

CARDINAL JOSEPH RATZINGER (POPE BENEDICT XVI)

Questions: What do you make of Ratzinger's understanding of conscience? What are the implications of this understanding of conscience for professional education in a Catholic university? What are the differences between Ratzinger's account of conscience and Bolt's interpretation of Thomas More's notion of conscience?

INTRODUCTION TO JOSEPH RATZINGER

Pope Benedict XVI born April 16, 1927, as Joseph Alois Ratzinger in Marktl am Inn, Bavaria, Germany, is the 265th pope of the Roman Catholic Church. He was elected pope on April 19, 2005. He has been one of the most influential academic theologians since the 1960s and author of many books. He served as professor at various German universities, Archbishop of Munich and Freising, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and Dean of the College of Cardinals before becoming Pope. In response to an increasing de-Christianization in many developed countries, where secular humanism, secularism, and secularization are influential, the Pope particularly emphasizes what he sees as the need for Europe to turn back to its fundamental Christian values.

CONSCIENCE AND TRUTH: THE ESSENCE OF MORALITY JOSEPH CARDINAL RATZINGER¹

In the contemporary discussion on what constitutes the essence of morality and how it can be recognized, the question of conscience has become paramount especially in the field of Catholic moral theology. This discussion centers on the concepts of freedom and norm, autonomy and heteronomy, self-determination and external determination by authority. Conscience appears here as the bulwark of freedom in contrast to the encroachments of authority on existence. In the course of this, two notions of the Catholic are set in opposition to each other. One is a renewed understanding of the Catholic essence which expounds Christian faith from the basis of freedom and as the

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very principle of freedom itself. The other is a superseded, "pre-conciliar" model which subjects Christian existence to authority, regulating life even into its most intimate preserves, and thereby attempts to maintain control over people's lives. Morality of conscience and morality of authority as two opposing models, appear to be locked in struggle with each other. Accordingly, the freedom of the Christian would be rescued by appeal to the classical principle of moral tradition that conscience is the highest norm which man is to follow even in opposition to authority. Authority in this case, the Magisterium, may well speak of matters moral, but only in the sense of presenting conscience with material for its own deliberation. Conscience would retain, however, the final word. Some authors reduce conscience in this its aspect of final arbiter to the formula: conscience is infallible.

Nonetheless, at this point, a contradiction can arise. It is of course undisputed that one must follow a certain conscience or at least not act against it. But whether the judgment of conscience or what one takes to be such, is always right, indeed whether it is infallible, is another question. For if this were the case, it would mean that there is no truth—at least not in moral and religious matters, which is to say, in the areas which constitute the very pillars of our existence. For judgments of conscience can contradict each other. Thus there could be at best the subject's own truth, which would be reduced to the subject's sincerity. No door or window would lead from the subject into the broader world of being and human solidarity. Whoever thinks this through will come to the realization that no real freedom exists then and that the supposed pronouncements of conscience are but the reflection of social circumstances. This should necessarily lead to the conclusion that placing freedom in opposition to authority overlooks something. There must be something deeper, if freedom and, therefore, human existence are to have meaning.

A CONVERSATION ON THE ERRONEOUS CONSCIENCE AND FIRST INFERENCES

It has become apparent that the question of conscience leads in fact to the core of the moral problem and thus to the question of man's existence itself. I would now like to pursue this question not in the form of a strictly conceptual and therefore unavoidably abstract presentation, but by way of narrative, as one might say today, by relating, to begin with, the story of my own encounter with this problem. I first became aware of the question with all its urgency in the beginning of my academic teaching. In the course of a dispute, a senior colleague, who was keenly aware of the plight to being Christian in our times, expressed the opinion that one should actually be grateful to God that He allows there to be so many unbelievers in good conscience. For if their eyes were opened and they became believers, they would not be capable, in this world of ours, of bearing the burden of faith with all its moral obligations. But as it is, since they can go another way in good conscience, they can reach salvation. What shocked me about this assertion was not in the first place the idea of an erroneous conscience given by God Himself in order to save men by means of such artfulness—the idea, so to speak, of a blindness sent by God for the salvation of those in question. What disturbed me was the notion that it harbored, that faith is a burden which can hardly be borne and which no doubt was intended only for stronger natures—faith almost as a kind of punishment, in any case, an imposition not easily coped with. According to this view, faith would not make salvation