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Heteronomy and Conscience in the Third Reich in Joseph Ratzinger and Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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# Joseph Ratzinger and Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Heteronomy and Conscience During the Third Reich

## Introduction

In evaluating how Joseph Ratzinger's work contributes to the healing of Reformation-era divisions, there would seem to be much promise in exploring a moment where Ratzinger and the Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer share ground in their thinking. Highlighting such a moment can show how healing may occur in the sense of 'restoring to health' or unity (which is in Latin, of course, *unitatis redintegratio*). But inspecting a moment of shared ground between Ratzinger and Bonhoeffer promises also to open-up avenues of discussion enabling an honest appraisal of enduring difference which must also attend the unfinished healing process (and which perhaps also calls for something best expressed in Latin, a counter to *unitatis redintegratio*: that is, *semper Reformanda*).

This paper focuses on such a moment to highlight a restored unity of sorts on the one hand, and also enduring difference, or a demand for ongoing *reformanda*, on the other. This involves writings on conscience in Ratzinger and Bonhoeffer. But these writings are particularly instructive because they did not come about simply through two theologians happening to write in a way which seems quite similar. Rather, the similarities between the two bespeak a complex relationship to their shared historical context. Firstly, because each writes from the perspective of the country which gave birth to the Reformation, their understandings of conscience are inevitably shaped by discussions from that era. But secondly, their proximity and distance from each other are compelling because their writings on conscience seem each to have been provoked (at least in part) by the same episode in 20<sup>th</sup> Century history: the Third Reich, specifically, a moment when Hermann Göring, one of Hitler's commanders-in-chief, stated: 'I have no conscience. My

conscience is Adolf Hitler'.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, not only does Göring's comment provoke both Bonhoeffer and Ratzinger to discern afresh the lineaments of a Christian understanding of conscience, they do so by drawing-on precisely the same text: Josef Pieper's *Traktat über die Klugheit*.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, the case will be made that Luther's theology of conscience led to an acceptance of conscience's fallibility in post-Reformation Germany, and to a related emphasis on its being superseded by another in faith, by Jesus Christ. This is inadvertently related to the extreme misappropriation of Nazism; namely, a brute heteronomy of the conscience under totalitarian rule. Following from this, we shall discern that Ratzinger and Bonhoeffer both respond by seeking to unearth the dimension of conscience to which infallibility had traditionally been apportioned before the Reformation. The ground will then be clear for me to outline an enduring difference between the two, centred on Ratzinger's writings on a collective, 'ecclesial' conscience, and their ramifications for understanding Church authority as something which is not heteronomous.

## **1. The Reformation-era Division on Conscience**

To start with the late-scholastic approach to conscience, let us call to mind firstly that conscience, in the medieval era, was considered to be not only the 'still, small voice' which arises with concrete dictates in lived-experience.<sup>3</sup> This was only a sort-of 'surface level' of conscience, a point where it enters consciousness with specific instruction, but these instructions were understood to be grounded-on a deeper dimension; a foundational, orientating 'rudder' or 'compass centre' embedded as a primordial dimension of human nature, and which emerges as concrete instruction when circumstances threaten to cause it to lose balance or go out-of-kilter.

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<sup>1</sup> Recorded in Herman Rauschnig, *Hitler Speaks: A Series of Political Conversations with Adolf Hitler on His Real Aims*, London: Thornton Butterworth, 1939, p. 84

<sup>2</sup> Josef Pieper, *Traktat über die Klugheit*, Kempton: Kösel-Verlag, 1959, published with other works in English translation as part of Josef Pieper's, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, South Bend: University of Notre-Dame Press, 1966

<sup>3</sup> A more detailed discussion of what I call the 'mono-' and 'bi-' dimensional approaches to conscience in Luther and Ratzinger is given in 'My Enemy's Enemy is my Friend: Joseph Ratzinger and Martin Luther on the Bi-Dimensionality of Conscience' in the *Heythrop Journal*, Hey J. doi:10.1111/heyj.12716

This dimension was called *synderesis*. We can thus speak of a ‘bi-dimensional’ matrix of conscience in Scholasticism, 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’,<sup>4</sup> that is, prudence requires both the abstract orientation to doing good (an innate knowledge of universal moral principles) and for this knowledge to inform and stimulate apprehension of the concrete singulars, or specific demands in the circumstantial realities of daily life.

