

STUART P. CHALMERS

CONSCIENCE

IN CONTEXT



*HISTORICAL AND
EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVES*

PETER LANG

Foreword

“I will now in discharge of my conscience speak my mind plainly and freely.” So said St Thomas More, a modern champion of conscience before the time, at the trial that indicted him for “falsely, traitorously and maliciously” denying the right of King Henry VIII to be proclaimed Supreme Head of the Church in England. He spoke at a time of fragmentation. And he spoke – not all recent interpreters have grasped this – from an understanding of conscience that was the opposite of fragmented. “I am not bound, my Lord,” he replied to his judge, “to conform my conscience to the council of one Realm *against the general council of Christendom*.” More went to the block, and to sanctity, enlightened by a “conscience in context”.

In this thorough and sensitive work, equally at ease in the historical and the theoretical, Fr Stuart Chalmers sets out to rescue conscience from the various fragmentations that have befallen it. He harks back to Greco-Roman antiquity, to Scripture and the early Fathers. He retrieves the scholastic distinction between *synderesis* and *conscientia*. He questions both the legalism of the pre-conciliar textbooks and the subjectivism of certain post-conciliar schools of moral theology. The best context for the health and well-being of the human conscience, he proposes, is a dynamic one: a life rooted in inner connection to objective truth, a life of virtue and grace, a life in prayerful pursuit of holiness within the communion of the Church.

There is nothing facile here. There is no replacement of the old authoritarianism with a subtly disguised newer model. Rather Fr Chalmers takes us beyond the paralysing dualism of inner light and external authority. He makes a quietly unpolemical but crucial contribution to that authentic renewal of moral theology called for by Vatican II and Bl. John Paul II. Both theoretically (this is based on a doctoral thesis) and practically (he is a parish priest), he shows a way by which, like St Thomas More, we can indeed, humbly under the mercy of God, “discharge our conscience”.

I hope this book will be appreciated for the light it brings.

+ Hugh Gilbert O.S.B., Bishop of Aberdeen