

Speech in Boston on October 14, 1967 by
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Most words are dispensable. They can perish as though they had never been written or spoken. Some few, however, must forever remain alive if human beings are to remain human. "I love my city, but I shall not stop preaching that which I believe is true; you may kill me, but I shall follow God rather than you," said "We must obey God rather than man." (Mt 23: 23)

Why are these words of Socrates and St. Peter so indispensable? Because in the first place they tell us that the most profound experience of the self is the experience of the conscience, and not as frequently suggested today the experience of private sensations and interior visions. And secondly, they tell us that because there is a higher and hopefully future order of things, men at times will feel constrained to disobey the law out of a sense of obedience to a higher allegiance. To hundreds of history's most revered heroes, not to serve the state has appeared the best way to love one's neighbor. To Socrates, St. Peter, Milton, Baynes, Gandhi, Nehru, it was clear that sometimes had subjects make good neighbors.

Let us remember these men were not out to destroy the legal order. By accepting the legal punishment they actually upheld it. Nor were they disrespectful of the law. They broke it as a last, not as a first resort. But they respected the law only, they did not worship it, and were determined to bend their every effort to the end that the law reflect and not reject their best understanding of justice and mercy.

And how can Americans so quickly forget their own heritage? Our Puritan forefathers came to these shores precisely because they would not surrender their consciences to the state! The Quakers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony were not only imprisoned but executed because they refused to obey the law. In Pennsylvania in 1750 John Rolfe refused to pay taxes when Pennsylvania decided to arm against the Indians. And Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, Adams were not only civilly disobedient but traitors all, until success crowned their efforts and they became great patriots.

Thus in the 19th century Abolitionists again and again ended up behind bars, as of course did Thoreau with these incredibly modern words: "I am first of all a citizen of the world, and of this country only at a much later and convenient hour."

If only Americans could remember their own heritage they could at least applaud the spirit, even if they do not share the views, of those who here today are refusing to surrender their consciences to the state.

The issue is one of conscience. Let us be blunt. To us the war in Vietnam is a crime. And if we are correct, if the war is a crime, then is it criminal to refuse to have anything to do with it? Is it we who are democratizing our boys in Vietnam, or the Administration which is asking them to do immoral things?

I have the highest sympathy for our boys in Vietnam. They know what a dirty, bloody war it is. But they have been told that the end justifies the means, that the cleansing water of victory will wash clean their hands of all the blood and dirt. No wonder they hate those who say "There must be no cleansing water." But they must strive, hard as it is, to understand that there can be no cleansing water if military victory spells moral defeat.

I have the highest sympathy too for those who back the war because their sons or lovers or husbands have died in Vietnam. But they must understand that sacrifice in and of itself confers no sanctity, that even if half a million of our boys died in

Vietnam that would not make the same one whit more sacred. (But how hard that is to understand when one's husband is numbered among the sacrificed.)

To us then the war is an issue of conscience. So too is the draft. For not only does the National Selective Act irresistibly defer the rich and better educated; it also insists that a man's conscientious objection be based on "religious belief and training."

Could anything be more ethically absurd! Have humanists no conscience? Why, many men become atheists because they think Christians are so inhuman that the only way to be a good humanist is to be an atheist. (Of course they are mistaken. Christians have always been the best argument against Christianity. But Christ is the best argument for it, and that's the argument that has to be met!) But it is absurd once again to say a man must be a believer in order to be conscientious.

Then despite numerous appeals by numerous religious leaders and groups, Congress last spring chose to recognize only the rights of conscience of the absolute pacifist. This too, as every good pacifist knows, is absurd. For the rights of a man whose conscience forbids him to participate in a particular war are as deserving of respect as the rights of a man whose conscience forbids him to participate in any war at all. This is an ancient Jewish and Christian tradition. Yet the tradition we honor the government steadfastly continues to dishonor.

So the war and the draft are both issues of conscience.

When an issue is one of conscience then surely it is one we may not wish to seek but it is one we cannot properly avoid - particularly the synagogues and churches. So what are they to do?

"Then spreadst a table before me in the presence of mine enemies."

It men have always felt certain times to be more sacred than others, i.e., the Sabbath, so also they have felt certain places to be more sacred, i.e., the home, the temple, the church. And closely associated with these more sacred places has been the belief that there a man should find some sort of sanctuary from the forces of a hostile world. "Then spreadst a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." These familiar words from the 137th psalm refer to an ancient desert law which provided that if a man hunted by his enemies sought refuge with another man who offered him hospitality, then the enemies of the man had to remain outside the rim of the campfire light for two nights and the day intervening.

In Exodus we read that the altar of the Tabernacle is to be considered a place of sanctuary, and in Numbers and Deuteronomy we read of "cities of refuge", three in Canaan and three in Jordan.

Then during the Middle Ages all churches on the continent were considered sanctuaries, and in some instances in England the land within a mile of the church was included. And according to the Justinian Code sanctuary was extended to all law breakers, Christian, Jewish, and non-believer alike, with the exception only of those guilty of high treason or sacrilege. Now if in the Middle Ages churches could offer sanctuary to the most common of criminals, could they not today do the same for the most conscientious among us? And if in the Middle Ages they could offer forty days to a man who had committed both a sin and a crime, could they not today offer an indefinite period to one who had committed no sin?

The churches must not shrink their responsibility in deciding whether or not a man's objection is conscientious. But should a church declare itself a "sanctuary for conscience" this should be considered less a means to shield a man, more a means to expose a church, an effort to make a church really be a church.

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