*Synderesis* means ‘conservation’ or ‘preservation’. It makes its way into Latinate Christendom via St Jerome’s commentary on Ezekiel. Jerome claims the fourth holy living creature of the prophet’s theophany, the Eagle, actually represents *synderesis* itself, a concept he draws from Greek philosophy.<sup>5</sup> He describes it as 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’.<sup>6</sup> So *synderesis* for Jerome is an intact substratum of postlapsarian human subjectivity, which was conserved or preserved when Adam went the way of all flesh.

Because *synderesis* was seen as an ‘intact’ remnant from before the Fall, tradition develops an understanding of it as something infallible. This eventually becomes a cornerstone of the late-scholasticism in which Martin Luther was trained. Luther studied Gabriel Biel’s writing, particularly, learning there that *synderesis* was an unfallen facet of the self and therefore ‘an infallible moral ability’ enabling us to choose the good.<sup>7</sup> Or, as he puts it elsewhere, ‘something that [...] necessarily directs in general toward a just and right activity.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II, II, 47, 3, quoted by Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, p. 10 n2

<sup>5</sup> Walter von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, translated by Herbert J.A. Bouman, Belfast: Christian Journals Ltd, 1976, p. 52

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

For many people today, the word conscience doesn't bring to mind the rather rarefied realm of *synderesis*, but only the 'surface' level of concrete instruction, the second dimension, *conscientia*. Indeed, there are good grounds to thank (or blame) Martin Luther for this, for he was to question the basic tenets of Gabriel Biel. Luther's early writings subscribe to the late-Scholastic tradition. He suggests in an early sermon, for example, that the 'spark of *synderesis*' explains how the prodigal son 'comes to himself' amongst the pig's husks, calling him home to his father.<sup>9</sup> In a sermon from 1514, however, we see a something new appear in Luther's understanding. Walter von Loewinich goes so far as to describe this new element as that with which 'the whole Catholic system receives the deathblow'.<sup>10</sup> Here, Luther speaks of *synderesis* as a 'longing', a longing for the good, or salvation. But he becomes alert to the possibility that human pride can be intertwined with this longing, that our prideful selves will want to justify ourselves by achieving the good through human means, that is, works. Insofar as the demands rooted in *synderesis* arise from a presupposition that we have the capacity to achieve the good, they can involve as much vice as virtue, they can be prompting us to a prideful self-justification before God. What is new here, then, is the notion that 'our longing for salvation [our *synderesis*] may be in conflict with God's will'.<sup>11</sup>

The mature Luther went on arrive at a paradoxical understanding of conscience based on this move. Luther drops *synderesis*, and adopts a 'mono-dimensional' model, in which conscience is called 'heart' (*Herz*) or just *conscientia* or *Gewissen*. It is worthwhile mentioning that *Gewissen* shares the *ge-* prefix of a German past-participle, for in much of Luther's writing conscience seems to be retrospective, something that looks back on past action and judges it negatively. Luther approaches conscience from the consideration that humanity must perform the law, the activities mandated by Scripture. But conscience is for him not an *ability* to choose the good, because human beings

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 54

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 56-7

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

are, by definition, unable to perform the works of the law satisfactorily. Conscience functions by looking back on past behaviour and finding us wanting,<sup>12</sup> and so a bad conscience is despair-inducing. But, this despair is not necessarily to be avoided. To surrender to one's own moral dereliction, says Luther, enables one to behold Jesus Christ as the perfect fulfilment of the law. From here, he claims, the light of heaven can dawn, namely: justification by faith alone.

Now, it is important to note that Luther has not dismissed conscience here. Rather, he is understanding it paradoxically, and partially in keeping with the Latin tradition, as something unfallen, or 'preserved'. That is, for Luther conscience still presupposes, legitimately, that human beings must observe the law, and in this it genuinely expresses God's will. What's changed, crucially, is the emphasis on how fallen humanity cannot meet these demands except through Christ alone. Conscience therefore assails, judges, and torments oneself with one's own moral weakness. This means, for Luther, Christ supersedes the conscience by contradicting it, by assailing its presumption of achieving righteousness. He thus states, 'Christ does battle with the conscience', or elsewhere, he 'triumphs over conscience'<sup>13</sup> with his perfect righteousness.

