



ISSN: 0975-833X

Available online at <http://www.journalcra.com>

International Journal of Current Research
Vol. 10, Issue, 10, pp.74825-74831, October, 2018

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24941/ijcr.32525.10.2018>

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF CURRENT RESEARCH

RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE ROLE OF LAW IN HUMAN CONSCIENCE: A CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF 1 JOHN 3: 21 IN AFRICAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

*Olusola Igbari

Crowther Graduate Theological Seminary, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria, In Affiliation with Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 20th July, 2018

Received in revised form

18th August, 2018

Accepted 17th September, 2018

Published online 31st October, 2018

Key Words:

Law, Human Conscience,
Contextual Analysis.

ABSTRACT

There are divergent views about the actual nature of the conscience of a man. To some people, the conscience is the voice of God in man, having godly characteristics and playing divine roles under divine influence. Others however see it as a natural inclination, tendency, or propensity in a man that tends towards a particular direction consequent upon a given 'social' influence under which it develops. To the latter, conscience is rather a product of 'social learning' rather than 'divinely influenced' agent that could only play godly roles of reproof or approval in a man. The argument against conscience as a 'divine agent' is mainly based on the ground that while some consciences could lead a man towards godliness, there are however some consciences that rather lead some into defiant behaviors. Given the above stances, the problems facing the researcher here is to attempt deciphering the actual nature of the conscience and examining the factor that influences or shapes it. Hence, the paper is focused on discovering the roles of law in human conscience in the context of 1 John 3: 21. It is discovered that the conscience could actually be influenced to act in a particular direction as a result of some factors. It is also discovered that Law is one of these factors that could influence the conscience. The objective of this paper is pursued in the contextual analysis of 1 John 3: 21 as to establish in more clear terms the roles of law in human conscience especially in African Political landscape. To achieve the objectives of this paper, the researcher adopted the use of secondary sources that is, library work in carrying out the study. The views of other scholars in the subject matter were consulted. The significance of this work lie in the potential meaningful contributions it adds to knowledge and scholarship. Since the subject matter is studied in the context of Christianity and politics; the study will be of an immense help to the church and the state in understanding the roles of law in human conscience.

Copyright © 2018, Olusola Igbari. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Olusola Igbari. 2018. "The role of law in human conscience: a contextual analysis of 1 john 3: 21 in African political landscape", *International Journal of Current Research*, 10, (10), 74825-74831.

INTRODUCTION

Law undoubtedly plays an important role in the life of a human person. The scripture says when there was no law, there was no sin but when the law was given, sin came to the world, (Rom. 4: 15). The human tendency is that we do what satisfies our conscience not minding the outcome. Knowledge plays a key role in the function of conscience, hence, knowledge of what is good and what is bad does guide the human conscience in making decisions and taking actions on matters affecting self or the public. This paper explores what place law takes in human conscience and how law can influence the attitude of humans to either make people take decisions either positively or negatively especially among those who are in leadership roles both in the Church and in the state.

*Corresponding author: Olusola Igbari,

Crowther Graduate Theological Seminary, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria, In Affiliation with Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo.

James T. Collard summarily defines conscience as "an innate faculty possessed by all men through which they are able to identify right and wrong."¹ According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 'Conscience' is from the Latin word, '*conscientia*'; which is a combination of two words '*con*' (*with*) and '*scientia*' (*knowledge*) and has to do with *shared* knowledge.² To this, Joseph Krupp adds: "Conscience is the knowledge that God puts in (man) about what's right and what's wrong."³ Stanford further shows that the literal meaning of the term conscience "shared Knowledge" "does not specify the type of knowledge involved and whom that

¹T. James Collard, "An Issue of Conscience": Maranatha Baptist Seminary, <https://www.mbu.edu/seminary/journal/an-issue-of-conscience>, Accessed 21/02/2017.

²Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy on Conscience, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/conscience/Mar14,2016>, Accessed 21/02/2017.

³Joseph Krupp, "What is the Role of Conscience?" Faith Magazine, <https://shalomfelipe.wordpress.com/2010/10/08/what-is-the-role-of-conscience>, Accessed February 21, 2017.

knowledge is shared with". It however holds that the traditional concept about *conscience* is that it often refers to "moral knowledge," and that the sharing is done with 'oneself'; which however does not rule out that the source of the morality in question could be external to self. The above source adds that the conscience could be influenced by either God, tradition, culture or even one's upbringing. "Reference to the self indicates that, from a psychological point of view, conscience involves introspection, awareness of one's behaviour, and self-assessment."⁴ Seen in the light of the above submission, conscience being susceptible to external sources; the researcher hopes to explore the extent to which laws (either man-made or God-made) as one of those 'external sources' can influence or even control the conscience of a man. In more specific terms, the paper is set to examine the role of law in human conscience, in the context of 1 John 3: 21. The framework used is mostly biblical and theological paradigms to achieve the goal of this work, the outcome of which will serve as source material for further research.

