
War's Heretics:

A Plea for the Conscientious Objector

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Any effort to think intelligently about a war avowedly waged for human liberty brings one face to face with the problem of the conscientious objector. Undoubtedly he is an irritant to the whole-souled patriot. His very existence seems a piece of inconsiderate egotism and annoyingly interrupts us in the midst of our enthusiasms for a war fought "by no compulsion of the unwilling" "to make the world safe for democracy." So newspapers, orators, and Colonel Roosevelt call him slacker, coward, or pro-German; philosophers gravely pronounce him anti-social, and scientists like Dr. Paton analyze him from a study chair with a truly Teutonic subjectivity and heaviness. Meanwhile his defenders and comrades are a bit embarrassed because he is not of one type or philosophy, but of many. Even the name "conscientious objector" is most unwelcome to some moderns among them, to whom the phrase has an "archaic flavor," and objective quality, "like a godly grandmother," which hardly fits into their scheme of life. They are not, then, overly sympathetic with the defense which is entirely satisfactory to the man to whom conscience is the real norm of life and "thou shalt not kill" a complete statement of the law.

Therefore, it is with some diffidence that I, a conscientious objector, undertake to speak for my brethren and to appeal even in the heat of war for some measure of understanding — not so much for our own sakes as in the interest of sound public policy and ultimately of democracy itself.

As a starting point we can define conscien-

tious objectors as men who are absolutely persuaded that enforced participation in this war is so opposed to their deepest convictions of right and wrong for themselves and for society that they must refuse conscription at least for combatant service. If they know themselves they will hold this position whatever it may cost. This attitude springs from no insufferable priggishness. The objector does not primarily seek to judge others; he may heartily admire the heroism which leads his friends into battle, he may admit the idealism of their ends, only he cannot agree with them as to the method they use.

How many such folk there are in the United States no one knows. Naturally, the government will not permit an aggressive attempt to discover and organize all conscientious objectors. There are, however, many societies, local and national, whose members are avowed conscientious objectors, and there are many more unorganized individuals who hold such convictions. Again, it is uncertain how many of the thousands of objectors will be drawn in the first group called to report under the draft law.

Who They Are.

It is natural to think of conscientious objectors as essentially religious, and the government showed a certain deference to religious liberty in exempting from combatant service members of well-recognized religious organizations whose

creed or principles are opposed to war. Of course this is illogical in theory, for conscience is an individual and not a corporate matter. Not all conscientious objection is avowedly religious, nor is it confined to the relatively small sects which have incorporated it in their creeds. Within the last generation there has been a wide growth of peace sentiment in the churches, not all of which is as amenable to conversion to war as the average ecclesiastical organization or that erstwhile prophet of the Prince of Peace, William J. Bryan. You have to reckon with it. Then you have young idealists among the intellectuals to whom humanity is a reality never served by the stupid horrors of war, and the very much larger group of workingmen who have learned too well the doctrine of the solidarity of the working class to believe that the organized destruction of their brethren who march under a different national banner will hasten the dawn of real liberty and fraternity.

In short, conscientious objectors include Christians, Jews, agnostics, and atheists; economic conservatives and radicals; philosophical anarchists and orthodox socialists.

It is not fair, therefore, to think of the conscientious objector simply as a man who with a somewhat dramatic gesture would save his own soul though liberty perish and his country be laid in ruins. I speak with personal knowledge when I say that such an attitude is rare. Rightly or wrongly, the conscientious objector believes that his religion or his social theory in the end can save what is precious in the world far better than with this stupendously destructive war. He is a pacifist but not a passivist.

