

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Conscience

A SCHOLASTIC DISTINCTION

It is clear that love alone cannot give guidance to our actions. Love is indispensable, but it is always bound up with the commandments which are just as indispensable. The question to be dealt with in this chapter concerns the *conscience*. Is it perhaps capable of functioning as an infallible guide in our life?

An enormous amount has been written about the conscience — more in past centuries, by the way, than nowadays. That is connected with the higher value which was attached to the conscience in those days. Sometimes that value was far too high. That can be made clear by a brief discussion of the distinction made by medieval scholasticism between *synteresis* and *conscientia*.

The term *synteresis* has a peculiar origin. In a commentary on Ezekiel, the church-father Jerome (ca. 347-419) wrote about the four beings which are found in the first chapter of that book: a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle. He attached an anthropology to it. The man, lion and ox were respectively the intellect, will and desire. The eagle, circling above all three was the conscience, or also the spirit, which being divinely illuminated could intervene in a correcting way in the activity of the intellect, will and desire. The word *synteresis* is related to *syntèrein*, which means "to preserve." *Synteresis* was viewed as the preserver and protector of the divine commandments in human life.

The word *synteresis* lay dormant for a long time until the Middle Ages gave it a very important function. *Synteresis* was then understood as the light of nature which inclines man towards what is good and keeps him from what is evil. *Synteresis* was a capacity in man by which he could infallibly know the first principles for his actions.

But how was it then possible that man, armed with such a wonderful capacity, could go wrong? That was not the fault of *synteresis*, which was infallible, but of the *application* of *synteresis* to the things of everyday life. That application was a matter of the *conscientia* (the Latin word for conscience). And man could go astray in his conscience.

What was not the case for Jerome can be found in the works of Alexander Halesius, Thomas Aquinas and others: The conscience contains *two* elements, an infallible core in the *synteresis* and a fallible application in the *conscientia*.

According to the judgment of the theologians, that application took the route of the practical syllogism. A syllogism consists of two premises (the *major* as the more inclusive and the *minor* as the less inclusive) and a conclusion.

A few examples will make this clearer:

Major: All sinners must die (every man knows that; condemnation to death on account of sin is known to the *synteresis*).

Minor: I am a sinner.

Conclusion: I must die (that conclusion as the application to myself of what the *synteresis* knows in general, is the *conscientia*).

Now another example:

Major: As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die (says David to Nathan, II Samuel 12:5. The *synteresis* dictates this to him).

Minor: You are the man (says Nathan to David, II Samuel 12:7).

Conclusion: I have sinned against the Lord (I deserve to die says David's *conscientia*, II Samuel 12:13).

It was said in the Middle Ages that the *synteresis* could not go wrong but the *conscientia* could, because man frequently erred in applying the general principle to the particular one. At this point the church offered assistance. In the confessional, clergymen could speak the decisive word in all cases of conscience, the *casus conscientiae*. Here we have reached the roots of casuistry. Man can go wrong, but fortunately there are ecclesiastical specialists who, with the aid of handbooks for casuistry, know a way out of the difficulties.

We should not, by the way, assume that speaking of a sin-free core in the *synteresis* of man ended with the Middle Ages. The distinction *synteresis-conscientia* was adopted by Protestant neo-scholasticism too. Even in very modern liberation theologies one can hear about the infallible conscience of man without the old terms being used.

An example of this is the book by G.H. ter Schegget, *Het beroep op de stad der toekomst* (The Appeal to the City of the Future).²⁷ To ter Schegget, having a conscience means having the Holy Spirit. In listening to ourselves, we hear God's voice. To him the conscience is an eschatological concept. It concerns the man of the future who subjects the present to criticism. A discussion of the self takes place between the conscience (that is the "I" of the future), and the I itself (that is: the I of the present situation). The conscience cannot go wrong: "Not the child of God, that we are in an eschatological sense, but the current listener understands the conscience incorrectly, wants to understand it incorrectly and sows misunderstandings, and also spreads the lie that the conscience errs!" It is clear: the old terms have disappeared, but the issue is still very much alive. An infallible conscience, housed in a man who comprehends it incorrectly.

In ter Schegget's case the term "conscience" is a revolutionary thing, which was not the case with Thomas Aquinas. In Aquinas' view, the conscience completely concurs with the law and the commandments, just as nature and the Scriptures teach them to him. In ter Schegget's view the

²⁷ Published in Haarlem 1972 (79ff.).

divine conscience of man decides above all law and order. The conscience, he writes, does not bind me to law and order, but to God's future, and that is decisive for all my actions.

WHAT IS THE CONSCIENCE?

