

Conscience and War

By David Chandler

[This is a more recent discussion of some aspects of objection to war on the basis of conscience. It is a response to those who uncritically accept the government's definition of a conscientious objector.]

If you sincerely feel that the current war, or any particular war, is an unjust war and you would be violating your conscience to participate in it, you are a conscientious objector in the most literal sense. The law does not recognize your right to object to a specific war, but you are a conscientious objector nonetheless. "Conscientious objector" is not something you apply to become on the basis of what is permitted by law. It is a declaration that you will not fight and that your objection is on the basis of your conscience. People have taken this stand throughout history in all nations and in all wars. Those who refuse to fight for reasons of conscience are sometimes persecuted, sometimes imprisoned, or executed (even in US history). Occasionally nations recognize the right to refuse to fight, but the laws cannot define the limits of conscience.

The right to follow one's conscience is a fundamental human right. The sanctity of the individual and the individual conscience is the foundation of all our freedoms. Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, all follow from the freedom of the individual to judge for himself or herself what is right and wrong, what is wise and what is foolish. Individual conscience is not infallible, but any political system that forces people to violate their conscience is surely worse: it is totalitarian.

Respect for individual conscience in regard to war is given lip service but not full implementation in our Selective Service System. A person who would object to fighting in all wars may be given alternate service, working as an orderly in a hospital or mental ward, for instance. However a person who just as sincerely follows his conscience in objecting to a particular war is not eligible for this consideration.

The Catholic Church and many main line Protestant churches subscribe to what is called the "just war" theory. They assert that war is evil, but in rare circumstances it may be less evil than the alternatives. Therefore they feel it is permissible to participate in some wars, provided they meet certain criteria. Some would argue that no war has ever lived up to the criteria for a just war. Many people believe the current war in particular fails to live up to the criteria. It is not a war of last resort, the evils perpetrated are not proportionate to the good that is sought, and the goals are economic and political dominance, not human justice.

If you feel that some other war was a just war, but the current war is not, you would be told you are choosing on the grounds of politics, not conscience. Yet the whole premise of the just war theory is the freedom to decide on the merits of the particular situation being confronted. In taking a stand against a particular war you could be just as sincere in following your conscience as someone who claims to object to all wars.

Why should anyone ever be forced to violate his or her conscience? If so many people object that an army cannot be raised, the wisdom of going to war must surely be questioned. If the cause is truly just, the public at large will support it. If politicians had to consider whether the public would willingly respond before going to war, there would be a check on the ability of privileged elites to send the poor and disenfranchised into battle to satisfy their greed.

If your conscience tells you that you cannot fight in a specific war for specific reasons, then you owe it to your conscience not to join, or allow yourself to be drafted into, a military machine in which you are not given the freedom to make that judgment. True, your alternate service might take the form of a prison term, but you would be in good company. There have been many prisoners of conscience throughout history and throughout the world today. If we believe that the United States should be a leader in respecting human rights, we must struggle to expand the legal definition of conscientious objector to include all those who truly seek to follow their conscience.