

A Theological Dialogue on The Notion of Conscience (Vicdân) in Christianity and Turkish Islamic Thought

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Abstract

The recent human crises in the world caused by believers of the same religions fighting amongst themselves—such as Muslims in the Middle East and Christians in the recent Russo-Ukrainian War—have once again raised the question of the function of individual conscience (the ability to distinguish bad from good) in society. How can individuals judge what is good or bad when religious communities of same faith confuse the judgment of the religion's followers by accusing others of wrongdoing while proclaiming themselves to be right? Would a conscience enable individuals to assess the moral quality of their thoughts, words, and deeds without being affected by society? This paper attempts to answer these questions by conducting a comparative analysis of the concept of *vicdân* (conscience)—the Turkish and Persian equivalent of the English word “conscience”—in Christianity and Turkish Islamic thought, and concludes that, although every individual is endowed with a conscience as a potential faculty, it must be discovered and cultivated by the individual through intellectual effort and represented in the society (collective conscience) in order to function as a righteous judge distinguishing good from bad and right from wrong in difficult times.

Keywords: Islam, Christianity, conscience, *vicdân*, Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır

Introduction

This article compares the concept of *conscience* in Christianity, a human ability to distinguish bad from good, with *vicdân*—the equivalent in Turkish and Persian for *conscience*—in Islamic thought. More precisely, it focuses on how the concept of *vicdân* is understood in *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili* (God's Religion Qur'an's Language), a book of exegesis for the Qur'an¹ by Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır (b. 1878, d. 1942),

* Naskah diterima Februari 2023, direvisi Maret 2023, dan disetujui untuk diterbitkan Juni 2023

<https://doi.org/10.47655/dialog.v46i1.779>

Dialog, 46 (1), 2023, 1-13

<https://jurnaldialog.kemenag.go.id,p-ISSN:0126-396X,e-ISSN:2715-6230>

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1 Elmalılı's work can be described as an encyclopedic exegesis, as it, in terms of source and content, conveys a kind of balanced interpretation of the Qur'an (Özel, 2015, p. 55) between both traditional and intellectual sources, as well as external and internal contents.

who has been regarded as one of the most respected Turkish religious scholars in the 20th century (Özübek, 2022, p. 171), hereafter “Elmalılı”, and compares the term with the understanding of *conscience*, in Christian scripts, and two Christian theologians who are Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), and Martin Luther (1546).

This study has two aims: 1) to contribute to contemporary debates on the functionality of consciousness in individuals involved in violent activities by establishing a theological dialogue between Islam and Christianity to understand the issue of *conscience* in terms of believers' individual feelings and societal actions, and 2) to contribute to ongoing academic efforts to understand *conscience* in Islam.

Although existing studies have explored some aspects of the concept of *conscience* in Islam in general, a complete and clear comparison of the subject in different languages such as in Turkish has not yet

been achieved. For instance, the theological understanding of *conscience* along with the various terms used in regions of the Islamic world where languages other than Arabic are spoken, have not been studied well. Therefore, there is much gap in the research. In order to acquire a comprehensive understanding of *conscience*, the present study will endeavor to reveal the philosophical aspect of *conscience* in Türkiye by focusing on the case of *vicdân* in Elmalılı's works.

Research Method

This paper uses a comparative methodology to understand the term *conscience* in both Christian and Islamic thought. This method consists of two components.

The first component is a critical literature review of previous studies. The review is conducted separately for Christian *conscience* and Islamic *vicdân* (*conscience*), and is thus presented in two separate sections.

The second component is a comparative philosophical inquiry into existing debates on *conscience* such as the relationship between the self, and state, as well as religious institutions and society; and the evaluation of one's thoughts and actions. This inquiry is conducted through a framework consisting of recurring arguments surrounding *conscience*, such as whether it is innate human wisdom that communicates through inner voices or whether it is a learned set of values absorbed from society through life experience and developed according to social and moral standards.

The paper stays within this framework and applies its findings to contemporary global religious societies to answer the following research questions: (1) On what basis should believers of religions determine what is good or bad when both parties in a moral/ideological conflict think they are right and the other side is wrong? (2) Can *conscience* be a judge for believers when assessing the moral qualities of their thoughts, words, and deeds? (3) Why do extremists' radical opinions, which are unanimously viewed as wrong by most people, gain support among some religious groups if they have a notion of *conscience*?

Answers to the above questions are drawn from Elmalılı's interpretations of "Sūra al-Fātiḥa" —the very first chapter of the Qur'ān—in his masterpiece *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili*, in which he focuses on *vicdân* (*conscience*)² in Islam.

Apart from the "Introduction," "Research Method," and "Conclusion," the key content of this article is presented in three sub-sections under the "Results and Discussion" section.

The first of these sub-sections discusses *conscience* in general and builds a lexical framework based on quotations from the earliest texts addressing the concept of *conscience* in Western thought.

The second sub-section covers textual evidence regarding *conscience* mentioned in early Christian sacred scripts and the understandings of the term by two Christian theologians, Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther.