Understanding the Nature and Characteristics of Human Conscience: In the view of the researcher, 'Conscience' is a term that is neither peculiar to a particular religion or philosophy. Every human being has conscience irrespective of his philosophical or religious stance. Therefore, under the above outline, the researcher would like to examine the nature and characteristics of the conscience, from religious and philosophical perspectives.

Religious Perspectives: From the Christians' angle; Jim Eckman, observed that there is no mention of the term 'conscience' in the Old Testament of the Bible. He believes that its mentions in the Old Testament could have been replaced by the use of the term 'heart' (e.g. 1 Samuel 24: 5) which to him is the closest term to conscience.⁵ Alexander Mileant agrees with Eckman that the words heart and conscience were used interchangeably in the Bible. With reference to Matthew 6: 22 and 5: 25, Mileant also shows how the Lord compared conscience to the 'eyes' by which a person can evaluate his moral condition, and a 'rival' with whom a person must come to terms before he presents himself at God's Judgment. The term 'rival' as used by Mileant, is the main attribute of conscience. According to him, this is because; "the conscience has the characteristic of opposing our evil desires and intentions."⁶ While Jim Eckman did not identify any mention of the term 'conscience' in the Old Testament books; he however shows that there are about 31 mentions of it in the New Testament, especially in Pauline corpus.⁷ James T. Collard acknowledges the mentions of 'conscience' in the New Testament but argues that its usages pertains more to one's ethics of morals; i.e. "the conscience is a moral consciousness."⁸ Walton Weaver shares Collard's view and uses the *analytical Greek* to define it as "an inward moral impression of one's actions and principles... the inward faculty

of moral judgment... the inward moral and spiritual frame."⁹ The above views are clearly presenting the conscience from the Christians' angle as having moral propensity or inclinations. Eckman noted very clearly that the Scripture teaches that human beings, "made in the image of God," have an innate sense of right and wrong, a moral monitor that either, 'approves' or 'accuses' (Romans 2: 14 – 15).¹⁰ This is in agreement with Collard's view about the nature or characteristics of conscience. He sees it as man's spiritual understanding which distinguishes between what is true and false, right and wrong. According to Collard, the conscience "looks at the facts in a situation of spiritual or ethical morality and arrives at a conclusion based on an internal judgment of right and wrong that is also influenced by an accepted rule of right."¹¹ While the fall may have drastically affected the conscience, Eckman maintains that it "has clearly not destroyed it. Evidence of this innate sense of right and wrong is a general agreement in all cultures about certain basic ethical issues (e.g. murder, incest, pedophilia, lying, stealing, etc.). Conscience like an umpire, disposes the human to view life situations in a moral/ethical light, thus judging or determining that some actions are 'right' and some are 'wrong.'¹²

Based on the New Testament usage, Collard maintains that the conscience has the nature of 'knowledge' and 'awareness' inside of the man. He argues strongly that this knowledge and awareness makes the conscience sensitive to some moral standard and judgment; and no matter how faintly this internal judgment of right and wrong in a man may be, it is a normal experience that impacts his decision.¹³ The religious perspectives of the nature and characteristics of conscience are not limited to the Christian religion. Maqsood Jafri, speaking from the Islamic perspectives presents conscience as "a judge having spiritual quality that differentiates between right and wrong." According to him, conscience is of two types, pure conscience and impure conscience. The former in the words of Quran is "Nafs-e-Mutminah;" "The contented self." It is a virtuous self differentiating between good and bad according to divine injunctions. The latter is "Nafs-e-mummarah," "the evil self." It does not differentiate between good and bad. It is a demonic and vicious self.¹⁴ Jafri opines that those with the 'impure conscience' are the vicious and cruel people who could go to any extent to commit vicious acts including murder. He shows that people like that are regarded as worse than animals and hard stones in Quran. "Such people of hardened hearts are tyrants, oppressors and terrorists. For their petty material and worldly gains they can go to any extent even to kill people indiscriminately."¹⁵ The 'impure' conscience of Jafri from the Islamic viewpoints corresponds with what Paul

⁴Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy on Conscience, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/conscience/Mar14,2016>, Accessed 21/02/2017.

