**My Enemy’s Enemy is my Friend:**

**Martin Luther and Joseph Ratzinger on the Bi-Dimensionality of Conscience**

Abstract

This paper responds to a polarisation in Catholic reactions to the quincentenary year of the Lutheran Reformation with an examination of Martin Luther’s and Joseph Ratzinger’s respective theologies of conscience, and their shared late-scholastic background. Luther’s key contributions to discussions of conscience follow from his abandoning of the traditional two-level (‘bi-dimensional’) model, which enables his move to a more personal and less abstract articulation, and clears the way for his conviction that an erroneous conscience must be respected (‘Here I stand, I can do no other’). Joseph Ratzinger’s approach will then be shown to take-up important elements of Luther’s, while re-establishing conscience’s bi-dimensionality. Ratzinger maintains a person-centred approach, and acknowledges the rights of an erroneous conscience, but he also importantly reconfigures these considerations within a bi-dimensional model which preserves the collective or communal dimension of Catholic tradition, thus offering a ‘hermeneutic of continuity’ of sorts for understanding the Reformation in relation to theologies of conscience.

Introduction

Like most things which happen on God’s earth at the current time, it has not taken long for the quincentenary of Luther nailing his 95-theses to the church door in Wittenberg to hit the Catholic blogosphere. And like most things which hit the Catholic blogosphere, it has not taken long for opinion to fall into two sharply opposed camps. On the one hand, there are those for whom Luther is a bit like Luther ended-up thinking the Pope was: the antichrist. For these condemnatory critics, Luther is misguided and entirely indefensible, heralding an unfortunate and regrettable rupture of Christendom from itself, and leading great swathes of the faithful into spiritual wrack and ruin. On the other hand however, there are those for whom Luther isn’t quite so bad. These more placatory commentators tend to highlight the devotional excesses, unscriptural accretions, and abuses of institutional authority in the late-medieval Church, and to criticise particularly the theology of the *counter* Reformation, seeing an internal rupture of genuine Catholicism from itself in the way the Church reacted *to* Luther, and thereby laying more blame at the door of Trent than Wittenberg.

Saying ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’ is not a particularly helpful approach to ecumenical relations, and it is unlikely to win many adherents against the background just described. For those for whom Luther is all evil, it is precisely Luther’s approximation to the good which makes him so dangerous – it is because he is claiming to argue from Scripture and Tradition - and saying something different to Catholic theology therefrom - that he can never be considered a ‘friend’, but is actually a servant of the enemy who claims to be a light-bringer, evil masquerading as good. For those seeking a more placatory response, however, it is the word ‘enemy’ that’s going to cause problems, for they point to the rectitude of Luther’s criticisms of the pre-Tridentine Church, and – after *Unitatis Redintigratio* – they ask, haven’t we all moved on a bit from such antagonistic language anyway?

In this paper, I explore the theology of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI in relation to this situation. In his recently published autobiographical work, *Last Testament*, the Pope Emeritus does not seem particularly hopeful about any Protestant-Catholic reunions in the foreseeable future, citing ‘the internal disagreements’ among Protestant churches as a ‘big problem’.[[1]](#endnote-1) He also admits his hand was very much at work in the document *Dominus Jesus¸* which famously states that ‘the [idea] that the one Church of Christ subsists also in non-Catholic Churches […] is contrary to the authentic meaning of *Lumen gentium*’.[[2]](#endnote-2) But, on the other hand, *Last Testament* tells us that during Benedict’s trip to Germany in 2010, the President of the *Evangelische Kirche*, told the Pope how Karl Barth always used to shout at him: ‘Read Ratzinger!’.[[3]](#endnote-3) Either way, my concern here is not with latter-day Catholic-Lutheran relations, but with the interpretation of the theology of Martin Luther himself. On this front, it may come as a surprise that the ‘much-maligned *Panzerkardinal*’ is thought to offer some of the most striking Catholic accommodations to Luther’s thinking in the history of post-Reformation Western theology.[[4]](#endnote-4)