Luther's writing had an awe-inspiring (or devastating) effect on the Western understanding. While the Tridentine Church would obviously not share the basic commitments just outlined, both Protestant and Catholic theology did see *synderesis* fall into the background between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I'll discuss shortly how Bonhoeffer and Ratzinger rediscover it, but before we get to that, let us acknowledge firstly, and uncontroversially, that Luther's re-interpretation of the Western tradition involved an understanding of conscience as imperfect and limited. In longing to fulfil unfulfillable demands, there's a sense in which the conscience errs, in a way that simply would not be possible for Gabriel Biel. But because Luther maintains the view that conscience is a

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Paul Althaus, in *The Theology of Martin Luther*, translated by Robert C. Schultz, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 176-7 (translation altered)

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216

preserved remnant of unfallen Adam, he sees it making legitimate – if dubiously motivated – demands. This paradoxical approach is related to Luther’s most famous words: ‘Here I stand, I can do no other [...] for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe’.<sup>14</sup> He means that, even if he is wrong, his conviction must still be respected, for conscience is an untouchable ‘preserved’ aspect of the self, which only Christ can overrule. There is, I suggest, some theological credit due to Luther for outlining a danger of semi-pelagianism in Biel, for if each person has an ability to do the good, there seems to be no need for Christ’s grace. Luther thus enmeshes Christ’s messianic work into the lived reality of the human experience of conscience, in a way intrinsically linking the two.

Notwithstanding the fruits of Luther’s legacy, the point could be made – more controversially – that the post-Reformation understanding of conscience found itself vulnerable when the heartland of the Reformation was faced with Nazi totalitarianism. For what is totalitarianism but a total claim - on the totality of - all dimensions of human life, including even layers of human subjectivity which were not immune from the process of what was termed in the Third Reich *Gleichschaltung* (meaning ‘co-ordination’ or ‘standardisation’) of everything to the will of the *Führer*? This is demonstrated most explicitly of course in the afore mentioned statement of Hermann Göring’s: ‘I have no conscience. My conscience is Adolf Hitler’. This is not to say that there is some direct culpability between Luther and the perverse distortions of the German intellectual tradition in the 1930s. It is rather to suggest that the superseding of conscience by another enters the German thought-world rather like a ‘trope’, which is then appallingly subverted by tyrannous rule. For reasons which will become clearer shortly, this approach to Nazi totalitarianism is in keeping with some historians’ emphasis on the pseudo-religious elements of

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<sup>14</sup> Luther’s speech at the Imperial Diet at Worms is reprinted in English in full in by J. H. Merle D’Aubigne, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century Vol. II.*, Translated by H. White, London & Edinburgh: Religious Tract Society, 1835, p. 44

Nazism. Michael Burleigh, for example, states considers Nazism a ‘pseudo- or substitute religion’, with ‘eclectic liturgies [and] ersatz theologies’.<sup>15</sup> Insofar as the supersession of conscience is a trope of the German religious imagination, it is reasonable to suggest that this trope gets employed in the general mood of the 1930s, when pseudo-religious imagery and ideas were frequently manipulated under totalitarian rule.

## **2) Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the Form of the Conscience**

This brings us neatly to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was remarkably quick off the mark to discern the pseudo-religiosity of Nazism, and the bizarrely pseudo-messianic place of Hitler within it. As early as 1933 he describes the danger of seeing any mere mortal as the ‘fulfilment of history’, striking directly at the claims of a supposedly ordained, and providentially inevitable, sovereign place for Hitler. It is in a discussion of Ancient Israel, interestingly, that this comment takes place. Bonhoeffer describes all history as living on the promise of our becoming ‘God’s people’. Insofar as Christ fulfils this promise, he writes, Jesus is the ‘center of history’, fulfilling that which human endeavour strives but cannot reach. He goes on to mention the dangers of any historical figure appearing and claiming to fulfil this striving. He states ‘[h]istory wants to glorify itself in the messiah’ and is therefore ‘[struggling] toward the impossible fulfilment of a degenerate promise’.<sup>16</sup>

This prescient interpretation of Nazism develops over the next few years of Bonhoeffer’s writing, and eventually shapes his mature writings on conscience. He first visits this topic in the late 1920s, where he approaches it in a way which broadly aligns with Luther. In his *Habilitationschrift, Act and Being*, published in 1931, he writes firstly of conscience as the point where the person seeking self-justification becomes anxious, and enters into dereliction (*Anfechtung*).<sup>17</sup> He

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History*, London: Pan Macmillan, 2012, p. 6

<sup>16</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 12, Berlin: 1932–1933*, ed. Larry R. Rasmussen; trans. Isabel Best and David Higgins, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009, p. 325 (original parenthesis)

<sup>17</sup> cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 2: Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr, trans. H. Martin Rumscheidt, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996, p. 130. Luther’s term *Anfechtung* is often translated as ‘temptation’, as indeed in this most recent critical edition



goes on to describe the functioning of conscience in the life of faith, where it is still a retrospective and accusatory force. But in faith the conscience has lost its power to send the believer spiralling into dereliction. Rather, the human being looks back at his or her own sin, but sees him or herself as ‘pardoned’. This not quite a satisfied conscience, but a conscience that has been superseded by Christ’s gracious work, a conscience over which Christ has triumphed as the only one who can grant pardon. He describes this experience of conscience as follows, ‘I see my sin’ within ‘forgiveness through Christ’.<sup>18</sup> In this early discussion, then, Bonhoeffer maintains the key coordinates of Luther’s approach: conscious as retrospective and condemnatory, and superseded by Christ in faith.