Even John Dewey seems to me to be dealing with only one phase of conscientious objection, and that not the most important, when, in a recent article on "Conscience and Compulsion," he speaks critically of conscience "whose main concern is to maintain itself unspotted from within" or "whose search is for a fixed antecedent rule of justification." Doubtless this point of view exists;

something of a case might be made for it; but it cannot be too strongly insisted that the majority of conscientious objectors, even of this type, believe that the same course of action which keeps one's self "unspotted from within" will ultimately prove the only safe means for establishing a worthy social system. They quite agree with Professor Dewey in the necessity of search for "the machinery of maintaining peace"; but they remember Edward T. Devine's sober and terrible indictment of war in his report at the most recent Conference of Charities and Corrections, or they recall that a great Christian denomination in its very declaration of hearty support for the government's war policy declared war to be "irrational, inhuman, and unchristian." So they feel that the burden of proof is decidedly on the shoulders of anyone who finds in the worldwide denials of humanity and democracy involved in this struggle a valuable part of that machinery of peace or the way for saving mankind.

We grant that our unity is to be found in our common denial of the righteousness or efficacy of our personal participation in the world war. Our positive philosophy, as I have already indicated, varies as does the philosophy of the larger pacifist movement, of which we are a part. At one extreme of our ranks is the Tolstoyan non-resistant, at the other the man whose objection is to participation in *this war*.

Perhaps the most extreme non-resistant gets the most understanding and respect for his consistency if not for his brains. The name "non-resistant," however, scarcely does justice to his convictions. He is persuaded that the supreme force in the world is Love and that Love can only win by its own weapons, which are never the weapons of violence. He is accused of ethical optimism, but he is too much of an ethical realist to preach to great armies the modern doctrine that they go out to kill each other with bayonets, bombs, Big Berthas, and poisonous gas in the spirit of love. He may believe in *dying* for one's country, or for

ideals; but not in *killing* for them. And his objection is by no means only to killing, but to the essential autocracy, the lies, the contempt for personality, the stark barbarism of war which knows no crime but defeat. He is convinced that victory of those great ideals of democracy so eloquently phrased by the President will never be won, no matter what nation is victorious, till love is the animating principle of life.

The Religious Objector.

Not all of this group are such extreme non-resistants as to deny the validity of police force. Such force can be organized and regulated, it can be applied to the real criminals and that for the purpose of their redemption in a way that is never tried of the indiscriminate and all-inclusive violence of war.

The God of the religious conscientious objector, Jewish or Christian, is both stronger and more loving than the being recently discovered by H.G. Wells. He does not have to save Himself and His causes by using the devil's means. Rather He waits for men to try His ways. We Christian conscientious objectors do not base our case on implicit obedience to one text even in that most revolutionary of documents, the Sermon on the Mount, but on the whole character and work of Jesus, who has conquered and is to conquer not by any might save Love and Truth. Churchmen nowadays say much of the "soldier's Calvary" and "salvation through suffering." If by sheer weight of agony the world is to be saved, long ago would salvation have come upon us. It is the spirit that counts, and the sublime sufferer on Calvary whose love and courage triumphed over shame and death did not receive His crown of martyrdom as an unfortunate incident in the attempt to kill as many of his enemies as possible. Singularly enough the world outside the church, despite the eloquent — and usually sincere — casuistry of her priests and ministers, appreciates the essential impossibility

of denying that Jesus of Nazareth is the supreme inspiration to conscientious objection. Hence many an ardent pagan or worshiper at the shrine of the superman scorns him for his slave morality, and many an opportunist wistfully rejects him as an impossible idealist, but thousands of the humble hunger and thirst after him who find scant comfort in his church.

Because the phrase "religious liberty" has come to have meaning and value to mankind we religious conscientious objectors get a measure of consideration denied to our brothers who base their objection on grounds of humanity, respect for personality, economic considerations of the capitalistic exploitation at the root of all wars, whose guilt all great nations share, or "common sense" observation of that failure of war as an efficient means of progress to which this tragedy gives agonizing witness. Some of these objectors are more opposed to militarism than to war and their objection is to war's denials of democracy even more than to its inhumanity.

Objectors to This War.