By the conscience I mean that authority in man which places him before his own decisions, already taken or still to be taken, making a judgment about them, whether approvingly or disapprovingly.

This says nothing yet concerning the *content* of the conscience. For that content can vary considerably. The only thing that is said here is that man is conscious of himself and that he passes judgment on his own behaviour, be it beforehand or afterwards. Expressing it in classical terms: it can be a *conscientia antecedens*, that judges decisions *to be taken*, it can also be a *conscientia consequens*, that judges decisions *already taken*.

The Scriptures know nothing of an infallible conscience with a particular content for all times and all people. There is no word for "conscience" in the Old Testament, even though the matter itself is present. The *heart* is often spoken about. When God punishes His people with captivity, He will "send faintness into their *hearts* in the lands of their enemies; the sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight" (Leviticus 26:36). In captivity He will give them a *trembling* heart (Deuteronomy 28:65).

Already in the Old Testament it is clear that conscience and milieu, time and development have much to do with one another. When Abimelech of Gerar was warned in a dream to stay away from Sarah, Abraham's wife, he answered that he had acted in the "integrity" of his heart (Genesis 20:5). We would say, with a clear conscience. But what Abimelech could still do with a clear conscience (taking another wife), we could not do with a clear conscience today (even without committing adultery). *Our* conscience is averse to polygamy. It already appears here that the conscience does not have an unchanging content.

In the New Testament, in which a word for conscience can indeed be found (*syneidêsis*), it is even more evident that the conscience is no constant entity and that it can function very differently, from well through defectively to wrongly. Paul can say that he is not aware of anything (or said differently, he has a clear conscience) but — he adds immediately — "I am not thereby acquitted" (I Corinthians 4:4). The conscience may not make us aware of any evil, but that does not justify us before God. It is a relative entity which always remains subjected to God's judgment.

Also what is said in the New Testament concerning a *weak* conscience confirms the variation in and the fallibility of the conscience. There are some people, Paul says, who are not yet free from idolatry. For that reason they do not dare eat any meat sold in the markets of Corinth if it had first served as a sacrifice in pagan temples. If they would eat of it, then their consciences, which are *weak*, would be defiled by it (I Corinthians 8:7, 10, 12). One conscience can deal with it and another cannot (I Corinthians 10:28f.).

Paul impresses upon Timothy that those who have fallen away from the faith will later be branded in their conscience (I Timothy 4:2). They have a *bad* conscience and act contrary to all they have learned earlier. The mind as well as the conscience can be defiled (Titus 1:15). If the mind is affected, the conscience does not remain untouched!

A GOOD CONSCIENCE

It was above all in the last century and at the beginning of this century that the conscience was deposed from the high throne upon which it had sat for ages. Two intellectuals played a major role in this development: Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). In his book *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887), Nietzsche regarded the conscience as a symptom of illness in the man who has been domesticated by society and who has suppressed his primitive, vital instincts. Freud viewed the essence of man as something impersonal: the *Es* (or with the Latin term *id*). These are the innate passions or biological instincts, with sexual passion as the centre. A lust-principle dominates the unrestricted. But the *Ich* (or *ego*) must adopt itself to its surroundings. The passions cannot be indulged; censure is necessary. The outpouring of *libido* (the impulses which activate the *Es*), are hindered by commandments and prohibitions, above all from the parents. An identification develops between the *Ich* and authorities on the outside, above all with the father. In this way, an authority arises within the *Ich* itself: the *Über-Ich* (or *superego*), that stands critically opposed to all the actions of the individual, and that rewards or punishes respectively with a good or a bad conscience. The *Über-Ich* embodies the morals. The lust-principle is involved in an eternal struggle with the reality-principles. The *Ich* threatens to be torn from two sides: by the passions of the *Es*, which want to assert themselves, and by the supervisions of the *Über-Ich* which says "no" to them. According to Freud, conscience is the guilty feeling in which the *Ich* lives in the tension between *Es* and *Über-Ich*.

We do not agree with this view of the conscience, because we reject the anthropology upon which it is based. We do not believe that a chaos of human passions has to be postulated at the beginning of all things. At the centre of his being, man is not a creature possessed by passions, ruled by a lust-principle. In that case, what does the word "guilty" really mean, if it concerns a conscience which alienates man from his deepest, innermost being (the experiencing of the lust-principle)? In Freud's morals there is no room for the word "sin" as the falling away of man from his Creator, Who created man good and in His image.