This paper explores the relationship between Luther and Ratzinger through one particular lens: the theology of conscience. This will show how Ratzinger adopts positions or orientations which – at certain points – seem closer to Luther himself than the late-medieval scholasticism Luther reacted against. For both Luther and Ratzinger, conscience is divinely instituted; an endowment of God to humanity, and an important remnant of Adam’s prelapsarian creatureliness which endures after the fall from grace. Moreover, while both hold there is a divine mandate undergirding the promptings of conscience, they also hold that these promptings can be misguided: our conscience can misinform, misinterpret and mislead. But importantly both Luther and Ratzinger maintain that the misguided, or ‘erroneous’ conscience, must always be respected; that it is unacceptable to overrule one’s own conscience, or coerce someone against his or her conscience, even when that conscience is mired in error and in service of evil. In precisely this sense Luther and Ratzinger both hold a position akin to saying of the misguided conscience that, ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’. That is, insofar as conscience is divinely instituted and seeks the good, it is always primarily an enemy of evil, even when it is functioning misdirectedly toward the good. Or better, each would say that to overrule someone’s conscience – even if it is misguided – would be a greater evil than letting it run its erroneous course.

Eamon Duffy famously said of the Second Vatican Council that it was the greatest upheaval in Christendom since Martin Luther.[[5]](#endnote-5) Anyone with the briefest acquaintance with Benedict XVI’s writings will know the depth of this Pope’s contribution to interpreting Vatican II. But what Benedict defined as a ‘hermeneutic of continuity’ need not be restricted only to interpreting the Council. It offers an interesting methodological approach for other areas of concern. An example of this is demonstrated by this article’s investigation of whether or not Ratzinger’s theology of conscience offers some sort of ‘hermeneutic of continuity’ for understanding the Reformation. Of course, at Vatican II we weren’t dealing with open, widespread schism, massive geopolitical turbulence, and the opening-up of deep fissures which would endure for centuries, unlike 16th Century Europe. But, thinking in terms of this hermeneutic is helpful, I suggest, when views have become sharply polarised. For what both those being condemnatory *and* placatory toward Luther’s quincentenary have in common, is a clear ‘hermeneutic of rupture’: Luther rent authentic Christendom asunder in the first place, or the counter-Reformation broke with authentic Catholicism in the second. And if both camps are guilty of the same basic misinterpretation, maybe there is some mileage in saying ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend after all’, maybe Ratzinger makes it possible to consider how there is some scope for genuine development within tradition, development informed to some extent by Luther, while still outlining fundamental points of disagreement, thus making room at the same time for the case that the counter-Reformation rightly battened down the hatches the steady the barque of Peter.

In what follows then, I want to discuss the late scholastic understanding of conscience in which the devout young Augustinian Friar, Fr Martin Luther, was trained. Then I’ll turn my attention to Luther’s critique of this understanding of conscience in his own theology. This will provide important background for his most well-known statement from the Imperial Diet at Worms: ‘Here I stand, I can do no other’.[[6]](#endnote-6) This brings an important aspect of Luther’s position to light, namely, that Luther states that *even if he is wrong*, he cannot take another position, and even if we disagree, we must respect his right to stand there: ‘it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience’, he says.[[7]](#endnote-7) The ground will then be clear to show how Ratzinger takes-up elements of the pre-Reformation, late-scholastic, understanding of conscience, while being orientated in ways importantly resonant with Luther. Ratzinger brings back to the table an important element to the late scholastic understanding, which had arguably been neglected since the Reformation: a collective, communal, or social understanding of conscience, enabling us to say not only ‘here I stand’, but ‘here we stand, in the Church’. This reasserting of a communal aspect to the conscience will be seen to offer an interesting example of reform within tradition, or development within continuity, or what I would term the ‘dynamic fidelity’ which is one of Ratzinger’s theological hallmarks.