The third sub-section under "Results and Discussion" is divided into two subsections — "Previous Studies," and "*Conscience* from Elmalılı's Perspective: His Understanding of *Vicdân*," which focuses on *conscience* in Islam. Previous Studies examines some preceding researches such as Hodgson's masterpiece *Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (published posthumously in 1974) and the most recent one which is (Heck, 2014), an area study on the understanding of *conscience* among Muslim university students in Morocco. The section concludes by delving into Elmalılı's understanding of *vicdân* which divides the concept into two types: individual conscience (*vicdân-i ferdî*) and social or collective conscience (*vicdân-i ictimâî*).

Results and Discussion

1. The Lexical Framework of *Conscience* in the Western Christian Tradition

Conscience, in a religious sense, can be generally understood as the human capacity "to sense or immediately discern that what he or she has done, is doing, or is about to

² *Vicdân* appears 63 times in his interpretation on "Sūra al-Fātiḥa," the biggest frequency for a chapter, even more than "Al-Baqara," the longest chapter of the Holy Book, despite it being comprised of the most pages in the commentary.

do (or not do) is wrong, bad, and worthy of disapproval” (Atkins, 2014, p. 4).

The origin of *conscience* as a moral and religious concept dates back to the era approximately between the beginning of Prophet Jesus’ ministry (pbuh) and the middle of the 1st century, in the geographic region that today includes Türkiye, Greece, and Egypt. The idea first appears in Western Christian texts such as Paul’s famous letters in the New Testament, traditionally believed to have been written in mid-1st-century AD. In those letters, the Greek word *syneidesis* was used for *conscience*. However, *syneidesis*, to be more precise, *synoida*, the verb version of the term, was used as a philosophical term even before its use in the Bible (Mantzanas, 2020, p. 66), which means “I know in common with”³. The word, as a term related to moral philosophy, generally refers to the goodness or badness of a specific action of a person in relation to another person.

The Latin word *conscientia* marks the last phase of the term’s evolution before *conscience* entered common usage. Jerome (d. 420) chose this as the Latin translation of *syneidesis*. Between the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century, Jerome first used it in his translation of the New Testament from Greek to Latin (Holdsworth, 2016, p. 37).

Another term often associated with *conscience* is *synderesis*. This word was first mentioned in Jerome’s commentary on Prophet Ezekiel’s vision. Although the term has been interpreted as an individual and infallible cognitive disposition of good and bad, unlike *conscience*, which could lead to errors, a considerable number of scholars agree that a monk mistakenly wrote the word *synderesis* instead of *syneidesis* (Reyna, 2018, p. 18). Refer to the table below for changes over time in the meaning and lexical evolution of the word *conscience*.

³ According to Costigane, it can be found in a range of Greek philosophical texts from 6th century BCE to 7th century AD. Costigane brings the oldest fragment, which apparently was wrongly attributed to Epictetus, as an example of usage of *syneidesis* in classical Hellenistic writings that was understood as *conscience* in the Western Christian tradition, and defines it as “something given to the child by the parent, or the adult by ‘God’ to protect the individuals from harm”(Costigane, 1999, pp. 3–5)

	500 BCE ~	50 AD ~	400 AD ~	1200 AD ~
Greek Texts	<i>Syneidesis</i> can be found in a range of Greek texts			
Sacred Christian Scripture	<i>Syneidesis</i> started to appear in Christian scriptures, and was first used by Paul the Apostle (d. 67) in the First Epistle to the Corinthians			
Latin Texts	Jerome (d. 420) introduced <i>conscientia</i> into the Latin Bible by Jerome <i>Synderesis</i> (infallible conscience) appeared in Jerome’s commentary on the Prophet Ezekiel			
Anglo-French Usage	<i>Conscience</i> started to be used			

Table 1: The Lexical Evolution of the Term *Conscience*

As can be seen above, terms and the connotations for *conscience* are numerous and ambiguous. Although the word *conscience* only might not convey all the meanings that other terminologies produce, this paper, without being constrained by diverse terms, utilizes “knowing with” as the meaning of *conscience*, consequently choosing “God” as the subject of knowing, since it deals with the concept in Islam from a religious angle. Nevertheless, before exploring the idea of *conscience* in Islam, to fully grasp the term, the next section outlines *conscience* in Christianity by recalling some famous biblical references (especially the New Testament) and thoughts of Christian theologians without focusing on debates among different Christian denominations, which is beyond the scope of this article.

2. Conscience in Christianity

In the following section, the first comparison, Christian *conscience*, is examined. How Christian *conscience* enters sacred scriptures is explained, and different interpretations of the term by Christian theologians are enumerated.