In 1942, however, while working on a manuscript which was posthumously published as a chapter in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer revisits the matter of conscience. Here, he offers a very different position. Conscience has now moved from something predominately retrospective, to something much closer to the original scholastic tradition as an innate orientation, a primordial and ineluctable facet of human subjectivity. As mentioned above, Bonhoeffer is responding to Göring’s comment. But it is also interesting for this paper that he does so a year after he stayed for a few months at a Benedictine monastery in Bavaria.<sup>19</sup> In this time he thus had to hand a library of Catholic theological writings, and time to consult them, such as at no other point in his life. He was also just a couple of hours away from the then 14-year old Josef Ratzinger’s family home.

The mature Bonhoeffer outlines an understanding of conscience which reconstructs, within the limits of a Protestant purview, a bi-dimensional approach. He gives a different conceptual framework, calling the ‘first’ dimension the ‘form’ of the conscience (which is

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of Bonhoeffer’s work. However, ‘dereliction’ is my preferred term, for we are not dealing with a momentary desire to commit sin, but with a foundational and existential apprehension of one’s core sinfulness, and a corresponding inability to fulfil the law.

<sup>18</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, p. 156

<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer stayed at Ettal Monastery from Nov 17<sup>th</sup> 1940-Feb 1941. The manuscript in question (‘History and Good’) was written during the first half of 1942. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 6: Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green; trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005, p. 125 n100

analogous to the scholastic *synderesis*) and the ‘second’ the ‘content’ of the conscience (analogous to *conscientia*). To understand what he means by these terms, we need first to turn to Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the Fall, which is primarily for him a fall into dis-unity.

Bonhoeffer considers Adam to originate in a state of ‘unbroken unity’: with God, his fellow human being, and himself.<sup>20</sup> With the Fall, this unity breaks-apart. But what Bonhoeffer calls the ‘form’ of the conscience is a remnant of the original state, a yearning for the ‘unbroken unity’ of Adam.<sup>21</sup> When conscience calls, for Bonhoeffer, this is shaped by a longing to be unified with God, each other, and ourselves. So while the scholastics considered *synderesis* an innate orientation to the good (*summum bonum*), and Luther as an orientation to the good as salvation, Bonhoeffer reconfigures the discussion through making this dimension a longing for unity. The form of the conscience shapes human beings’ desire for community with each others, but problems arise when this unity is wrongfully grasped at, particularly through some type of false absolute, in this case, totalitarian rule. Hitler’s ethnically defined ‘community’ (the *Volksgemeinschaft*) can thus be seen as a wrongheaded grasping at human unity in community. For Bonhoeffer, of course, that which can fully satisfy the yearning ‘form’ of the conscience is the only genuine absolute, coming from ‘outside’ the merely human (and therefore fallen) domain: Jesus Christ, in and by whom, he claims, we enter into genuine unity with others.<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere he gives some detail which helps to elucidate this. Writing of our justification by Christ, he describes this as a moment where ‘people recognize God and their neighbors for the first time’, realizing ‘there is a God who loves and accepts them, [and] that alongside them stand others whom God loves equally’. Thus do they enter their ‘future’ in ‘God’s church-community’ (*Gemeinde*).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For a full discussion of this, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 3: Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy; trans. Douglas Stephen Bax, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004

<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 84

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of Christ coming ‘from outside’ and *extra nos* in Bonhoeffer’s theology, see Michael DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer’s Reception of Luther*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 39

<sup>23</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 146 (my parentheses)

It the 1942 discussion of conscience Bonhoeffer directly quotes Göring's statement, albeit rather cryptically, being mindful of Nazi censorship.<sup>24</sup> He claims that, '[w]hen the N.S. [meaning National Socialist] says, "my conscience is A.H.", then this is [...] [an] attempt to [find] [...] unity [...] [for] the ego [from] beyond one's own self'.<sup>25</sup> That is, the drive for unity with oneself seeks to overrule the sense of being misaligned with one's conscience. But, in this case, the ego tries to attain self-unity by overruling the conscience without Christ (in a way analogous to urge for unity with others and the misappropriation of the *Volksgemeinschaft*). Here, moreover, it is as if conscience rightly glimpses that unity with oneself cannot be self-granted, that it must come from 'outside', but this leads it even deeper into the mire, for the externality is another human being: Adolf Hitler.