The Late-scholastic Understanding of Conscience

So, to start with the understanding of conscience Luther inherited in his theological schooling, it is important to bear in mind that what we today consider as conscience was understood rather differently in the medieval period. Today, people tend to think of the conscience as that ‘still small voice’, which says at points of decision in life; ‘do this’, ‘don’t do that’, or ‘you shouldn’t have done that’. Immediately we can see something a touch odd here, that conscience is often described in terms of an internal dialogue. But a dialogue presupposes two parties, while in descriptions of conscience, oneself (i.e. first-person subjectivity), addresses oneself in the second-person – addresses oneself as ‘you’: ‘you should not have done that’. In this way we can understand why people often interpret the etymology of the word conscience, coming from *scientia*, knowledge, and *con-*, with, as ‘knowing with oneself’; a knowledge of what should or should not be done arising mysteriously from within oneself, a moral knowing to which only oneself is privy at that moment. This dispensation of knowledge in the process of lived decision making which we today call conscience is certainly present in the scholastic understanding, and unsurprisingly it is called *conscientia*.

But this is not the whole picture. Since classical times, what today would be termed conscience involved not only concrete dictates in lived experience. There was also what could be termed a ‘bi-dimensional’ understanding of conscience. This is summarised by Thomas Aquinas as follows: ‘[i]t is necessary for the prudent man to know both the universal principles of reason and the singulars with which ethical action is concerned’.[[8]](#endnote-8) What I just termed the ‘the processes of lived decision making’, Thomas calls ‘the singulars with which ethical action is concerned’ – and what both of us are trying awkwardly to communicate is conscience as involved in moral choice in concrete events, being prompted to choose the good (hence ethical) amongst the historical realities of our own lives (hence ‘singular’, or unique, or particular). But Thomas says the wise man knows *both* ‘the universal principles of reason *and* the singulars with which ethical action is concerned’, and so there are two dimensions at play; not just the ‘still small voice’ saying ‘do this’, but a deeper, foundational layer beneath or behind that voice. Thomas describes this as knowledge of the ‘universal principles of reason’. To my mind, this phrasing has led to many misunderstandings. It suggests that these ‘principles’ are perspicuous before one’s consciousness, transparent to oneself, and that they always align comfortably with lived realities. To give a slightly silly example, many English children were once taught at primary school the basic universal moral principle: ‘honesty is the best policy’. The implication in some misreadings of Thomas is that – when faced with the possibility of being dishonest – he envisages this ‘universal principle’ kicking-into one’s consciousness, and the voice of conscience saying ‘don’t tell that lie’, i.e. that ‘singular lie’ in one’s own life.

Space will not permit me to assess whether this is a fair reading of Thomas, but it can safely be surmised that it is at least not a fair reading of the broader tradition in which Thomas participates. Since classical times conscience was understood as bi-dimensional, with a foundational, fundamental, perhaps abstract or maybe primal level called *synderesis. Synderesis* does not in and of itself offer concrete instruction, but undergirds and orientates the ‘surface’ level called *conscientia,* which refers to the mysterious arrival of concrete instruction in lived experience. Where certain readings of Thomas are wrong, is in thinking that *synderesis* is like some sort of tabular list of moral generalities – killing is wrong, honesty is the best policy, etc – rather than an inexplicable, primordial *orientation* of human life. When the Greeks looked deeply into human ethical decision making, they concluded there is a sort of base layer at work in us, which is very hard to describe, but which fundamentally orients us toward the good and the true. If we try to describe it, we can only slip into universal principles, because it is abstract, or primal, but these principles are not the thing itself. Probably the best attempt to distil a universal principle to describe *synderesis* is provided by Josef Pieper: ‘That the good must be loved and made reality’.[[9]](#endnote-9) The basic point here is that underneath the dictates of conscience (or *conscientia*) is a fundamental orientation, a decree primordial to our being human: ‘love the good and make it happen’. Insofar as the tradition argues that actually being human is tied up with this, that it is a facet of human nature by definition, we can see why *synderesis* is sometimes called ‘innate conscience’, ‘natural conscience’, or – by Ratzinger, as we shall see – ‘an ontological level of conscience’, where conscience is tied up with *being*, with the deepest layers of our identity as created, our being as human.