2.1. Textual Foundations of *Conscience* in the Christian Sacred Texts

The textual basis of *conscience* is primarily found in the New Testament. Paul’s letters are the most important reference because they contain half the instances of the word out of the 31 that appear in the Bible (Drozdek, 2018, p. 101). One of Paul’s writings in which the

concept appears multiple times is “The First Letter to the Corinthians.” In his views on consuming meat sacrificed to idols in Chapter 8 of First Corinthians, the idea crops up four times. The excerpt below shows the relevant part:

However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their *conscience* being weak is defiled. But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who has knowledge, dining in an idol’s temple, will not his *conscience*, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their *conscience* when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.” (The New American Standard Bible, 2023, Corinthians. 8:7–13)

Paul, who seems concerned about a possible conflict between the two groups of Christians in the church he established in Corinth, states the two basic principles that he believes members of his church should adopt as God’s commands: knowledge and love of God. He advises those who have the knowledge to act with love toward neighbors who are unfamiliar with Christianity.

In Chapter 10 of the same letter, where the word appears five times, he suggests that groups with more religious knowledge eat meat sold at markets when it is served to them for the sake of *conscience* and love, without asking whether the meat was sacrificed to other people’s gods (The New American Standard Bible, 2023, 1 Corinthians. 10:25–27). He instructs those who seem not to have a deeper understanding of Christianity to refrain from eating meat when it is revealed

that “this is meat sacrificed to idols” for the sake of those who are informed, and for the sake of *conscience*. The complete text of the related passage from the letter is as follows.

Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbour. Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for *conscience’s* sake; for the earth is the Lord’s, and all it contains. If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for *conscience’s* sake. But if anyone says to you, “This is meat sacrificed to idols,” do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for *conscience’s* sake; I mean not your own *conscience*, but the other man’s; for why is my freedom judged by another’s *conscience*? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.” (The New American Standard Bible, 2023, 1 Corinthians. 10:24–33)

Paul seems to want to keep his church unified by prescribing two different formulas: one for the “the commons” (who do not know Christianity well), and another for “the knowing people” (who have more knowledge of God’s commandments). The solution for “the commons” challenges their culture by following the knowledge of their knowing neighbours; for “the knowing people,” the strategy is to put aside their knowledge and act with love toward the commons for the sake of *conscience*. Thus, in this context, *conscience* denotes an attitude whereby individuals set aside their beliefs for the sake of society. In this situation, the shared values of a society manifest as a neighborhood, which is more important than an individual’s inner feelings. To ensure shared values, individuals must sacrifice their own value systems that they may have grasped with a certain type of

knowledge or which had been passed down through their own faith.

Paul's another epistle, which has often been referred to as an important foundation for the notion of *conscience* in Christianity, is Chapter 2 of the Epistle of Romans, especially Verses 14–16, which say:

For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their *conscience* bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus. (The New American Standard Bible, 2023, 2 Romans 2:14–16)

Contrary to Chapter 10 of Corinthians, the above passage from Romans, especially the part about "their *conscience* bearing witness," apparently describes *conscience* as an introspective faculty wherein people know the requirements of the Law instinctively while accusing or defending individuals. Hence, *conscience* in Paul's letters is a twofold concept: it is an individual's inner faculty and also an attitude based on shared social values. If these aspects contradict each other, personal feelings may be sacrificed for the sake of society.

The final fundamental reference for the concept of *conscience* in Christianity is Jerome's use of *synteresis*, which differs from *syneidesis* in his interpretation of Ezekiel's vision of the four creatures emerging from a cloud. Part of the vision that Jerome uses as the basis of his understanding of *conscience* is as follows:

Each of them had four faces and four wings. Their legs were straight and their feet were like a calf's hoof, and they gleamed like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides were human hands. As for the faces and wings of the four of them, their wings touched one another; their faces did not turn when they moved, each went straight forward. (The New American Standard Bible, 2023, 1 Ezekiel 1:6–9)

In his interpretation, Jerome identifies the eagle as *synteresis*, the spark of *conscience* that is never extinguished in human beings, despite misreading *syneidesis* as mentioned above. Thus, the understanding of *conscience* in Christian tradition underwent a significant change, revealing "an infallible moral ability universally endowed upon human beings, enabling them to choose the good" of (Phillips, 2017, p. 325).

Although the textual foundations of the concept are small, as shown above, the understanding of *conscience* within Christian sacred texts has long been a subject of debate, especially between Roman Catholics and Protestants (Ross, 2015, p. 803). This discussion focuses on position of the individuals, against status quo, and the community, and raises questions such as "What is the relationship between the self and society?" and "Is *conscience* about adapting to society by internalizing its value system or by following one's inner voice when confronting society?"

The following is a brief overview of the Christian understanding of *conscience* from the point of views of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) and Martin Luther (d. 1546), two prominent theologians who represent two major understandings of *conscience* in two distinct phases of the history of Christian theology: scholastic philosophy and Protestant reformation.

2.2. *Conscience* in the Christian Theology

One of the Christian theologians wrote about *conscience* was Thomas Aquinas, who has been considered an eminent figure of scholastic theology in the Middle Ages for "articulating the understanding of natural law" (Magee, 2021) which can be defined as a set of capacities of human reason that is put into human minds to guide them in their acts toward knowing God. According to Aquinas "the prince and master of all Scholastic doctors", "*conscience* is judgment of reason" (Mullady, 2015, p. 439). Therefore, it can be said that his understanding of *conscience* is based on the premise that *conscience* is an inbuilt, God-given intellectual ability (Levering, 2019, p. 439) especially in the practical intellect to

understand the difference between right and wrong.