With this, Bonhoeffer is pointing out that Göring's statement fully illustrates the pseudo-messianic currents of Nazism. This is because Hitler is directly occupying the place that can only be occupied by Christ. The afore mentioned trope of the German tradition - the superseding of the conscience by another - has been perversely contorted with the pseudo-messiah enthroned at the center. Bonhoeffer states that if some other person overrules the conscience, that person 'takes on the role of my redeemer'. For this reason, he claims, Göring offers the 'closest secular parallel to Christian truth and thus its most pronounced antithesis'.<sup>26</sup>

Bonhoeffer's reliance on Luther remains perceptible, but at the same time, prompted by Göring's assertion, he also seems to resituate his understanding of conscience. This can be seen in his presentation of conscience more in terms of an orientation (like the scholastic tradition) than just something to be superseded by another; as a configuring, primordial 'longing for unity' which pervades human life, which he calls 'the form of the conscience'. In this way it is no longer merely retrospective and self-condemnatory (*contra* Luther). Yet he stays ever-mindful of Luther's Christocentricity, with Christ as the only one who can properly occupy conscience's form, the only fulfilment of the lost 'unbroken unity' of Adam for which humanity yearns.

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<sup>24</sup> Clifford J. Green, 'Editor's Introduction to the English Edition' of Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 1-44, p. 24

<sup>25</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 278 (my parentheses)

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*

Moreover, Luther has long-been regarded as instigating and exemplifying a paradigm shift in theological language, from an at-times dispassionate, third-person standpoint of some late-scholasticism, into the warp and woof of first-person human existential reality. This can be seen by Luther's dropping of the classical notion of *synderesis* as an endowment of human nature, something apportioned to 'humanity' by definition, and his speaking instead of a believer's impassioned grappling with one's own moral ambiguity. One upshot of this, is that conscience, arguably, becomes something primarily individual: 'here I stand, I can do no other'. Bonhoeffer, with his scheme of 'form' rather than *synderesis*, seems broadly to maintain Luther's centrality of the individual, at least as regards fallen humanity. That is, part of the yearning of unity which constitutes conscience's form is a yearning for community with others.<sup>27</sup> The centre of gravity thus remains with oneself as an individual, as for Luther. In the scholastic tradition, generally speaking, the 'first' dimension of conscience – that is, conscience in and of itself - is more explicitly 'shared' with other human beings as something belonging to human nature as such, as part of our common lot. So let us now turn to Ratzinger, and see how he should be situated in relation to Scholasticism and Luther by responding to Göring, for connecting him to Bonhoeffer against this background will cast our understanding of the healing of Reformation-era divisions into sharp relief.

### **3) Joseph Ratzinger on Anamnesis and Conscience**

With Joseph Ratzinger's writings, the historical situation has changed significantly, but he too writes on conscience in reference to Göring's notorious claim, albeit some decades later in 1987.<sup>28</sup> Ratzinger seems to have been made aware of the claim through its record in Hermann

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<sup>27</sup> This is not to say Bonhoeffer doesn't expend huge amounts of effort on emphasising community in his ecclesiological writings, from the famous 'Christ existing as *Gemeinde*' in his doctoral thesis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English Volume 1: Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Clifford J. Green; trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998, p. 121

<sup>28</sup> In *Kirche, Ökumene und Politik: Neue Versuche zur Ekklesiologie (Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Endeavours in Ecclesiology)*. Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1987, published as *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics; New Endeavours in Ecclesiology*, translated by Michael J. Miller et al, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008, p. 160

Rauschning's *Gespräche mit Hitler* from 1940.<sup>29</sup> Ratzinger is, as in much of his writing, wanting to tackle totalitarianism. Meditating on Göring's comment he states, '[t]he destruction of conscience is the real precondition for totalitarian obedience and [...] domination'.<sup>30</sup>