The word *synderesis* can be translated as ‘conservation’ or ‘preservation’, and seems to have made its way into the Latin tradition via St Jerome’s commentary on Ezekiel, in which he implies Plato is the source.[[10]](#endnote-10) Jerome states that *synderesis* is the ‘spark of conscience which was not extinguished in the breath of Adam even after he was expelled from paradise, and by which […] we know that we sin’.[[11]](#endnote-11) So *synderesis* for Jerome is a substratum of human subjectivity which has survived more or less intact after the fall; which was conserved or preserved when Adam went the way of all flesh. This aspect of *synderesis* proves important as the tradition develops, and would become a cornerstone of the late-scholastic understanding in which Luther was trained. Luther studied Gabriel Biel’s writing on *conscientia* and *synderesis*, and learned thereby that *synderesis* was an intact (unfallen) facet of the self, and was thus, therefore, ‘an infallible moral ability’ universally endowed upon human beings, enabling them to choose the good.[[12]](#endnote-12) Of course one might well ask here why human beings clearly do not always choose the good, but Biel is merely claiming that we have the *ability* to choose the good, or what he terms ‘something that at all events necessarily directs in general toward a just and right activity.[[13]](#endnote-13) Of course, all manner of circumstances might prevent the ability to act rightly through *synderesis* holding sway, not least through the drives of pride, greed, lust *et al*, but for Biel the ability is indisputably there. So for Biel and many of his contemporaries, *synderesis* is firstly an unfallen ‘intact’ aspect of the self (he calls it ‘an inextinguishable spark’), and an aspect which secondly therefore cannot err; which is infallible.

There is also a third aspect to the late-scholastic understanding of conscience, related to these two, which should be mentioned and is arguably their corollary. This is the view that Church teaching and *synderesis* cannot be at variance. It is easy enough to see how this view took root: if the Church and *synderesis* are the making present of a divine mandate, they cannot contradict each other, if the Church is restored to original justice, and *synderesis* is an uncorrupted remnant of that justice, they must concur with each other. So, having outlined the late-scholastic understanding of conscience, let us explore what Luther does with it – and to give a preliminary indication – let us bear in mind that conscience, for someone like Biel, cannot err, and can never therefore be an enemy of the good.

Luther’s Understanding of Conscience

The centrality of conscience to Luther’s thinking is so pronounced only a brief summary can be conducted here, focusing on the most pertinent points for this article. As mentioned, Luther inherited the late-scholastic approach, and this is clear in his early writings, such as a discussion of the parable of the prodigal son, in which he states that the ‘spark of *synderesis*’ explains how the lost son ‘comes to himself’ amongst the pig’s husks, calling him home to his father.[[14]](#endnote-14) In a sermon from 1514, we see Luther has begun to grapple more antagonistically with Biel, and started questioning his teachers. He claims that *synderesis* provides continuity between Adam and us – that it is therefore a prelapsarian ability of the self – but then struggles with the question of how, if we have an intact orientation to the good, there can be so little evidence of it, that ‘the natural ability of […] *synderesis* is not expressed in corresponding acts’.[[15]](#endnote-15) He then ends up saying that *synderesis* is there, it is present in human subjectivity but it is present as unrealised, it is a mere ‘postulate’. Nonetheless, at this pre-Reformation stage he maintains the late-scholastic tradition that human nature has an unfallen capability or ability to choose the good, a ‘point of contact’, if you will, for the reception of divine grace.