Aquinas deals with *synderesis* and *conscience* in different sections in his books such as *The 29 Questions of Truth*. However, a careful examination of his explanations for both concepts shows that his understanding of both terms is more or less the same. Take the example of the issue of fallibility of these capacities — for him, both *synderesis* and *conscience* can err: “it seems that it (*synderesis*) can err” (Aquinas, 1952, p. 495) and “conscience is sometimes erroneous” (Aquinas, 1952, p. 316).

As described above, throughout the Middle Ages, most theologians like Aquinas regarded humans as capable of knowing which actions are desirable or undesirable and applying this knowledge based on their conscience to various decisions in a balanced way between themselves and the church, which is an attitude that does not contradict Christian society or faith.

On the other hand, “the familiar modern understanding of conscience” (Strohm, 2011, p. 14) that is a moral position “to confront the status quo” (Kotzé, 2017, p. 164) was associated with Martin Luther who is the second figure whose understanding of *conscience* will be examined in this section.

Luther, a German monk, known as “the father of Protestantism” for nailing his famous “95 Theses” to the door of his church, not only took the first step that would be bringing many changes in religion, politics and international relations of Europe, but also kindled a new understanding of *conscience*.

Although the word *conscience* was not mentioned in his declaration, his attitude embodied a yet untold meaning of *conscience*, which was standing up against the authority in favor of personal *conscience*. This meaning was later declared during his celebration at the Diet of Worms in 1521. Luther, in the Diet, confronted with both the state and the church, and declared that he would follow his personal *conscience* (Niekerk, 2018, p. 5), not the expectations of the Church and the King:

I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive

to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against *conscience* (Murdock, 2017, p. 316).

Luther who was confident that his *conscience* did not err as long as his claim was proven by the scripture followed his *conscience* even though he was told by Johan Eck to lay aside his *conscience*, “because it is in error” (Strohm, 2011, p. 24).

Thus far, the idea of *conscience* (and other related terms) has been examined from the perspective of Western Christianity. Although *conscience* has been overemphasized in the West and is claimed as being an “internal human faculty and peculiar to the West” (Heck, 2014, p. 295), most cultures have a similar notion. Many of these cultures speak languages that include words for *conscience* which have become fundamental terms in their vernacular usage (Leirvik, 2003, p. 281). Islam is no different. The following section presents views about *conscience* in Islam by reviewing past research.

3. Conscience in Islam

This section, which focuses on the understanding of *conscience* in Islam, will first examine the current situation of scholarship on the Islamic *conscience*, and then attempt to present the perception of *conscience* in Islam through the case of Elmalılı. A brief overview of the studies on this subject is provided below.

3.1. Previous Studies

A review of studies on the notion of *conscience* in Islam conducted from the second half of the 20th century until now reveals a dynamic argument about the concept with the use of different terms. One of the first books that substantiated the existence of the idea of *conscience* in Islam was written by late Professor Marshall G. S. Hodgson of Islamic Studies. Hodgson—who sees the Qur’ānic verse “you have become the best community ever raised up for mankind, ordering (or commanding) the right and forbidding the wrong” (al-Qur’ān, 3:110) as the vision of Islamic civilization—traces the history of

Islam from its beginning until the middle of the 20th century to identify historical evidence of Islamic civilization through the concept of *conscience*, which also serves as the subtitle of his three-volume book *The Venture of Islam*. According to Hodgson, Islamic civilization implies establishing a world in which right is ordered and wrong is forbidden.

Hodgson does not clarify how he interprets the term *conscience*. However, his religious background as a Quaker also influenced him. The Quakers belong to a Christian movement that rejects all existing denominations and emphasizes a personal and direct relationship with God. Furthermore, we can understand Hodgson's view based on how he defines some Islamic terms; for example, he defines *mufti* as "an expert who makes public decisions in cases of law and *conscience*" (Hodgson, 1974, p. Vol. 1, 516). Thus, for Hodgson, *conscience* seems to be a kind of value mechanism substituted by the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth (the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad), with their accurate interpretations making even finer distinctions between good and evil (Hodgson, 1974, p. Vol. 1, 75), embodied by individuals in areas of human life, such as Islamic ethics (*akhlāq* in Arabic), where law and political systems are not affected.

As for whether the Qur'ānic prophecy has been realized, Hodgson believes that "Muslims have yet to implement the Qur'ānic vision fully in all its implications" (Hodgson, 1974, p. Vol. 1, 71). Nevertheless, he shows that there has always been a tradition of *conscience* throughout Islamic history, mainly manifested through "historical accidents—the result of personal talent or self-interest or fancy—(that) cancel each other out for the sake of the common good (thus if one man gains by accepting a bribe, another will gain by reporting him and another by purging corruption from among all his employees)" (Hodgson, 1974, p. Vol. 3, pp.5–6).