It is particularly noteworthy for this paper, that Ratzinger responds to this gross instance of heteronomy, like Bonhoeffer, by calling us back to a bi-dimensional matrix reminiscent of the pre-Reformation, scholastic tradition. Ratzinger highlights that *synderesis* was 'effectively forgotten'<sup>31</sup> in post-Tridentine Catholic theology. He goes right back to its roots in Stoicism and Socrates, and discusses its centrality to doctors of the Church like St Basil, and of course St Augustine.<sup>32</sup> But, Ratzinger doesn't just take up *synderesis* again, opting rather to replace it with the Platonic word: *anamnesis*. This of course means 'remembering' or 'recollection'. Obviously, Ratzinger doesn't share Plato's views on the pre-history of our earthly lives. Yet he does maintain that our base layer of orientation toward the good and our desire to realise that good, function *like* memory, a sort of recollection of our intrinsic relatedness to God, if you will, a reminder that we are his creatures. Underneath the concrete instructions of *conscientia*, then, is what Ratzinger calls a 'primal memory [*Uerrinerung*] of the good and the true'; '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 *anamnesis* a memory 'of the origin', of our originatedness in and of God.<sup>33</sup>

Elsewhere I've written on how Ratzingerian *anamnesis* offers a hermeneutic of continuity, of sorts, for approaching Luther's critique of late-Scholasticism.<sup>34</sup> This argument was focused on how *anamnesis* offers an innately personal conceptual framework, and thus seems to take on board Luther's alleged gravitational shift to concrete lived experience. That is, there needs to be a person

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<sup>29</sup> Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics*, p. 165 Ratzinger also takes note here of Rauschning's record of Hitler himself claiming to 'liberate man' from the 'chimera' of 'conscience and morality'.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> D. Vincent Twomey SVD, *Pope Benedict XVI: The Conscience of Our Age*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007, p. 122

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *On Conscience*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007, p. 31-2

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, quoted by Twomey, *Conscience*, p. 125-6

<sup>34</sup> See Phillips, 'My Enemy's Enemy is my Friend' (n.3 above)

for there to be remembering; memory cannot easily be distilled from personal experience as a concept in its own right, unlike *synderesis*, and thus displaces the afore mentioned dispassionate, observer standpoint of some late-scholastic writers. Secondly, Ratzingerian *anamnesis* challenges the idea that the primal dimension of conscience is necessarily something like an *ability* to perform the good, to make good choices. His *anamnesis* provides an orientation which configures concrete promptings to do good, but insofar as the actual ability to do these goods is not presupposed, Ratzinger cannot be accused of semi-pelagianism here. Ratzinger maintains that '[w]e would dissolve Christianity into moralism if no message that surpasses our own actions [i.e. grace] became discernible'.<sup>35</sup>

There are thus interesting parallels with Bonhoeffer. Both theologians re-interpret the tradition in markedly proximate ways, that is, discerning a bi-dimensional matrix afresh to react against Göring's misappropriation, and emphasising a neglected, primordial dimension to conscience rooted in prelapsarian humanity. In both, this establishes the inherent legitimacy of conscience more robustly, as something which must never be overruled by a human being or beings. That is, the respect of people's consciences is a key safeguard against totalitarian heteronomy, and the destruction of this respect is a primary signal that political power is grossly overstepping the mark. Moreover, both Bonhoeffer and Ratzinger rename the dimension of *synderesis* in ways which maintain a certain continuity with Luther's critique of the pre-Reformation tradition, they both avoid metaphysical abstraction. Bonhoeffer does this by adopting 'form' to describe how conscience shapes human desire, that is, in concrete life, and Ratzinger's *anamnesis* carries a strong personalist resonance. But, as I stated at the beginning, comparing Bonhoeffer and Ratzinger on this issue of conscience not only shows a certain healing in the sense of restoring to unity, or '*unitatis redintegratio*', but also throws certain important differences between the two

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<sup>35</sup> Ratzinger, *On Conscience*, p. 39

theologians into clear relief. And it is in discerning the difference between the two, I suggest, that we should turn briefly to Josef Pieper.

### **3) Josef Pieper**

As afore mentioned, Bonhoeffer and Ratzinger both make use of Pieper's 1937 *Traktat über die Klugheit*, (*Treatise on Wisdom*). Bonhoeffer seems to have imbibed Pieper's work during his stay with the Benedictines, and Ratzinger's long-term affinity with Pieper is widely acknowledged in the literature,<sup>36</sup> and in his recent *Last Testament* he talks fondly about his friendship with him when they worked together at Münster in 1963-66.<sup>37</sup>