But, something begins to emerge in this sermon here, which is undeniably crucial for the development of Luther’s thought. We need not go so far as Walter von Loewinich and say Luther hereby makes a discovery here by which ‘the whole Catholic system receives the deathblow’, but it is hard to deny how centrally important it is for Protestant theology.[[16]](#endnote-16) Luther goes on to describe *synderesis* as a ‘longing’, a longing for the good, or for salvation. But at this point he becomes alert to the possibility that human pride might be caught up with this longing, that prideful humanity will tend to assert our own capability of achieving the good, or attaining salvation by human means (that is, works), and therefore, he concludes, ‘our longing for salvation [our *synderesis*] may be in conflict with God’s will’.[[17]](#endnote-17)

It is of course this aspect to Luther’s thinking which came to the fore over the next three years, before he wielded his hammer in 1517. In the classic texts of Luther’s theology, we thus see a deeply paradoxical and dialectical understanding of conscience at play. Luther drops the language of *synderesis* (no doubt partly because it is unscriptural and comes from the pagan Greeks), and goes instead for the biblical term ‘heart’ (*cor* or *Herz*) or just *conscientia* or *Gewissen*. He thus adopts a mono-dimensional model of conscience, called *Gewissen*, itself an admixture of the past-participle ‘known’ (*gewusst*) with the noun for knowledge ‘*Wissen*’, a ‘known knowing’ or maybe a ‘knowing as we are known’. For the later Luther, the conscience calls humanity to perform the law, to perform the activities mandated by Scripture. But what has changed is that conscience is not an ability to choose the good, for actually, he writes, human beings are by definition unable to perform the works of the law satisfactorily, so conscience functions in a despair-inducing and terrifying way. That is, conscience says ‘do this’ and ‘don’t do that’, but human beings find themselves unable to do what it commands and equally unable to stop doing what it prohibits (to quote Paul, “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” [Rom 7]). In this way, we can understand why Luther says that ‘hell will be nothing other than a bad conscience itself’.[[18]](#endnote-18) Faced with a bad conscience, as we all inevitably are for Luther, we have two options. On the one hand, we can deny it, and convince ourselves that we are fulfilling the demands of the law satisfactorily. Luther would not recommend this, for he states, that in this denial ‘the real torture of hell […] begins to be felt in this life’.[[19]](#endnote-19) The more desirable option, contrary to appearances, is to be ‘reduced to nothing’.[[20]](#endnote-20) That is, to enter into and surrender to one’s own moral dereliction, and accept the insufficiency of one’s own attempts at fulfilling the law. If one does this, says Luther, one can then behold Jesus Christ as the perfect fulfilment of the law. And having faith in this Christ, whose perfect righteousness is mercifully imputed to the sinner, opens-up the path to heaven, namely: justification by faith alone.

There are some things we need to draw out from this before turning to the final section on Ratzinger. In the first place, Luther has moved the discussion into personal language. The abstract, impersonal realm of *synderesis* has been dropped, and he has shifted gear into the narrative of human experience, and the deep moral ambiguity of human existence. Luther is no longer talking about human *nature*, but about the struggles of each individual human person. Secondly, contrary to popular misconceptions, Luther does not dismiss all natural theology, and still holds to the basic contention of the Latin tradition that there is an unfallen, prelapsarian, aspect to conscience. This can be seen in that the conscience makes a *legitimate* demand for human beings to observe the law, it is a *genuine* representation of the will of God. The significant point is that this legitimacy is not the whole picture. The terrors of conscience assail human pride, reducing self-satisfaction to nothing, and are thus a preliminary step to the faith that saves. Thirdly, with his move to personal language we see him place Jesus Christ at the centre. For the late-scholastic Biel, it seems we have an ability to choose the good regardless of Jesus. Luther has decided this is semi-pelagian, and therefore Christ must enter the scene, so we depend on Christ utterly. He thus states that ‘Christ does battle with the conscience’, or ‘assails the conscience’ and Jesus Christ Our Lord ‘triumphs over conscience’[[21]](#endnote-21).

Against this background I can now briefly touch on Luther’s oft-repeated statement: ‘Here I stand, I can do no other…it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience’. Notice the personal language, ‘Here *I* stand’, which is related to his dropping of *synderesis*. But notice also that Luther doesn’t say he cannot be moved because he is right – because his conscience cannot err – but because his conscience compels him to stand there, for good or ill. This aspect to his statement arises, I suggest, because Luther has arrived at a point where the demands of conscience are legitimate, even when they are mistaken. Conscience calls us to fulfil the law - which is legitimate – but in doing so it mistakenly assumes that we *can* fulfil the law, which is erroneous. But to assuage this call is severely inadvisable, even though it is mired in error – or more accurately, pride.