⁵Jim Eckman, "Issues in Perspective: A Biblical Theology of the Human Conscience," <http://graceuniversity.edu/iip>, Accessed 21/02/2017.

⁶Alexander Mileant, "Conscience: God's Voice in Mankind," <http://fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/consci.htm>, Accessed 21/02/2017.

⁷Jim Eckman, "Issues in Perspective: A Biblical Theology of the Human Conscience," <http://graceuniversity.edu/iip>, Accessed 21/02/2017.

⁸T. James Collard, "An Issue of Conscience": Maranatha Baptist Seminary, <https://www.mbu.edu/seminary/journal/an-issue-of-conscience>, Accessed 21/02/2017.

⁹Walton Weaver, "The Role of Conscience in Religion," <http://www.grandoldbook.com/conscienLg1.pdf>, Accessed 3/03/2017.

¹⁰Jim Eckman, "Issues in Perspective: A Biblical Theology of the Human Conscience," <http://graceuniversity.edu/iip>, Accessed 21/02/2017.

¹¹T. James Collard, "An Issue of Conscience": Maranatha Baptist Seminary, <https://www.mbu.edu/seminary/journal/an-issue-of-conscience>, Accessed 21/02/2017.

¹²Jim Eckman, "Issues in Perspective: A Biblical Theology of the Human Conscience," <http://graceuniversity.edu/iip>, Accessed 21/02/2017.

¹³T. James Collard, "An Issue of Conscience": Maranatha Baptist Seminary, <https://www.mbu.edu/seminary/journal/an-issue-of-conscience>, Accessed 21/02/2017.

¹⁴Maqsood Jafri, "Islamic Concept of Conscience," http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles_151_200/islamic_concept_of_conscience.htm, Accessed 21/02/2017.

¹⁵Maqsood Jafri, "Islamic Concept of Conscience," http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles_151_200/islamic_concept_of_conscience.htm, Accessed 21/02/2017.

the apostle describes as the 'seared' conscience in 1 Timothy 4: 2. Paul also holds to the fact of 'pure' conscience (1 Tim. 3: 9; 2 Tim. 1: 3). Weaver identified about four different types of consciences from the Bible: A "Good Conscience" (1 Tim. 1: 18 – 19; Acts 23: 1; 24: 16 and 2 Tim. 1: 3). This is conscience that is pure and void of offense. An "Evil Conscience," (Heb. 9:14; 10: 22; and 1 Cor. 8: 7), this corresponds with a bad or defiled conscience. A conscience is defiled or made evil when it fails to conform to the known will of God. A "Weak Conscience" (1 Cor. 8: 7, 10, 12) is the conscience that does not have the required strength to act according to what he thinks is the right thing. A conscience is also considered 'weak' when it cannot make proper distinctions and judgments because of a defect in knowledge or perception. The fourth type of conscience identified by Weaver is the "Seared Conscience" (1 Tim. 4: 1 – 2). This is the conscience that has become insensible to moral and spiritual discernment through persistent violation of it.¹⁶ The above stances go to show that conscience could be alive, active, pure, and good; and could conversely, be impure, bad, weak, dead, hardened, or even seared. Factors leading to either of the above tendencies could be traced to the responses of the conscience to the 'external' or 'internal' sources that influence it. In the context of this paper, this could refer to how the conscience responds to the laws that it has been exposed to and also on the impacts that some laws could have on the conscience. The religious perspectives on the nature and characteristics of conscience therefore include the facts that the conscience is an innate voice, judge, sense, or moral monitor, that approves or disapproves man's actions depending on what the conscience has been 'programmed' to see as right or wrong. The above idea of "conscience programming" could be understood further with the illustration of Maqsood Jafri. Jafri holds that what a conscience may accept as right or wrong in a particular setting may be different from what it may see in the same situation in another setting. He illustrated this with the issue of murder which could be seen as a crime by a conscience in a situation where murder is prohibited. However, if the same law empowers someone to kill a convicted murderer, the conscience is programmed to see the act of murder in that sense as a good thing.¹⁷ The Christians and Islamic religious perspectives, on the nature and characteristics of the conscience, demands that the conscience must be brought under positive influences if it must be positive, active and pure in discharging its original (God-intended) functions as a moral guide.

Philosophical Perspectives: Trudy Govier, talking from the Humanists' point of view, contends against the religious perspectives of conscience, which according to him always present the authority and voice of the conscience as divine. He argues that while the conscience may dare to "pronounce on matters of morality, and often, highly with profound implications... it is no more transcendent than the everyday voice that reminds us to carry an umbrella or take out the garbage." He maintains that the voice of the conscience is from within the "human self." While, it should not be ignored; it is however to be seen as "human, fallible and utterly mundane."¹⁸

¹⁶Walton Weaver, "The Role of Conscience in Religion," <http://www.grandoldbook.com/conscienLg1.pdf>, Accessed 3/03/2017.

