



The Primacy of Conscience

(Adopted by the General Board, February 23, 1967)

Today many young people find that compulsory military service conflicts with their consciences. Christians should be especially sensitive to their dilemma. Experiences of a shrinking world, the development and use of new weaponry of awesome destructive potential, and new complications in international relationships combine to impress upon these young people the moral implications of their personal decision.

Every encouragement should be given to this moral seriousness among young people, especially when they confront this crucial choice—whether to participate in military action against other people at the nation's command. Although society has the power to press all its members into military duty, our nation has made room in its conscription laws for the operation of conscience by exempting certain classes of conscientious objectors from military service.

The General Board of the National Council of Churches considers this provision to be wise public policy, not only because intensely objecting men do not make the best soldiers, but because society should encourage men to live by conscience rather than compel them to violate it. The war-crimes trials at the conclusion of the Second World War asserted the inescapable responsibility which every human being bears for his own acts, even in obedience to military orders in time of war.

This social judgment accords with our Christian belief that conscience is the light given by God to every man to seek good and reject evil. In instances of conflict with human authorities, Christians have insisted, "We must obey God rather than man" (Acts 5:29). The Church, when it has been true to this insight, has nurtured and defended the right and duty of all men to obey God as each perceived His will in the leading of conscience.

However, "conscience" is not a monopoly of Christians or of the religious traditions. Neither is there one kind of conscience that is "religious" and another that is "non-religious," but only the human conscience, which Christians see as God's gift, whether or not every individual so understands it (Cf. Romans 2:12-15).

The highest interests of a free society are served by giving to conscience the greatest freedom consonant with justice, public order and safety. Although we may have greater confidence in a conscience that is rooted in a religious tradition, we believe that ways and means should be provided so that the validity or sincerity of another's conscience may be recognized. Even though the majority may consider decisions based on such a conscience to be mistaken in a particular instance, or may be uncertain of its sincerity in another, our nation should protect the right of conscience in such cases for the sake of a greater good. Coercion of conscience can recruit no more than an unwilling body, while

mind and spirit and a willing body are likely to serve society more fully in alternate tasks not repugnant to conscience. Therefore we urge the greatest possible protection for its free exercise.

In respect to the provisions for conscience in the selective service laws, we recommend the following:

1. The retention of the provision of non-combatant military service for those conscientiously opposed to full military service and the retention of the provision for alternate civilian service for those who are conscientiously opposed to participation in war in any form.
2. The extension of precisely the same provisions for those who are conscientiously opposed to a particular war, declared or undeclared, that is, to the one which a young person confronts at the time of induction.
3. The elimination of the statutory requirement of a showing of "religious training and belief"—a requirement unnecessary to validate the operation of human conscience and placing "religious" conscience in a preferential position over "non-religious" conscience.
4. Provision in the statute for the person in armed service who becomes a conscientious objector to obtain non-combatant service or to be honorably discharged through an orderly and expeditious process subject to administrative review.
5. Adoption of a new disciplinary provision for the person in armed service who cannot in conscience take part in the use of certain weapons or forms of warfare, or who cannot in conscience obey what is for him an unlawful or morally unacceptable order. We recognize that any military organization requires discipline, and that refusal to carry out an order for any reason is a disciplinary breach. When such refusal is motivated by conscience, however, this motivation should be considered as a factor with all other circumstances of the particular case in determining the nature of the disciplinary action to be taken.

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