There is one more thing to draw out before turning to Ratzinger. The deeply personal language, the ‘I’ of ‘here I stand’, means the authority of Church teaching is not for Luther a central consideration. Remember that for many on the late-scholastic scene, conscience and Church teaching could not be at variance, because *synderesis* was straightforwardly unfallen. In Luther’s mono-dimensional model, *synderesis* is no more, and with it human sociality, collectivity, communality, or solidarity threatens to follow suit. Because he is not speaking of human *nature*, but about each of us as persons, conscience becomes something individual: ‘Here I stand, I can do no other’. The late scholastic background enables us to understand why an archbishop at Worms could shout at Luther: “"Lay aside your conscience, Martin; you must lay it aside because it is in error."[[22]](#endnote-22) That is, if the Church contradicts the conscience, conscience must be wrong.

Ratzinger’s Understanding of Conscience

Let us now leap forward a few centuries, to the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, to explore some of Joseph Ratzinger’s writings on conscience. In the first place, his key contribution is, arguably, to argue for a return to a bi-dimensional understanding of conscience like that of the scholastic era. Ratzinger highlights that *synderesis* was ‘effectively forgotten’[[23]](#endnote-23) in post-scholastic/post-reformation Catholic theology. He studies its roots in Stoicism and the philosophy of Socrates, and its centrality to such luminaries of Christendom as St Basil and St Augustine.[[24]](#endnote-24) But, Ratzinger doesn’t just take up *synderesis* again in a retrograde or reactionary step; he doesn’t just hold to what we have seen was considered as an ‘inextinguishable spark’, or prelapsarian substratum of human subjectivity by late-scholastic theologians like Biel. Rather, he drops the *term* ‘*synderesis*’, perhaps suspicious of its Stoic-roots, and adopts instead the Platonic word: *anamnesis*. This of course means ‘remembering’ or ‘recollection’, stemming from Plato’s view that knowledge is, for human beings, essentially a remembering of primordial memories buried deep in the pre-history of our earthly lives. Ratzinger doesn’t go this far, obviously, but he does maintain that the base layer of orientation toward the good and its realisation, the primordial disposition of human beings at the core of their very being, functions *like* memory, a sort of recollection of our intrinsic relatedness to God, a reminder that we are his creatures. Underneath the concrete instructions of *conscientia*, then, is what Ratzinger calls a ‘primal memory [*Urerrinerung*] of the good and the true’ which is ‘implanted in us’; ‘an inner tendency of being in man made in the likeness of God toward that which is in conformity with God’. He also calls this an *anamnesis* a memory ‘of the origin’, of our originatedness in and of God.[[25]](#endnote-25)

But note here that by opting for *anamnesis* over against *synderesis*, Ratzinger achieves two important things beyond just the rediscovery of the bi-dimensionality of conscience. In the first place, he adopts a term which is innately personal, and not simply an attribute of human nature. There needs to be a person for there to be remembering; memory cannot easily be distilled from personal experience as a concept in its own right, unlike *synderesis*, meaning ‘conservation’ or ‘preservation’. We can consider how human nature has a conserved or preserved facet of itself in the dispassionate, conceptual, observer standpoint of some scholastic thinkers, but this is much harder if we think in terms *anamnesis*. This has a further corollary in that Ratzinger can then question the tendency I highlighted in certain misreadings of Thomas to consider *synderesis* as a set of moral principles transparent to human consciousness, to mistake its description for the thing itself. AS Ratzinger puts it, the ‘anamnesis of the origin […] is not a conceptual, articulated knowledge, a treasury of recollected contents’, rather, it ‘is an interior sense, a capacity of re-cognition, so that the person who is thereby addressed […] recognises in it an echo of himself’.[[26]](#endnote-26) What this means in more pedestrian language, is that the promptings of conscience – always *acutely* personal – are deeply bound up with the deepest reaches of our own identities. That when conscience calls, one feels that one can no longer remain oneself if one does not heed it. In short, we see here a different way of understanding a moment like Luther’s: ‘Here I stand, I can do no other’, if I am to remain myself.