The book provides dozens of historical examples of Islamic *conscience*. However, it fails to portray *conscience* as a comprehensive thought system.

Another early study dedicated to *conscience* in Islam is (Geaves, 1999). The

article, titled "Islam and *conscience*" starts with the claim that it is necessary to examine the revelations of Islam in order to study Islamic *conscience*. Based on this perspective, Geaves, like Hodgson, takes the same Qur'ānic verse (3:110) as the scriptural foundation of social *conscience* in the religion. But according to Geaves, this social *conscience* can only be fulfilled by establishing the *umma* (the whole community of Muslims bound together by the faith of Islam), which calls people to the good and aims to prevent the wrong from occurring (al-Qur'ān, 3:104), based on God's commandments and protection from Islamic law. Geaves underlines the centrality in Islam of the guardianship provided by revelation, transcribed in the Qur'ān over social *conscience* in Islam, as revelation does not "leave *conscience*, to the arbitrary human interpretation of moral behaviour, and it makes sure that the correct action is not left to peculiarities of social upbringing or cultural norms that vary across societies" (Geaves, 1999, p. 157). Based on the premise that God the Merciful will not punish any of His servants without teaching them the difference between right and wrong, Geaves deduces that Islam does not contain instinctive notions of right and wrong (Geaves, 1999, p. 167). Here, *conscience* seems to be a response to external moral standards. However, according to Geaves, there is another type of *conscience* that he calls the "personal *conscience*." It can only be possible under categories such as *jāiz* (allowable), *mandūb* (recommended), and *maḥdhūr* (warned), which are acts in which Muslims are allowed to search their own inner selves and make moral choices in order to perform an action (or not), outside of any realm firmly established by *sharia* (Islamic religious law) as "permissible" (*fard*, or *wājib*) and "not permissible" (*ḥarām*). Geaves concludes the paper by sharing general explanations of the stages of mystical experience through which he believes personal *conscience* can be attained (Geaves, 1999, p. 170).

Apart from the early works on *conscience* mentioned above, two more studies must be mentioned here. One of them was conducted by Professor Paul L. Heck, who blended area

and literature studies. His monograph focuses on the meaning of *conscience* in the current globalized age. He presents his arguments based on the accounts shared by his Muslim student informants in Morocco, who claimed similarities between Islam and the Christian West during his joint reading circles. He also used written documents shared by the Muslim informants from Morocco as evidence of *conscience* in Islam (Heck, 2014, pp. 292–294). After a long lexical examination, Heck points out that even though Islam lacks an exact word for *conscience*, there are many that come close (such as *ḍamīr*, *qalb*, *fiṭra* and *nafs*) that are found in the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth, as well as classical Sufi books by Muslim scholars such as Al-Qushayrī and Al-Ghazālī (Heck, 2014, pp. 296, 306).

Heck, who seems aware of his research success in terms of exploring Islam’s rich terminology to study *conscience* within the faith, rejects the claims that Islam lacks the concept of *conscience* either as a written idea or as a word used in daily life. He asserts that the language of Islam can enrich Christian thinking about *conscience*, and Muslims can similarly be enriched by seeing that the ways in which Christians refer to *conscience* are not foreign to their own moral heritage, even if they are not expressed in the same language (Heck, 2014, p. 308). However, Heck cannot hide his doubts about whether the idea of *conscience* appears in the daily lives of Muslims and calls for sociological analysis to determine this.

The second and the last study with which the present article shares similarities in terms of methods was (Leirvik, 2003). Leirvik’s book, which includes another of his monograph (published in 2003) that presented his earliest findings on the theme, concentrates on a single term, *ḍamīr*, that he believes was identified by Arab Muslim scholars during the first half of the 19th century as a counterpart to *conscience* in the Western Christian tradition. Based on Leirvik’s research, Muslim scholars, have been aware of the discourse on *conscience* in the West and its positive role in establishing the modern civilization that the Muslim world has been searching for. Therefore, they wanted to spark similar discussions in the

Muslim world through dialogues between Muslim and Western scholars.

To summarize this section⁴, it can be said that a rich, promising sub-field on *conscience* has been emerging and expanding, as demonstrated by Hodgson’s epoch-making investigation to find evidence for the presence of *conscience* in historical events, Geaves’s brief lexical explanation of *conscience* sourced directly from Islamic texts, Heck’s area study of the contemporary understanding of *conscience* among Moroccan informants, and Leirvik’s case study of the term *ḍamīr*. There have been many investigations (including in the field of area studies) on other parts of the Muslim world and literature about other notions that have been used to describe *conscience* in places where Arabic is not spoken. Therefore, the present study aims to contribute to filling this research gap by focusing on *vicdân* in Elmalılı’s work—a notion that has not yet been explored in depth.