It is here that we find our point of contact with one distinct class of conscientious objectors — those who will not declare that no wars have ever been justified or that under no conceivable circumstances would they fight, but who feel that the ghastly horrors of this conflict will not win the liberty they seek. The public gives little sympathy to these men yet there is no doubt that their sense of right and wrong forbids them to engage in the struggle as certainly as does the conscience of the objector to all war. The man who believes that we can win *now* by negotiation about as satisfactory a peace as in the indefinite future, and start on the long road of reconstruction without further ruin may have genuinely conscientious objection to engaging in this brutalizing war whose concrete ends he considers to be so ill-defined. Perhaps it is to this class that a great many radi-

als belong who are opposed to international wars but who in extreme cases would support violence in social revolution. I am not concerned to justify these men but only to argue that such a position can be conscientious. Among the possessing classes, especially if they are good churchmen, many men profess abhorrence of violence *per se* in labor struggles who are hearty believers in the violence of war. Now as a matter of fact, as radicals recognize, the violence of revolution is really less indiscriminate and more clearly directed to remedying specific injustice than modern international war. Furthermore, it is far less likely to perpetuate itself in great armies and a militaristic philosophy. The Russian Revolution gives dramatic proof of this fact and of the impotence of autocracy buttressed by force and fear to withstand the might of great ideas.

Another group of objectors to participation in this war who might fairly be given generous consideration are certain Americans of German antecedents who, though in no sense disloyal to America, more on sentimental than on rational grounds, cannot bring themselves to join in the actual slaughter of their brethren. They might, on the other hand, be willing to render non-combatant service. They do not command popular sympathy, but it is fair to ask why a government which has consented to debarring *all* German-Americans from Red Cross work in France should insist on drafting some of them for the unspeakably bitter task of fighting in the trenches against their kin. Such methods may possibly conquer Prussia but never Prussianism.

Apart from these German-Americans — how numerous I do not know — whose feelings cannot be exorcised by coercion, conscientious objectors are overwhelmingly anti-Prussian. That system incarnates what they hate most. Their sin, if sin it be, is not in loving Prussianism but in the belief that Prussianism cannot be most effectively conquered in or out of Germany by Prussianizing America.

If the wide difference among conscientious objectors seems to discredit their cause it should be remembered that between no two of them is there a wider gulf fixed than, let us say, between William English Walling and the *New York Sun*, or those famous colonels, Bryan and Roosevelt, all of whom are backing the war. Indeed one argument for letting us objectors live is that liberals and radicals temporarily in another camp may find in our conviction that ideas are to be fought by ideas and not by jails or bullets, a strong tower of defense in the quarrels that will surely come between them and their present allies.

It is interesting to see how genuinely educational we find our comradeship in conscientious objection. Many a Christian pacifist is learning some profound lessons as to the economic roots of war and is coming to a sense of the futility of a doctrine of the power of good will and brotherhood which only functions in the sphere of international wars and does not cut down deep into the heart of social injustice; while certain economic radicals are learning a new respect for the “unscientific” idealist and occasionally find themselves speaking his language with real eloquence and perhaps some new emphasis on love rather than hate as the energizing force in the struggle for justice. Indeed it should be made clear that the division between conscientious objectors on religious or rational grounds is not absolute or exclusive. Many of us, for example, find our religious objections strongly confirmed by rational considerations.

Relation to National Service.

Besides the underlying differences of philosophy which divide conscientious objectors, there is a fairly sharp practical division in their relation to national service. Along this line they fall into 3 classes:

1. Those whose objection is merely to personal participation in battle. Their objection is sin-

cere but illogical and is based either on an emotional abhorrence of the ugly business of killing or a very narrowly literalistic interpretation of the command "Thou shalt not kill." Such men would accept almost any kind of *non-combatant* service.

2. Men who would not only reject combatant service but also most forms of non-combatant service which minister primarily and directly to military operations, such as making military roads or munitions. They might, however, accept *alternative* service in the reconstruction of devastated districts or in socially useful tasks, even though these like all useful work in war times indirectly add to the nation's war strength. They would prefer to show their devotion in voluntary work; they are fearful of the principle of conscription in wartime, but so great is their desire to serve mankind that they might accept some tasks even under conscription, as thousands of sincere conscientious objectors have done in England.