¹⁷Maqsood Jafri, "Islamic Concept of Conscience;" http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles_151_200/islamic_concept_of_conscience.htm, Accessed 21/02/2017.

¹⁸Trudy Govier, "Practical Philosophy: What is Conscience? Issue 151, Science and Conscience, Humanist Perspectives," http://humanistperspectives.org/issue151/whatis_conscience.html, Accessed 20/02/2017.

From such perspectives, "The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy" corroborating Govier's position on the naturalness of the human conscience argues that human nature is 'naturally' good. "At least it leans decidedly toward an awareness of the good and a preference for it, over evil and injustice."¹⁹ The argument of men like Govier is on how the conscience could act as "divine voice," and yet in some cases "people have been inspired by 'conscience' to act in defiance of social norms in such contexts as apartheid, corporate corruption, and abuse of animals."²⁰ The researcher (not bringing in his religious biasness to play) observes that the religious perspectives cannot be completely disputed against or disregarded by Govier's position. This is because, such questions as 'conscience-inspired defiant behaviours' raised by Govier are not different from what the religionists see as the problem of 'impure' or 'seared' conscience. Such may not stand as a strong argument against the divine nature and characteristics of the conscience. It is rather the view of the researcher that the conscience is an innate voice given to man by God to differentiate between right and wrong. The questions of 'impurity' and 'defiance' however arise from whatever influences the conscience has been subjected into. This can be understood better from the letter of Paul in Romans 6: 16: "to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?" (KJV). According to Allen Wood, "Philosophical theories of conscience may be categorized by bringing them under three headings: moral knowledge theories, motivation theories and reflection theories." He illustrates the above categories by showing that when people talk of their "conscience telling them to do such-and-such," it implies that the conscience is a source of moral knowledge about what to do. The motivation theories of conscience also is seen in the fact that people often speak of being 'urged' to do a thing or the other. This 'urging propensity' presents the conscience as a motivator. In another sense, people also usually talk about the "pricking" or 'prodding' conscience; which describes the "reflection theory" about the conscience.²¹ To the philosophers, the conscience has the nature and characteristics of "moral knowledge," "motivational ability," and "reflective tendencies." It knows what we should do, motivates us into doing it, and ponders on the possible consequences of what we have done with commendations or condemnations as the case may be. The difference observed between the religious and philosophical perspectives on the nature and characteristics of conscience is mainly on the sources that influence this knowledge of the conscience. While the religionists see God and his laws as the main sources; Govier, like several other humanists and philosophers maintains that the conscience acquires its knowledge through "social learning."²²

The Law and the Conscience: Richard Salbato shows that the "rule of law," otherwise known as the 'supremacy of law' is an ancient idea which was discussed by the Greek philosopher, Plato, 350 years before Christ. According to him, Plato wrote:

¹⁹Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Moral Development; A peer-Reviewed Academic Resource," <http://www.iep.utm.edu/moraldev>, Accessed 21/02/2017.

²⁰Trudy Govier, "Practical Philosophy: What is Conscience? Issue 151, Science and Conscience, Humanist Perspectives," http://humanistperspectives.org/issue151/whatis_conscience.html, Accessed 20/02/2017.

²¹Allen Wood, "Kant on Conscience," <http://web.stanford.edu/~allenw/webpapers/KantOnConscience.pdf>, Accessed 3/03/2017.

²²Trudy Govier, "Practical Philosophy: What is Conscience? Issue 151, Science and Conscience, Humanist Perspectives," http://humanistperspectives.org/issue151/whatis_conscience.html, Accessed 20/02/2017.

Where the law is subject to some other authority and has none of its own, the collapse of the state, in my view, is not far off; but if law is the master of the government and the government is its slave, then the situation is full of promise and men enjoy all the blessings that the gods shower on a state.²³ Salbato further shows that Aristotle endorsed the rule of law writing that: "Law should govern" and those in power should be "servants of the laws."²⁴ In the light of the above 'supremacy' of law, it can now be understood why the concepts like "conscience-programming," "conscience as product of "social learning," or an "influenced conscience" could be used. This is because, where the dictates of the law have been established as the highest authority, the conscience naturally develops its knowledge, motivation and reflection around such laws. If in the views of Plato and Aristotle, the law should govern and those in government should be servants, slaves of the law; it goes to say that the relationship between the conscience and the law is like that of the servant/slave and the master. Whether it is the laws of the land or the laws of God; whenever the conscience accepts a given law as the norm, it naturally comes under it and brings its host (the man) under its consciousness. From that moment, it becomes an 'inner task force' reminding the man about the law and reprimanding him when he goes contrary to it. This agrees with Govier's perspective on conscience as a "product of social learning." The conscience can therefore be informed or uninformed in a particular sense. Without the former (i.e. a given information), the conscience, however, has its natural tendency towards the morally good, because it is God's moral agent in man (at least, from the theological perspectives). "But there is a spirit in man: and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding" (Job 32: 8; KJV).