In the literature on Pieper himself, there is controversy surrounding his own relationship with Nazism, but recent research has argued that Pieper critiques Nazism subtly in his writing, and this certainly seems true of the text in question.<sup>38</sup> The background to all this is controversial in itself, but suffice to say here that certain theologians in interwar Germany had attempted an intellectual *rapprochement* with Nazism through misusing St Thomas Aquinas' axiom, 'grace presupposes nature'. Space will not permit a full discussion of this, except to say that apportioning considerable autonomy to the natural (and so to the political, the territorial, and even the racial), seems to have enabled some Catholic theologians to evaluate Nazism as something bringing order and stability for Germany, thus enabling, or giving a platform, for the 'graced' mission of the Church to flourish. Pieper reacts against this in various ways, but overall, interprets Thomas in a way probably much closer to many of today's theologians, and in some ways prescient of the Augustinian *ressourcement* reading of Henri de Lubac, where nature seems rather to presuppose grace.

Particularly salient examples of this surround Pieper's use of the word 'form', and of what he calls 'preceding ideas' of 'reality' in the mind of God. Discussing these here will not only show

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<sup>36</sup> E.g. Tracey Rowland, *Benedict XVI: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London: T & T Clark, 2010, p. 15-6

<sup>37</sup> Benedict XVI and Peter Seewald, *Last Testament*, translated by Jacob Phillips, London: Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 144

<sup>38</sup> See Jon Vickery, 'Searching for Josef Pieper', *Theological Studies* 66 (2005), pp. 622-637

Pieper's own intellectual grappling with tenets of Nazi ideology, but will also suggest Pieper was instrumental for both Bonhoeffer and Ratzinger, Bonhoeffer through the use of the term 'form', and Ratzinger through the concept of 'preceding ideas' and *anamnesis*. Drawing out Pieper's resonances with the two theologians under discussion, will also show how they differ.

Beginning with Pieper's discussion of the 'form' of the virtues, this takes place when he is writing on the four cardinal virtues. These are held by tradition to be 'natural' virtues, a capacity for which is endowed on all, which is why they are found in non-Christian literature like Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>39</sup> This point is important for Pieper's discussion, for he seems to be taking issue with the overstated autonomy being granted to nature by some of his contemporaries. He argues firstly that the 'form' of the virtues is prudence, and that if any of the virtues are over-emphasised or separated from prudence, serious problems occur. He argues this, secondly, by focusing on a particular aspect to 'prudence', namely, its intrinsic link to *synderesis*. By tightly joining the two together in his reading of Thomas, Pieper takes issue, implicitly, with the fascination of the Nazis with 'courage' (*Zucht* or what was originally *fortitudo*). The virtue of courage was greatly celebrated by the Nazi state, and – as with other instances of Nazism discussed above – could take on a pseudo-Christian character. That is, self-sacrificial courage was greatly encouraged in Nazi rhetoric, what one commentator calls the bombarding of 'the German public with exhortations to an uncompromised, sacrificial loyalty toward the state'.<sup>40</sup> By insisting that courage must take form according to prudence, and is thereby intrinsically linked with something going rooted right back to prelapsarian Adam, it can no longer be held that the flourishing of the natural virtues (like Nazi courage) can be separated out as something naturally 'good' and straightforwardly encouraged in non-Christian contexts on the basis of 'grace presupposes nature'. Put differently, Pieper is implying that for Catholic theologians to see potential in the Nazi valuing of courage is wrong, it does not align with Christian *fortitudo* because it is rent apart from prudence and therefore *synderesis*.

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<sup>39</sup> See Pieper, *Four Cardinal Virtues*, p. xi

<sup>40</sup> Vickery, 'Searching', p. 625



Courage, for Pieper, must take shape according to conscience, otherwise it is no longer virtuous, and therefore it is approached as intrinsically linked with a reality transcending the natural order.

Bearing this in mind it is instructive that Bonhoeffer adopts the word 'form' to understand the primordial dimension of conscience. For Bonhoeffer too wants to arrive at some sort of divine grounding of the natural order which does not involve the autonomy he cannot accept in the classical natural law tradition, and which Pieper is himself seeking to reign-in. But, importantly, Bonhoeffer doesn't commit to something strongly ontological, unlike Pieper's linking of prudence with *synderesis*. Bonhoeffer merely adopts the word Pieper uses for the taking shape of *synderesis* in individual lives, the 'form' of the virtues, and leaves to one side the overarching, primordial *dimension* of human nature as such (*synderesis* proper). This means that the first dimension of conscience is, in Bonhoeffer, an individual matter, and this is why it yearns for unity: the unity of genuine community, a unity found ultimately in ecclesial existence in Christ.