What Nietzsche, Freud and many others have clearly taught us is that the consciences of men greatly vary in content. *The* conscience does not exist. What one person does not have the heart to do, the other person does with a clear conscience. Without a doubt, upbringing and the influence of society exercise a great influence on the development of the conscience. We can see that in all sorts of current ethical questions. What was generally considered to

be wrong thirty years ago (abortion, homosexuality), is now accepted by many as completely normal. In spite of that we will continue speaking about a good and a bad conscience. In this case too, though, this is not possible without binding the conscience to the content of the Scriptures. A good conscience is a good conscience *before God*.

For that reason Paul can say that he has a completely clear conscience before God regarding his behaviour in public (Acts 23:1). He strives to keep a clear conscience before God and men (Acts 24:16). A good conscience goes hand in hand with a sincere faith (I Timothy 1:5, cf. also 1:19; 3:9). You can be assured of a good conscience if you wish to live honourably in every way (Hebrews 13:18). The civil authorities are to be obeyed, not only "to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience" (Romans 13:5). That is to say, we should be obedient not only to escape the punishment of the authorities but also because *God* asks it of us. A good conscience is always coupled with obedience to God's commandments.

It has already been said, with a reference to Paul's words in I Corinthians 4:4, that even a good conscience does not yet justify us before God. That does not prevent us from speaking about a good conscience, because the Scriptures do that themselves. We may say in many things — even in politics — that we act with a good conscience, if we dare to account for our actions before God and men. But a good conscience cannot live without grace. It has already become clear that the Christian conscience is also not a constant, but rather a shaky matter. Consider the "weak" conscience of many upright Christians. People with weak consciences are often sturdy Christians, on fire for the Lord. But they may nonetheless have a narrow-minded vision and for that reason refuse to eat sacrificial meat, reject a new Bible translation or nowhere tolerate a television set.

We remain dependent upon the guidance of God's Word, whereby His Spirit has to give us correct insight in the Scriptures. An appeal to our conscience may never provide the last word in a matter. Also our conscience is subjected to the Word of God and needs cleansing by the blood of Christ.

TWO MORE COMMENTS

The assertion that *SYN-eidēsis* or *CON-scientia* must be related to the knowledge of man *with God* is not correct. It is certainly often portrayed as such, for example, by Calvin, who calls the conscience a "certain medium" between God and man (*Institutes*, III, 19.15). The "with" can simply refer to man himself: knowing by himself, being aware of his own considerations and actions.

This does not mean that God can make no claims on the conscience. He does just that not only with Christians, but also with many non-Christians. Think again of Romans 2:15, where the work of the law, written in the hearts of the Gentiles, is described: "their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them" on the day of judgment. The law of God makes such a strong impression that it also continues

to make an impact on the non-Christians, willingly or not. It cannot be burned out of the consciences of the many. And that will become evident at the last judgment when the consciences begin to speak.

But we have also seen how the light, that God allows to shine in the heart of man, is suppressed by them. Man can also resist God's revelation in such a way that his conscience no longer functions — even to such a degree that he can deny God's existence.

In the second place, an appeal to the conscience can be of such power that others may not negate it. Objections of conscience have to be taken in consideration both in the church (I Corinthians 10:28) as well as in society as a whole.

One does have to be economical in appealing to one's conscience as the final argument. For in fact, it is no argument at all. A. van Haersolte has pointed out that an appeal to the conscience usually boils down to three things: the speaker stands behind his theory in all sincerity; he has considered it fully and is now no longer to be dissuaded. But the first and the second parts must be self-evident while the third brings the discussion to an end.²⁸ Appealing to the conscience must not mean that one stops with "knowing" and "discussing." An appeal to the conscience must also be considered in all its consequences. It is understandable that someone asks for exemption from military service if he has insuperable objections to the use of violence in all circumstances. But the issue becomes more complicated if he only has conscientious objections to the use of *particular* means of force (especially nuclear weapons). And it is indeed strange if someone is opposed to some wars, but has no objections of conscience against others. Conscientious objections then become *political* conscientious objections. One is willing, for example, to fight in a U.N. peace-keeping force, but not in connection with NATO; one is willing to participate in a revolution to liberate an oppressed people, but not in a possible conflict with the Warsaw Pact countries. War is not considered to be reprehensible, but rather a political order which, if it comes down to it, one is willing to overthrow with force.

Consistently applied, the soldier will decide from case to case whether or not he will fight. One could just as well give him the right to strike. *He* decides whether or not he will participate. A simple appeal to the conscience is sufficient! There is no trace of a *consistently* applied "conscientious objection" in the case of such political "conscientious objections." One easily does tomorrow what one rejected yesterday. Or to say it in the words of Godfried Bomans: "Many people then have a good conscience thanks to their bad memory."

²⁸ A. van Haersolte, *Kleine wijsgerige ethiek*, Deventer 1972, 113.