The Exegesis

The Greek Text

1 John 3: 21

Dear ones, if the heart (s) we do not descend to our God

The English Translation

1 John 3: 21: Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God.

Here, John was not speaking to anyone whose conscience does not accuse him since some of the people that time have deadened their consciences by continual and deliberate sin (1 Tim. 4: 2). He was speaking to Christians who knew Christ's laws. The Greek word for conscience is consciousness.²⁵ Originally, Richards says the word signified a look back into one's past, an evaluation of remembered events in relationship to good and evil.²⁶ To the Greeks as reflected in their literature, conscience was usually "a bad conscience," one that relentlessly plagued its owner by accusations about past

failures. Conscience provides evidence of humanity's moral nature. Moreover, conscience reminds us constantly of past failures and of guilt. It rubs us of confidence and hope for a better future. But through God's forgiveness we have forgiveness and the past is wiped away. The Hebrew word *Torah* means law, rules or guiding principles of the life of Israelites in their relationship with God. Hence, the law in other Old Testament concept is, "instructions to be obeyed" or "teachings for morality." Law was introduced to meet a need that existed within the context of the covenant. At Sinai, God provided the needed structure for living with him and others. Observing the revealed will of God shared in the Law of Moses was the way to blessing. The Greek word for 'law' is *nomos*. Its roots in Greek culture assume a social process by which members of a community develop patterns of expectation, which become traditions and finally are incorporated as norms that define a person's duties to others and the state.²⁷ According to Richards, by the Fifth Century B.C, laws were written which if not obeyed brought punishment.²⁸ In Jesus' time, the rabbis focused their faith in the law. Lk. 18: 18 sums up the understanding of religion held by most of the religious people in Jesus time. An example of this is the Rich Young Ruler's question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" the answer from the man proved the place of the law in the Jewish culture.

The Text in the Context of the First Epistle of John: The background of this epistle discussed above reveals that the first epistle of John is supposedly written to predominantly Gentile churches in and around Ephesus by John the apostle towards the later years of his life. The occasion for the writing has also been seen to have to do with some practical and polemical issues. From the submission of McCain; it is observed that the practical purpose of John in this letter includes giving his readers practical exhortations about the true faith and Christians' life as to achieve fullness of joy (1: 4), overcome sin (2: 1) and to live in the consciousness of the fact that they have eternal life (5: 3).²⁹ In chapter 3 in particular, the apostle stresses the need to live an eternity-conscious life (3: 1 – 3) which should lead the believers into purity of life and heart. To lead an impure or sinful life is to lead a lawless life, because "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law" (3: 4; KJV). The author would like his readers to know that sinful living is inconsistent with the life of God whose seed abides in them. In fact, one who continues to live in sin is of the devil who has been sinning from the beginning (3: 6 – 8). He also emphasizes the need for practical Christian living which is shown through love and concern for one another (1 John 3: 9 – 19). One of the implications of the author's exhortation here is that a Christian should be able to live in such a way that he can boldly and confidently come into the presence of God without the sense of guilt and with an assurance that his prayers will be answered (3: 22). To achieve this, he must be sure his 'heart' (conscience) does not 'condemn' him before God (3: 20). This is because, where his heart condemns him, he can be sure that God will condemn him the more. But, if his heart (conscience) does not condemn him; then, he has confidence before God (3: 21) and can be confident of receiving answers to his prayers (3: 22). Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown are of the view that

²³Richard Salbato, "The Common Sense and the Rule of Law," <http://www.unitypublishing.com/Government/RuleofLaw.htm>, Accessed 21/02/2017.

²⁴Richard Salbato, "The Common Sense and the Rule of Law," <http://www.unitypublishing.com/Government/RuleofLaw.htm>, Accessed 21/02/2017.

²⁵Lawrence Richard, 'Conscience,' *Expository Dictionary of the Bible Words*, (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 185.

²⁶Lawrence Richard, 185.

²⁷Lawrence Richard, 'Conscience,' *Expository Dictionary of the Bible Words*, 390.