Secondly, Ratzingerian *anamnesis* challenges late-scholastic understandings of conscience in that it doesn’t necessarily mean something like an *ability* to perform the good – to make good choices. This *anamnesis* provides an orientation which configures concrete promptings to do good, and insofar as the actual doing of these goods is not presupposed, there is firm ground to argue that Ratzinger could not be accused by Luther of semi-pelagianism here. Ratzinger states that ‘[w]e would dissolve Christianity into moralism if no message that surpasses our own actions became discernible’.[[27]](#endnote-27) To understand this more deeply, we need to remember the centrality of truth to Ratzinger’s thinking. But he holds not only to the centrality of truth, but to the conviction that truth is person*;* namely the Logos, Jesus Christ. The promptings of conscience can serve as the voice of truth, and herein there is, for Ratzinger, an encounter with Christ – ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14.6). While *anamnesis* is endowed upon all human beings, he claims, there is a ‘real innovation’ to Christianity, for in the promptings of truth we are offered ‘the Logos, the truth in person’ who is also the ‘atonement, the transforming forgiveness that is beyond our own capability and incapability’.[[28]](#endnote-28) In short, I suggest again, we see something resonant with a key orientation of Luther’s: for Christ is at the centre. *Anamnesis* reminds us of the origin – of Adam – and therein opens the way to Christ, in whom Adam is surpassed.

This leaves one point to cover, bringing this article to a close by revisiting the title: “my enemy’s enemy is my friend”. Remember that Luther, in his dropping of *synderesis*, and his turn to deeply personal language, lost sight of the relation between Church authority and conscience which was – perhaps naively – considered intrinsic by the late-scholastics. Comparing Gabriel Biel and Luther there are two options for us so far on this point. In the first place, we might follow Biel and say that Church teaching and conscience cannot be at variance, or if they seem to be at variance, conscience has erred and must be changed. Hence the archbishop at Worms: ‘Lay aside your conscience, Martin’. For Luther, the implication seems to be that individual conscience always trumps ecclesial teachings - that when one feels ‘Here I stand, I can do no other’ – and the Church says otherwise, one can longer stand in the Church, or maybe one would be best off finding a community with the same view, or doing what many of Luther’s followers have done and continue to do, founding a community with which one can agree.

Before I show how Ratzinger reconfigures this black and white picture, let us call to mind the context of Catholic theology in the late 60s. One of the key events which provokes Ratzinger’s engaging with conscience is the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae*, or more accurately, its reception amongst the theologians of the day. Ratzinger was provoked to reflect deeply on the relation of Church teaching and conscience after the bishops of his locality of the time published a document on *Humanae Vitae* which, while accepting its teaching, urged the faithful to ‘follow their own consciences’, that is, prioritised individual conscience, as did Martin Luther.[[29]](#endnote-29) Against this background, we can appreciate the depth of Ratzinger’s reconfiguration of this debate, by arguing that what is usually conceived as a tension between freedom and authority (individual conscience and Church teaching), is actually a tension between two different forms of conscience. That is, for Ratzinger, there is also an ‘ecclesial conscience’, a collective *anamnesis* or envisioning of the origin, the parameters of which are articulated by the Magisterium. This iteration explains some of Ratzinger’s condemnations of majority decision making in collegiality, for example, for he envisages the bishops of the Church as carefully, humbly, and prayerfully seeking to discern God’s will together, and to speak as the Church having done so. For Ratzinger, we as human beings need *both* individual and collective conscience, both the ‘here I stand’ and the ‘here we stand’. If individual conscience is made primary, he claims, ‘subjectivity is invested with false autonomy’, while if ecclesial conscience is made primary, ‘authority is seen as heteronymous’.[[30]](#endnote-30) Both Luther and Biel are thus dealt with, but importantly, he leaves plenty of room for the moral ambiguity of human existence. Our task is to struggle to keep both elements in unity, staying mindful of the equal integrity of each, and this will involve confusions and difficulties.

