

The Pope, a Duck Commander, and the Methodist Minister: Men of Conscience?

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In July of 2013, Pope Francis was asked about gay people in the Catholic Church. He replied: "Who am I to judge?" His comments were taken by many as being less condemning, an expression of compassion, a hoped for new attitude of inclusion, and a refreshing sense of human candor by the Holy See.

In December of 2013, the Duck Commander, Phil Robertson, from the reality television show "Duck Dynasty" created a firestorm of controversy when he made highly inflammatory, sexually graphic, and definitive comments condemning homosexuality, and providing the readers of Esquire magazine with a unique historical education pertaining to the subjective experience of Black Americans as he perceived it while growing up in the swamps of Louisiana as a white man!

Also in December of 2013, Frank Schaefer, a United Methodist minister was convicted of violating Methodist doctrine for officiating a same sex religious marriage for his gay son. He was in the words, of the press "defrocked" of his clerical title and spiritual authority. His case triggered an explosion of tensions and hostility from both sides of the "gay-religious" issue throughout the Methodist Church. Schaefer told the clergy oversight body that ultimately stripped him of his pastoral office that he could not uphold church doctrine "in its entirety" saying church teachings were contradictory and reflected un-Christian like treatment of gays and lesbians.

What do these three gentlemen have in common? Other than their obvious focus on homosexuality, each spoke from a perspective driven by a personal "**moral conscience**." When I made this connection, I began contemplating the following questions: What is conscience? What are its dimensions? How does it work? What does a person's conscience tell us about them? Can your conscience lead you astray? When might your conscience be unreliable?

The definitive "internet authority," *Wikipedia*, defines conscience as an inner aptitude, faculty, intuition, or judgment that assists in distinguishing right from wrong. Merriam-Webster Online dictionary relates that it is the part of the mind that makes you aware of your actions as being either morally right or wrong. Wiktionary, an open content internet dictionary, states that conscience is from an Old French and Latin notion of "conscientia" referring to knowledge within oneself.

These lay notions of conscience suggest that each of us possess an inner sense (feelings and thoughts) of what is right and wrong. Because we all have differing subjective experiences of life, varying degrees of knowledge, maturity, reasoning capacity, and ability to control our appetites, desires, and emotions, it is not surprising that we individually exercise our free will and make our choices of what is right and wrong in ways that uniquely distinguish us from others.

Clearly, the Pope, the Duck Commander, and the Methodist Minister reflect attitudes, and moral beliefs that illustrate how different we all are from one another. Here are a few philosophical inquiries I present to you for your reflection: With whose view do you most align? What does your particular perspective say about the nature, quality, and essence of your moral conscience?

The opinions of the Pope, the Duck Commander, and the Methodist Minister offer each of us the opportunity to discover, re-examine, and contemplate the depths and dimensions of our own conscience.

Socrates urged us all to seek self-knowledge and awareness when he commented that: "The unexamined life is not worth living."

He also implored us to seek knowledge and use that knowledge for the betterment of our individual souls. As we individually strive for better lives, seek richly satisfying personal experiences and hope for deeper more meaningful relationships with others, may each of us be guided by a conscience that is pure and true. Of course, that is entirely up to each of us.