²⁸Lawrence Richard, 392.

²⁹Danny McCain, *Notes on New Testament Introduction*, (Jos: African Christians Textbooks, 2005), 397.

“John does not mean that all whose heart does not condemn them are therefore safe before God; for some have their conscience seared, others are ignorant of the truth: it is not sincerity, but sincerity in the truth, which saves men.”³⁰ John Calvin agreeing with Jamieson and co. (that John is not in any way describing the consciences of every human being) argues that some consciences are already reprobate and cannot be a right judge to guiding the man in making moral choices. In his words: It is certain that the reprobate are sometimes sunk by Satan into such stupor, that they are no longer conscious of their own evils, and, without alarm or fear, as Paul says, rush headlong into perdition; it is also certain, that hypocrites usually flatter themselves, and proudly disregard the judgment of God, for, being inebriated by a false conceit as to their own righteousness, they feel no convictions of sin. The answer to these things is not difficult; hypocrites are deceived because they shun the light; and the reprobate feel nothing, because they have departed from God; and, indeed there is no security for an evil conscience but in hiding-places.³¹

Calvin rather shows that the consciences the Apostle is speaking about here are “the consciences which God draws forth to the light, forces to his tribunal, and fills with an apprehension of his judgment.”³² The above submission of Jamieson and co. agrees with the fact that conscience is bendable, programmable or even corruptible. It has been established in this paper that conscience has to do with an innate voice, judge, sense, or moral monitor, that is put in man by God which approves or disapproves man’s actions, “depending on what the conscience has been ‘programmed’ to see as right or wrong.” In the context of this first Johannine letter; the ‘conscience’ in question is the conscience of the “little children,” ‘fathers,’ “young men,” ‘brothers,’ and ‘beloved’ (2: 12 – 14; 4: 1, 7). In other words, the destination of his letter is to the ‘Christians.’ The consciences of the Christians are meant here. And these consciences can be adjudged to be lively, pure or good only in the context of the law of God. If the conscience is originally put in man by God to guide his moral decision; it therefore follows that the Christian’s conscience should be a godly conscience, truly capable of making right and moral decisions. Following the fall, as observed by Eckman, the conscience has been drastically affected (though not destroyed);³³ resulting in impurity, weakness, and even in some more severe instances, seared condition. When one however submits his heart (conscience) to the regenerating work of the Holy Ghost, a renewal, transformation and purification takes effect (Romans 12: 1, 2; Titus 2: 15). Consequently, such consciences become reactivated to function more effectively as the voice of God in the man. It is such consciences that 1 John 3: 20, 21 is alluding to. Where such consciences condemn a man; the man should know that God who is greater than his conscience condemns him the more. Conversely, if such lively, active and pure conscience does not condemn him, he can be confident in the presence of God knowing that it is a sign that God is approved of his stand before Him.

Contextual Analysis of the Text in Relation to Conscience:

The conscience originally stands as a divine agent in man to guide his moral decision. The conscience should be positively fed, trained or informed so that it can fulfill this role more effectively. This could account to why the writer of Job was inspired to write: “But there is a spirit in man: and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding.” (Job 32: 8; KJV) God’s laws are given as guides to keep the conscience on track. The immediate (chapter) context of 1 John 3: 21 could be put into five major outlines: living a pure life resulting from the hope of eternity with Christ (1 – 3); living a sin-free life resulting from the consciousness of God’s laws (4 – 9); living a life free from wickedness and hatred, resulting from loving one another (10 – 18); living in confidence of God’s approval and acceptance resulting from a clear conscience (19 – 21); and, living in assurance of answers to prayers resulting from conscientious commitment in keeping God’s commandments (22, 23). The role of the conscience here is to help the man know when his ways are no longer consistent with the above requirements of God as to make amends. Its role here could be illustrated with the sayings of Solomon: “The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord, searching all the inward parts of the belly.” (Prov. 20: 27; KJV) Man, should therefore, be sensitive and responsive to the prodding and pricking of the conscience as to maintain his cordial relationship with his maker. In his work on the Background to the New Testament; Craig Keener shows that “Judaism repeatedly stressed that God knew the hearts of all people (cf. Jer. 29: 23); some texts even call him “Searcher of Hearts.” As one Jewish wisdom writer expressed it, Happy is the one whose soul does not accuse him” (Eccles 14: 2).³⁴