3.2. Elmalılı’s understanding of *Vicdân*

According to Elmalılı, *vicdân* is “the core of morality” (*ahlāk*; in Arabic: *akhlāq*) (Yazır, 1979, p. 19). *Vicdân* is such an important component of ethics that the latter would not even exist without the former, just as philosophy would be absurd if it were not about being, and reasoning were not used as philosophy’s methodology (Yazır, 1979, pp. 19–20). In other words, *vicdân* works as a fundamental principle to decide whether acts are good or bad in terms of morality, in the

⁴ Readers familiar with Michael Cook’s *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2000/2010) may believe that it should be discussed here, as its title is derived from the Qurʾānic verse of “commanding right and forbidding wrong” – seen as the cornerstone of Islamic civilization – and thus it is likely to deal with the concept of *conscience*. However, Cook’s book primarily examines the legal aspect of “commanding right and forbidding wrong” – “amr bi al maʿrūf nah ʿan al-munkar” in Arabic – which is a religious obligation for all Muslims mentioned in the Qurʾān. In fact, Cook uses the term *conscience* just once in the book to refer to the political rebellions of various tribes in early Islamic history (Cook, 2001, p. 548), which is a connotation that is far from the scope of this paper.

same way that scientific laws comprise the basic premise used to describe the nature of the universe (e.g., the law of gravity in physics and chemical reactions in chemistry)(Yazır, 1979, p. 49,70). Nevertheless, for Elmalılı, *conscience* is not a universal capacity that everyone possesses. Although every person can develop *vicdân*, not every individual has it innately, and thus it has to be discovered personally. He calls the discovered *conscience* the individual *conscience* (*vicdân-i ferdî*).

3.2.1. Individual Conscience (Vicdân-i Ferdî)

According to Elmalılı, this type of *conscience* can only be understood through personal and intellectual reasoning. He explains the details of the journey in his commentary on the first verse of “Sūra al-Fātiḥa” (the first chapter of the Qur’ān), which is “Praise be to God, Lord of all the worlds” (al-Qur’ān, 1:1).

He views “the worlds” as the basic foundation of his epistemology, through which he describes his understanding of *vicdân*. By connecting “knowledge” and “the worlds” to each other (because both are derived from the same Arabic root ‘a-l-m), he defines “the worlds” as “things by which other things are known.” Then, Elmalılı asserts that “real knowledge is grasped through acknowledgement (*tasdīk*), not imagination (*tasavvūr*)” (Yazır, 1979, p. 71). He goes on to claim that “knowledge does not mean remembering a piece of information in one’s mind; rather, it relates to two or more imaginings and comprehends the entirety of reality” (Yazır, 1979, pp. 70–73). He called this holistic comprehension *vicdân*.

Based on the above analysis, what one learns through the physical senses is called imagination. And those impressions become true knowledge if they are acknowledged through an intellectual reasoning exploration, the process he calls *vicdân*.

Elmalılı explains this process using another concept that has the same Arabic root: *vücûd* (being, existence), a Sufi term that is a key notion in the thinking of Ibn ‘Arabî (d. 1240). Elmalılı states:

In fact, we know things by witnessing them through our senses (*şuur*; in

Arabic: *shu‘ūr*), then by imagining and reasoning them in our minds through the images and memories that come out of the relationship between the senses and mind (the process of imagining and reasoning). If we don’t have this comprehension, we even cannot be aware of ourselves. For instance, the sun is the sun because (I see) its image in my mind. But, apart from those images, we feel “fixed prototypes” (*âyan*; in Arabic *a’yân*) of the things outside of our minds. Now, even though we didn’t have them before, how are we able to know them without (imagining or remembering them)? How do we distinguish (whether they are) true (or) false? Although the “the realities of the things” (*hakāik-i eşya*; in Arabic: *ḥaqāiq al-ashyā*) that we call “fixed prototypes” (*âyan-i sâbite*, in Arabic: *al-a’yân al-thābita*) are inner and imaginal values in my mind, how do I figure out that they are real? If I don’t accept them as real entities, why does my *conscience* blame me as (a) liar? Most importantly, how do I acknowledge my imagination, my *vicdân* (*conscience*) and my being (*vücûd*; in Arabic: *wujūd*) as real? If I am able to do that, then I must have a relationship with God, who has already comprehended me, my mind, my heart, my inside and outside, knows (all of) time and space, witnesses all incidents and events beyond all things, the creator, the maker, the guardian, the witness, the lord, the necessary being (*vâcibü’l-vücûd*; in Arabic: *wājib al-wujūd*). Through this relationship with God, I first acknowledge his presence (Yazır, 1979, pp. 72–73).

This quote illustrates that for Elmalılı, *conscience* (*vicdân*) is the result of an intellectual reasoning that ends with an exploration of the true nature of things beyond our mental images of them. Hence, anyone who has this experience can successfully distinguish between good and bad and right and wrong, as he or she has acquired wisdom beyond their external appearances. If not, one would not be able to develop a *conscience*, and eventually one would not be able to distinguish between

good and bad. The ability to sort things out is explained in the following passage:

In reality, if I did not acknowledge *hakk* (reality, essentiality) that overlooks my front, back, right and left at the same time, as well as its relationship with things when I conceive of myself, I could not determine the relationship of things. Neither could I have said "I am me", (or be) able to (transform) from my existence (*vücud*) to *vicdân* (conscience). Consequently, I could not comprehend any reality. (For instance), I could not distinguish...between happiness and sadness, darkness and light, sleeping and wakefulness, or richness and poor-ness" (Yazır, 1979, p. 49,73).