3. The "absolutists," as they have been called in England, argue that any compulsory change of occupation in wartime is war service, and that the highest social duty of the conscientious objector is to bear witness to his abhorrence of war and of the conscription principle. In England these men have proved their courage and sincerity by withstanding all sorts of brutality, imprisonment, and the threat of death. It is important to remember that our present law, unlike the British, makes no provision for exemption for any of these classes.

I have dwelt on this statement of the types of conscientious objection and the philosophy behind them because in an understanding of these matters is the best answer to most of the uninformed criticism heaped upon us. It would be more amusing than profitable to point out how utterly contradictory are some of the charges brought against us. For example, in a recent amazing letter Prof. Stewart Payton accuses objectors of Hamlet's indecision of character and then calls them "rapturous sentimentalists," many of whom are ready to die for their convictions! As for cow-

ardice, genuine conscientious objectors in America have already proved moral courage by their resistance both to the terrific social pressure of wartime and to the organized appeal to fear which does so much to make war possible. If necessary they will prove their willingness to sacrifice comfort and liberty for their convictions, as have thousands of their brethren in England.

I suppose we should, most of us, have to plead guilty to believing in principles rather than opportunism. Even the eloquent (and very romantic) "realism" of *The New Republic* seems to us to give elusive and unstable guidance in the present crisis. We have a feeling that certain of our ideals or principles are more satisfactory even from a pragmatic standpoint. Does this mean that we are a danger to democracy?

Is the Objector Anti-Social?

The charge that our position is essentially anti-social or parasitical deserves an extended answer. Very often it is put in a singularly inconsistent form by our critics. For instance, the other day an estimable gentleman assured some of us (1) that conscientious objection was a denial of democracy because "the people had spoken" and (2) that pacifists who advocated direct referendum on war or conscription were absurd or worse, because these were matters on which the people could not decide by direct vote!

Men and newspapers who are most concerned for the "anti-social" quality of conscientious objection are often violently opposed to what they call "conscription of wealth," even in so moderate a form as Amos Pinchot's proposal, because "business can't be run on patriotism." In order to defend our economic system they are rampant individualists and more tender in their treatment of money and profit, which have no conscience, than of the deepest convictions of men. As a matter of fact, conscription of wealth can be justified long before conscription of life, by any philoso-

phy, social or individualistic. The most individualistic among us favor increased social control of property precisely because our present system of private property is a chief foe of the free development of personality. It makes both rich and poor slaves to *things* and denies to little children the chance for free development. These facts make us resent the charge of a selfish individualism from many of our critics as a peculiarly irritating piece of hypocrisy. Perhaps its most conclusive answer would be a challenge to find among an equal number of supporters of war more men and women who are rendering steady and unselfish service to society in philanthropy, education, and the fighting of ancient abuses than there are among conscientious objectors. The records of the Quakers, of American abolitionists, of the newly formed Fellowship of Reconciliation, give conspicuous but not unique proof of this fact.

Yet sometimes the charge is brought by men who honestly believe that these services cannot socially justify our refusal to yield to the state absolute obedience despite our personal judgment in time of war. Let them remember that we are conscientious objectors because to us war is supremely anti-social. It imperils for us far more than it can save. We have asked no man to defend us while we sat at ease; rather we advocated a different way whose risks we were willing to accept. Now that the nation has chosen the way or war we emphatically prefer her cause to Germany's. Our opposition to war is not on the plane of political obstruction or friendship for the Kaiser, but rather of supreme loyalty to certain convictions of right and wrong.

Democracy and Capitalism.