Contextual Analysis of the Text in Relation to Law: The

Theology of 1 John 3 reveals clearly the roles of law in human’s conscience. Man must live a life free from impurity, if he desires to spend his eternity with Jesus the son of God. He must ensure his life is free from sin since a sinner is described as a transgressor to the law of God. Wickedness and hatred should not be traced to him in any way. This is because, the fate of Cain awaits the wicked man and one who hates his brother is just like a murderer. He should therefore allow the love of God to purge his heart from every form of wickedness and hatred. Where the conscience of a Christian condemns him in relationship to any of the above requirements (commandments, laws) of God; he should know that God disapproves of his actions and therefore condemns him the more (3: 20). Cormac Burke holds that conscience could be formed or reformed. According to him, No one goes through life with unchanged moral standards. Some of the standards one originally held are matured and confirmed and intensified. Others perhaps give way to completely new ones. And so our conscience, the elements of judgment which make up our criterion of right and wrong are constantly being formed and reformed.³⁵ According to E.P. Byrne, several factors that could ‘form’ or ‘reform’ our conscience include: Family, Friends/Acquaintances, Media, Religion, Cultural/societal values, Government legal constraints, Professional Ethics, etc.³⁶ According to Burke, “Conscience Formation” is the “process by which true principles of conduct gradually become

³⁰Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *Commentary*, Electronic Database, Copyright © 1997, 2003, 2005, 2006 by BibleSoft, Inc.

³¹John Calvin, *Commentaries*, “PC Study Bible,” Formatted Electronic Database, © 2005 – 2006, BibleSoft, Inc. n.p.

³²John Calvin, n.p.

³³Jim Eckman, “Issues in Perspective: A Biblical Theology of the Human Conscience,” <http://graceuniversity.edu/iep>, Accessed 21/02/2017.

³⁴S. Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 742.

³⁵Cormac Burke, *Conscience and Freedom*, 2nd edition, (Sinag-Tala, 1992), www.cormacburke.or.ke, Accessed 15/13/2017, n.p.

³⁶E.P. Byrne, “Factors Influencing Ethical Behaviour,” <https://www.ucc.ie>ebyrne>publications>; Accessed 15/03/2017.

operative in a person's mind, by which his mind gradually takes hold of true principles."³⁷ Judging from the above points of view; it can be said that something has informed (formed or reformed) the 'conscience' or the 'heart' of 1 John 3: 21, to react the way it does. The factor here is the laws or requirements of God. The author started the chapter by calling the attentions of his readers against impure, sinful, and wicked life. Their consciences being informed (formed or reformed) by those demands have to be consistent with such principles. It is therefore clear that the reactions of the heart or the conscience of the man in the context 1 John 3: 21 (in approval or disapproval of his actions), are consequences of his disposition to the above requirements of God.

This is well illustrated by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, where he shows that he would have not known what is right or wrong if the law were not there to instruct him. "What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet," (Rom 7: 7; NIV). The law therefore, plays the role of an instructor, a guide, a teacher, an information giver, or a reformer to the conscience. In the light of the above Pauline submission; the conscience could in a sense be numb (insensitive or indifferent) in a given situation if not informed on the principles that should govern the behaviors in such circumstances. It rather becomes more active and activated when it receives some information or laws on what should be done and what should not be done. Burke maintains that people differ as to which exactly are the right norms and which are the wrong; what exactly makes for a right, an enlightened conscience on one man and what makes for a wrong or erroneous conscience in another.³⁸ This is however not the case with the audiences of 1 John 3: 21. This is because, the contextual analysis of the text has shown the expectations of God (or the author) from his readers. The conscience of the man here commends or condemns him depending on what he does with those requirements or laws of God.

Conclusion

The main thrust of this work has been to examine the role of law in human conscience. It has therefore been observed that the law is very important in guiding or keeping man on the right track. To keep one's conscience alive, pure, active and blameless before God; one is therefore expected to strictly adhere to the requirements of every law that is within the godly confine; whether secular or sacred. To the Christians however who are the destinations of the first Johannine letter and by application the readers of this paper; the laws of God should be strictly and completely obeyed to maintain a healthy conscience and confident and acceptable stand before God. To the Christian, this is not an option but a rule or his conscience will not spare him. And should his conscience condemn him; he should know that God who is greater than his conscience condemns him the more. The law and conscience are closely interrelated i.e. one influences the other and also it reveals the integrity of the individual person. There are three major functions of law in the life of human persons. They are:

- **It reveals the nature of God:** God's own character is revealed by the standard he establishes (Lev. 19: 1).

- **It reveals Sin:** In the history of Israel, who ever discovered that he had violated the commandment in Mosaic code was mandated to offer sacrifices as restitution.
- **It guides the Individual:** It helps people to live a moral life.
- Considering these functions vis – a – vis the place of conscience in human life, one can confidently conclude that the role of law in human conscience cannot be over emphasized.