According to Elmalılı, *conscience* is a universal capacity that is accessible to everyone. However, it, at the same time, remains a special ability, and an individual disposition, as it can only be reached through intellectual reasoning⁵. Apart from individual *conscience*, Elmalılı often mentions another kind of *conscience*, which he calls "social conscience" (*vicdân-i ictimâî*).

3.2.2. Social or Collective Conscience (Vicdân-i İctimâî)

As a feature of Elmalılı's general commentary, which incorporates some scientific arguments into his Qur'anic exegesis, he explains his understanding of

5 One question that may arise is why individuals have to explore their conscience, which is supposed to be a fixed internal quality in the human heart. To answer this question, first, conscience does not always vocalize the good. In fact, conscience can beatify good actions such as charity or self-sacrifice, but at the same time, it might "justify bad actions like self-individualism or an act of terror" (Strohm, 2011, p. 2). Second, as the etymological meaning of the term, which is "mutual knowledge," might suggest, conscience could be a public voice coming from outside too. In other words, conscience combines both private ethical insights and public expectations. As such, the conscience of those who care about public opinion, could be abused by wrong public opinions and be deceived by deviation of others. Elmalılı who seems to be aware of the contradiction of conscience, suggests that, in order to avoid possible misguidance coming from outside, individuals must explore their conscience and learn to distinguish their own authentic inner voice from public expectations.

social *conscience* by referring to the sociology of his time. He views society—in which social *conscience*, in his view, plays a crucial role—as a group of organized people that act in a unified spirit. He claims that the first Muslim society, which had that spirit, developed after the first chapter of the Qur'ân was completely revealed to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

Being aware of diverse accounts of when and where the chapter was revealed, he chose a narration that suggests that the first three verses were revealed in Mecca and the rest in Medina, the town where Muslims built the first Muslim city state, which later became a model for Muslim civilization. However, what makes the second part of the chapter so special in terms of Muslim society?

He finds in the Qur'ân that the pronouns used to describe subjects or objects in prayer sentences in the second half of the chapter are plural ("we" or "us") instead of singular ("I"); for example, "You alone *we* worship, and You alone *we* ask for help; guide *us* to the straight path" (Yazır, 1979, p. 113). He understands this grammatical point as instruction not only for performing prayers with others but also for building a Muslim community. Although he reaffirms the ultimate duty of Muslim society, which is described in the Qur'ân as establishing an *umma* "inviting to the good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong" (al-Qur'ân, 3:104), he still does not forget the important role of conscientious individuals in comprising society. He states:

The spirit of the community appears in individuals first. When brotherhood enters into an individual's *vicdân* (conscience), and brotherhood broadens his or her *conscience* by getting rid of harmful feelings such as arrogance and selfishness, that *conscience*, based on its spiritual expansion, serves as the foundation of the community. Then this foundation spreads from family to large civilizations (Yazır, 1979, p. 110).

Elmalılı then evokes the intellectual aspect of this understanding and claims that the individual *conscience* on which all Muslim societies were built throughout Islamic history is Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) social

conscience (al-Qur'ân, 3: 104). An example of "perfect *conscience*" can be found in the following passage:

During his isolation from worldly affairs and reclusion in the cave of *Hirâ'*, the Prophet Muhammad's heart was so exhilarated that he embodied the "perfect soul" (*rûh-i küil*), and his social *conscience* represented the whole universe. And the Muslim communities (developed) from this (Yazır, 1979, p. 114).

Although Elmalılı does not give details about how the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) social *conscience* becomes the foundation of all Muslims, it can be explained through his in the establishment of the first Muslim community in Medina, the first Muslim city state that was taken as an example for the Islamic civilization theories by many Muslim philosophers such as al-Fârâbî (d. 950), the author of *The Virtuous City* (al-Madîna al-Fâdıla). Therefore, Islamic civilization is impossible without the Prophet. It seems that, for Elmalılı, receiving God's words in the cave of *Hirâ'*, and putting those commandments into action against many difficulties could be realized because of the *conscience* the Prophet (pbuh) possessed, which he refers to as the Prophet's (pbuh) social *conscience*.

Another sociological point that he utilizes for his explanation of social *conscience* is the notion of *mîsâk-ı içtimâiye* or *muâvaza* (both of which mean "social contract"). Again, the starting point of this commentary is related to the second part of the chapter, in which the verses take on the style of conversation between God and the Muslim community. He emphasizes the change in narration from God to believers after the first three verses, which are about God's attributes (including his lordliness which is *rubûbiyyet* in Turkish or *rubûbiyya* in Arabic, and mercy *rahmet* in Turkish or *rahma* in Arabic). He views this shift in conversation as two facets of a contract between God and humanity: a grand privilege given by God to humanity in addition to countless blessings. He states:

God bestows us the right of talking with his almighty by letting us say "You alone we worship; and You alone we ask for

help" as our part of the contract. Then, we, with all of our social *conscience*, start to say our words and agree. With that relationship, we conclude a treaty that would never diminish since its counterpart is God, the infinite mercy (Yazır, 1979, p. 53).