Having shown how Ratzinger takes-up some important orientations of Luther’s (personal language and the centrality of Christ) while still challenging him on the important point of Church authority through his understanding of ecclesial conscience, I can now conclude by showing why Ratzinger, like Luther, maintains that ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’ as regards conscience. That a misguided or erroneous conscience must be respected – or to quote Luther, that ‘it is neither safe not right to go against conscience’. Because for Ratzinger conscience is innately personal, and is so tightly bound up with our deepest identities, he argues that it is simply unacceptable to expect people to ‘lay it aside’. He thus claims that ‘[o]ne must act according to one’s […] conviction, even if it is objectively wrong’.[[31]](#endnote-31) That is, even when one’s judgement is an enemy of the good, it must be respected, because to go against it would be the greater evil. Again, the reasons behind this lie in his understanding of *anamnesis.* If our yearning for the origin, for conformity with God, misses the target and falls short, it still makes a legitimate demand: the demand to live in conformity with God, the demand to live in perfect obedience to his will. To overrule or override this demand is thus the gravest of matters, undermining our creatureliness and perpetuating the ultimate sin of Adam, seeking to be *sicut Deus*, ‘like God’ in and of oneself. Both Luther and Ratzinger share the view, then, that the conscience can be an enemy of the good, and therefore ‘my enemy’, while holding that even when in error the conscience remains most fundamentally an enemy of evil, and in this sense, always ‘my friend’, for it yearns for the good even when it misappropriates it. In this example, I contend, we can gain some sense of how Ratzinger offers us a hermeneutic of reform within tradition with which we could approach the celebrations of Luther’s quincentary, and maybe orientate ourselves a little more mindfully toward the levels of theological complexity involved beneath the polemics we will no doubt see plenty more of in 2017.

1. Benedict XVI and Peter Seewald, *Last Testament*, translated by Jacob Phillips, (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 203 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Dominus Jesus*, n56 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Benedict XVI and Peter Seewald, *Last Testament*, p. 152 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Peter Seewald, ‘Introduction’ to Benedict XVI and Peter Seewald *Last Testament*, p. x [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Andrew Brown, ‘How the second Vatican council responded to the modern world’ in *The Guardian*, 11 October 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/andrewbrown/2012/oct/11/second-vatical-council-50-years-catholicism> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Luther’s speech at the Imperial Diet at Worms is reprinted in English in full in: History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century Vol. II., by J. H. Merle D’Aubigne, Translated by H. White, (London & Edinburgh: Religious Tract Society, 1835, p. 44 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. AS quoted by Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, (South Bend: University of Notre-Dame Press, 1965) p. 10 n2 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p. 11 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Walter von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, translated by Herbert J.A. Bouman, (Belfast: Christian Journals Ltd, 1976), p. 52 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., p. 54 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 56-7 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Quoted by Paul Althaus, in *The Theology of Martin Luther*, translated by Robert C. Schultz, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 176-7 (translation altered) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Althaus, *Martin Luther*, p. 176-7 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See a paradigmatic use of Luther’s phrase ‘reduced to nothing’ in the Heidelberg Disputation (1518), in Luther Works vol. 31, (Philedelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), p. 55 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Althaus, *Martin Luther*, p. 216; [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Martin Luther, *Luther Works* *vol. 32*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), p. 130 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. D. Vincent Twomey SVD, *Pope Benedict XVI: The Conscience of Our Age*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), p. 122 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *On Conscience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), p. 31-2 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Joseph Ratzinger, quoted by Twomey, *Conscience*, p. 125-6 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Ratzinger, *On Conscience*, p. 39 [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., p. 39-40 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Twomey, *Conscience*, p. 20 n2 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Joseph Ratzinger, *Wahrheit, Werte, Macht: Prüfsteine der pluralistischen Gesellschaft* (Freiburg: Herder, 1993), 27-39 (my translation) [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Twomey, *Conscience*, p. 127 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)