The outcome of this is what we experience in the contemporary life of humans especially both in religious and political life of Nigerians. It is therefore recommended based on the findings in this research that emphasis be laid by the church and the state for good governance through the proper use of conscience in discharging assigned responsibilities. In the current democratic dispensation in some African countries, there are lots of staggering revelations of looters of national resources being arrested, tried and jailed; the political leaders whose consciences have not allowed the law of the land to influence them. The questions that could be asked are: Do these political leaders not have conscience? Does it mean that because of their leadership positions, they decide to ignore the rule of law and also ignore the consequence if they are tried and convicted? Have they not got access to the ethical rules that guide their offices in which they sworn to at their inauguration?. The goal of this paper therefore is to make our leaders both in the Church and in the state re-examine themselves and search their consciences when they are faced with temptations to do what is contrary to the ethics of their jobs. All our religious and political leaders in Africa belong to one religion or the other. By implication, they are expected to maintain the integrity that matches the morality which their religions teach. If this is so, sanity will prevail in the society and there will be growth and development in all its ramifications.

REFERENCES

- Bible.org. "The Beloved Disciple's Memoirs and Letters: The Gospel of John, I, II, and III John," <https://bible.org>. Accessed 15/03/2017.
- Burke, Cormac. *Conscience and Freedom, 2nd edition*, Sinag-Tala, 1992. www.cormacburke.or.ke, Accessed 15/13/2017.
- Byrne, E.P. "Factors Influencing Ethical Behavior," <https://www.ucc.ie/ebyrne/publications>; Accessed 15/03/2017.
- Calvin, John. *Commentaries*, "PC Study Bible," Formatted Electronic Database, © 2005 – 2006, BibleSoft, Inc.
- Collard, James T. "An Issue of Conscience": Maranatha Baptist Seminary, <https://www.mbu.edu/seminary/journal/an-issue-of-conscience>, Accessed 21/02/2017.
- Dickson, Roger E. *Teacher's Bible*. South Africa: Africa International Missions, 2001.
- Eckman, Jim. "Issues in Perspective: A Biblical Theology of the Human Conscience," <http://graceuniversity.edu/iip>, Accessed 21/02/2017.
- Govier, Trudy. "Practical Philosophy: What is Conscience? Issue 151, Science and Conscience, Humanist Perspectives," <http://humanistperspectives.org/issue151/whatisconscience.html> Accessed 20/02/2017.

³⁷Cormac Burke, *Conscience and Freedom, 2nd edition*, n.p.

³⁸Cormac Burke, *Conscience and Freedom, 2nd edition*, n.p.

- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Moral Development; A peer-Reviewed Academic Resource," <http://www.iep.utm.edu/moraldev>, Accessed 21/02/2017.
- Jafri, Maqsood. "Islamic Concept of Conscience;" <http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles151200/islamicconceptofconscience.htm>, Accessed 21/02/2017.
- Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *Commentary*, Electronic Database, Copyright © 1997, 2003, 2005, 2006 by Biblesoft, Inc.
- Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993.
- Kostenberger, Andreas; Kellum, Scott L. and Quarles, Charles L. *The Cradle, The Cross, and The Crown*. Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Publishing Group, 2009.
- Krupp, Joseph. "What is the Role of Conscience?" Faith Magazine, <https://shalomfelipe.wordpress.com/2010/10/08/what-is-the-role-of-conscience>, Accessed February 21, 2017.
- Marshall, Howard I; Travis, Stephen and Paul, Ian. *Exploring the New Testament, A Guide to the Letters and Revelation, Vol. 2*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2002.
- McCain, Danny. *Notes on New Testament Introduction*. Jos: African Christians Textbooks, 2005.
- Mileant, Alexander. "Conscience: God's Voice in Mankind," <http://fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/consci.htm>, Accessed 21/02/2017.
- Richard, Lawrence. 'Conscience,' *Expository Dictionary of the Bible Words*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985.
- Salbato, Richard. "The Common Sense and the Rule of Law," <http://www.unitypublishing.com/Government/RuleofLaw.htm>, Accessed 21/02/2017.
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy on Conscience, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/conscience/Mar14,2016>, Accessed 21/02/2017.
- Weaver, Walton. "The Role of Conscience in Religion," <http://www.grandoldbook.com/conscienLg1.pdf>, Accessed 3/03/2017.
- Wood, Allen. "Kant on Conscience," <http://web.stanford.edu/~allenw/webpapers/KantOnConscience.pdf>, Accessed 3/03/2017.