For Elmalılı, it is not only honor that society receives through this agreement, but also "the right of legal intervention" (*şer'î tasarruf hakkı*) as a proxy of God, which enables the community in question to manipulate God's creation on the earth on His behalf. Through this power of attorney, given in return for worshiping Him, a conscientious society is able to establish laws (called *ijmâ'* in Islamic jurisprudence). Elmalılı explains this as follows:

As was mentioned in the Qur'ân that "the righteous servants of Allah inherit the world" (21:105); and "It is He who made you successors upon the earth" (6:165), there is a kind of successor of God on the earth. They are bestowed (with) the ability of disposal on the earth. From this, we can claim that a community that holds a social *conscience* that serves only Allah and seeks refuge only in him, must be given a sort of capacity to make laws in their concurrence. That is to say, general concurrence and agreement (*icmâ-i ümmet*) are positive (pieces of) evidence in the law-making process (Yazır, 1979, p. 54).

Consequently, if all requirements (such as being composed of conscientious members and acting together) are fulfilled, Muslim society will be able to judge what is good or bad. That is what Elmalılı seems to call *social conscience*.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study, which compared the notion of *conscience* in Islamic and Christian thoughts, was to answer the research questions mentioned in the Research Method section. The following points can be presented as responses to the research questions.

- 1) On what basis should believers of

religions determine what is good or bad when both parties in a moral/ideological conflict think they are right and the other side is wrong?

Based on the examination conducted, it can be concluded that both Islamic and Christian thought accept *conscience* as an innate human ability to distinguish between right and wrong.

However, *conscience* can be swayed by prevailing culture and social pressure, thus, potentially leading one in the wrong direction if the culture or community in question is "immoral." An example of such deviation from morality can be seen in the so-called religious militant groups with extreme ideologies in different parts of the world, who have been influenced by their communities to view immoral or unlawful deeds as justified, which causes them to commit atrocities around the world without feeling any remorse. In that case, can we say, "Those who act against the common good have no *conscience*?" The Pauline understanding of *conscience*, found in the First Corinthians, as well as the Thomistic understanding of *conscience*, allows us to assume that they too have a *conscience*, based on his description of *conscience* which is an attitude taken for the sake of the community or society. Therefore, it can be said that believers of religions like some Muslims and Christians who prioritize the values of their organizations or communities before their own beliefs and act according to the demands of the situation (whether good or bad), possess a *conscience* in this sense (which Elmalılı calls "individual *conscience*,") even if their actions may conflict with universal values.

2) Can such *conscience* be a judge for believers when assessing the moral qualities of their thoughts, words, and deeds?

Based on Martin Luther's words and deeds, such as his confrontation with the church and state in the Diet of Worms, it can be said that Lutheran *conscience* can be relied upon as long as there is evidence from sacred scripts justifying that particular action. However, if both sides hold evidence that seems to support each party's position, how can one be assured of being righteous? According to Elmalılı, who does not consider

individual *conscience* as the only reliable faculty for sound thinking and moral action, all individuals should discover their *conscience* through intellectual reasoning and cultivate it into what he calls *social conscience* or *collective conscience*, which leads to good and right. Hence, anyone, including self-proclaimed "Muslims", whose thoughts and actions, such as justifying the killing of innocent civilians through indiscriminate terror attacks, go against universally accepted values such as the sanctity of human life, should be deemed as someone who has no *social or collective conscience*, even if they may have an individual *conscience* that can be misguided by external influences such as false interpretations taken from the sacred sources of Islam.

3) The answer to the question "Why do extremists' radical opinions, which are unanimously viewed as wrong by most people, gain support among some religious groups if they have a notion of *conscience*?" can be found in the responses to the first and second questions.

It can be argued that the support for radical ideas among religious communities is the result of interactions between individuals who have *individual conscience* and radical groups in small circles. This interaction can occur through direct contact with these groups in conflict zones and war-torn countries or through exposure to ideas on the Internet and social media. Therefore, individuals with a *social conscience* or *collective conscience* cultivated through intellectual reasoning neither support nor are influenced by radical ideas.

Although this study provided solutions to its research questions using primarily the example of Islamic thought and Muslim actions, it can be said that the findings shared here apply not only to Muslims but also to other monotheistic faith groups, as these groups have many components in common with regard to *conscience*.

Acknowledgment

I began researching the concept of *conscience* in 2018 and completed my research this year. During this period, I worked at three universities: Doshisha, Kyoto, and

Ritsumeikan. I am very thankful to these three universities for providing me with resources to pursue my research activities in general, including this study.

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