We are lovers of America because we believe she still strives for democracy. It is the essence of democracy to believe that the state exists for the well-being of individuals; it is the essence of Prussianism to believe that individuals exist for the

service of some unreal metaphysical entity called the state. True, the individual exists and finds his complete self-realization only in society — an immeasurably greater concept than the state. Democracy means, of course, mutual accommodation of individuals and social control. In proportion as the state is the effective agent of such control its power should grow but never should it grow to a control over men's convictions. It then becomes as dangerous to society as to the individual. When the state seeks to compel a man who believes that war is wrong, not merely to abstain from actual sedition, as is its right, but to participate in battle, it inevitably compels him, however deep his love of country, to raise once more the cry, "we ought to obey God rather than men." He acknowledges with Romain Rolland that he is the citizen of two fatherlands and his supreme loyalty is to the City of God, of which he is a builder. Some conscientious objectors may substitute mankind or humanity for God, but their conviction remains the same; only the free spirit can finally determine for a man the highest service he can render. Compulsory service rendered against one's conscience is genuinely anti-social. The deep principles which guide a man's life are not formed or suddenly altered by any act of Congress whatsoever. There is a region in human life where the commandment of the state does not run. On this very issue Christianity long withstood the whole might of the Roman Empire, and wherever she is strong it is because of her assertion of the responsibility of conscience to God. In the long run the state is most secure which recognizes this truth.

We are not now pleading that our critics recognize that conscientious objectors are right in their opposition to war. We are not claiming a monopoly of idealism for ourselves or denying that men may seek our name from unworthy motives. Our interest is deeper than securing justice for ourselves. We are pleading for recognition of the social value of heresy. Every movement worth while began with a minority. Democracy degen-

erates into mobocracy unless the rights of the minority are respected. The church of the Middle Ages made the sincerest, most magnificent effort in history to coerce the individual's conscience for the sake not only of the eternal welfare of his soul, but of the church universal. At last she recognized her failure, but not until she had done incalculable damage. Her own sons rejoice at that failure. Now the state, less universal in its outlook, less definite in its dogma, sets itself up as a secular deity and demands not the outward conformity which usually satisfied the church, but active participation in doing that which is to its heretic sons the supreme denial of their sense of righteousness. It deliberately thinks it can save democracy by this final act of autocracy. Gone is our belief in the power of ideas, in the might of right. America, founded by exiles for conscience's sake, their refuge in all generations, gives her sons the option of service in the trenches or imprisonment and thereby wounds her very soul as no outward victory of Prussian power can do. The heretic may be very irritating, he may be decidedly wrong, but the attempt to choke heresy or dissent from the dominant opinion by coercing conscience is an incalculable danger to society. If war makes it necessary, it is the last count of the indictment against war.

I have chosen to dwell on the recognition of conscientious objection as a matter of democratic right rather than a matter of expediency or of sound public policy because this aspect is the more fundamental and because a nation that sees the importance of the issue involved will discover the statesmanship to give justice expression in law.

In point of fact we might make a case on the question of policy. The conscientious objector in prison adds no strength to the nation, nor does he commend our brand of democracy to the German people for whose freedom we are fighting. If the conscientious objector is cowardly enough to

be intimidated into the ranks he is the last man to help win the war. This is no time for the government to indulge in a petty fit of exasperation at the conscientious objector, who often times is quite willing to give some real non-military service to his country. The problem of giving effect to a policy of fair treatment for conscientious objectors is not without its difficulties. Real freedom of conscience is impossible under conscription partly because of the practical difficulty of framing an exemption clause and partly because some coercion upon the unformed conscience inconsistent with genuine liberty is inevitable in any system of conscription of young men. This is one of the reasons why so many lovers of liberty were steadfast opponents of the draft law.

But even under our present system exemption can be granted on the basis of the individual, as in England, and he can be at least allowed to take alternative service which may not violate his conscience. It is entirely possible to copy the general principles of the British system and avoid certain of its stupid brutalities of administration.

But behind any change in the law or its administration must lie the far more fundamental matter of a public opinion not swayed by false and prejudiced statements against conscientious objectors but informed as to their real position and attitude, and above all aroused to the desperate urgency that, in a war for democracy, America shall not kill at home that "privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and obedience" which she seeks to secure for the world. If this is indeed a people's war for freedom, the people can be trusted to see it through, without any coercion of conscience. To deny this is either to distrust democracy or to doubt the validity of the war as its instrument. Justice to the conscientious objector secures, not imperils, the safety of the democratic state.

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