The second important element of Pieper for this paper, arises in his discussion of some neo-platonic elements to Thomas; pre-existing 'ideas' in the mind of God, which are analogues to 'the pre-existing form of which all ethically good action is the transcript'.<sup>41</sup> This means that prudence (the mode behaving with ethically good action) has a certain 'pre-existence' or is primordially transcribed 'on' human subjectivity. There are good grounds to suggest that this inspired Ratzinger's choice of '*anamnesis*' to replace *synderesis*. Ethical decision making, for both Pieper and Ratzinger, carries a 'memory-like' quality, the 'good' has an innate familiarity, perhaps, a sense that a certain situation reflects the proper order of things. But comparing Ratzinger and Pieper brings another important point into view. Pieper considers *synderesis* as structurally analogous to Thomas's 'prototypes' of the 'objective world' which are 'pre-imaged' and 'pre-formed' in 'the creative cognition of God'.<sup>42</sup> Like with Ratzinger's *anamnesis*, then, the 'first' dimension of conscience is can be considered as the deepest root, the core of the moral impulses,

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<sup>41</sup> Pieper, *Four Cardinal Virtues*, p. 7

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

that take shape in individual lives as prudence. Embodied decision making should thus be an aligning of oneself with the primordial prototype of human being preserved from prelapsarian Adam, being formed into one's creatureliness before God. Crucially, this deepest root (or 'prototype') is not something individual. But calling to mind the comments above about *anamnesis* compared to *synderesis*, Ratzinger achieves an abstract generality which still maintains a link to personhood, whereas for Bonhoeffer, the first dimension of conscience is individual.

So now I can close by asking how, or from where, does the call of '*semper reformanda*' arise in comparing Bonhoeffer and Ratzinger on conscience? Well, it seems that a lot depends here on the place of the Christian community in Bonhoeffer's understanding of the form of the conscience as a 'yearning for unity'. While Bonhoeffer elsewhere takes issue with various forms of theological individualism he encounters, when it comes to conscience, he adopts the word Pieper uses for the taking shape of *synderesis* in individual lives: 'form'. The fact Ratzinger's *anamnesis* is never just mine, as such, but ours, it is closely related, at least analogously, to our collective remembering in and as Church tradition. Insofar as tradition constitutes the *depositum fidei* or sedimented human responses to conscience in light of revelation, there is scope for a genuine continuity between one's own moral compass and the position taken by the Church on key moral issues.<sup>43</sup> For Ratzinger, we as human beings must not separate individual and collective conscience, and so with him, we can say Luther's 'here I stand', certainly, but also 'here *we* stand' as the Church. If individual conscience is made primary, he claims, 'subjectivity is invested with false autonomy'. But, and here Göring comes back into view, he also says that if ecclesial conscience is simply expected to overrule individual conscience, Church 'authority is [then] [...] heteronymous'.<sup>44</sup> For Ratzinger, then, our task is to struggle to keep both elements in unity, staying mindful of the equal integrity of each,

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<sup>43</sup> 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, not trying to win adherents through political campaigning, but opening their hearts to their shared origin in God.

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Wahrheit, Werte, Macht: Prüfsteine der pluralistischen Gesellschaft* (Freiburg: Herder, 1993), 27-39 (my translation)

and this will involve difficulties as we strive to live our daily existence in the sacramental economy instituted by Christ. But with Bonhoeffer conscience is more fundamentally broken insofar as it's primarily individual, and thus it looks for the church, rather than – to quote Ratzinger – putting the believer in position whereby he sees in the Church 'an echo of himself', that is, something authentically his: a 'recollection' of his being created by God, his life 'hidden with Christ in God'.

To conclude, there is healing on offer in this comparison. The Protestant Bonhoeffer seeks to establish a more robust goodness for the natural by drawing on pre-Reformation theology, and the Catholic Ratzinger re-interprets the same tradition in a way which is mindful of the basic tenets of Luther's critique of it. Hence, some *unitatis redintegratio*. But, there is also enduring difference, in that Bonhoeffer's borrowing of Pieper's language of 'form', means the actual legitimacy of conscience is grounded individually, and it doesn't draw its very strength from a prevenient unity, paralleling the Church. For Ratzinger there is both an individual remembering which is shared with others as primordial subjectivity, yes, but - more tangibly – also the recollection of the 'cloud of witnesses', the saints and doctors of the Church, and her teaching authority – which isn't a counter to conscience, but its crystallisation through individual persons explicating the consequences of revealed truth together, a crystallisation which remains and calls each individual conscience to perpetual reformation: or, *semper reformanda*.