

## THE CHURCHES, THE STATE AND MODERN WAR

At its meeting in Uppsala, Sweden this summer, the World Council of Churches endorsed a principle that invites prolonged national discussion. With only a few negative votes, the 720 delegates adopted a resolution that endorses selective conscientious objection. The pertinent section from the 4,000 word statement entitled "Towards Justice and Peace in International Affairs" reads as follows:

"Protection of conscience demands that the churches should give spiritual care and support not only to those serving in armed forces but also to those who, especially in the light of the nature of modern warfare, object to participation in particular wars they feel bound in conscience to oppose, or who find themselves unable to bear arms or to enter the military service of their nations for reasons of conscience. Such support should include pressure to have the law changed where required."

There are a number of comments to be made about a statement such as this when it is issued in the name of an organization that represents most major Protestant and Eastern Orthodox churches throughout the world. The first and most obvious observation is that the statement is not to be ignored; it will bring the issue to the attention of many people who had not previously considered it, and it will help determine the disposition of many people who have not thought their way through to a satisfactory solution of the problems it entails. As a journal that has considered selective conscientious objection over a period of time and devoted the greater part of two issues to the concept (February, March, 1967), *worldview* welcomes the contribution the World Council of Churches has made to the discussion.

There are two other observations, however, that concern all those who are in sympathy with the declaration of the World Council. The declaration says not only that the Churches should support those who object to participation in particular wars but that "such support should include pressure to have the law changed where required." The step from moral support to pressure for legal change might seem so natural as to be inevitable. After all, it could be asked, what's the value of moral support that has no teeth, that cannot confront the legal pressures that weigh upon the young man who, facing conscription, opposes a particular war. But the step from moral support to pressure to make basic changes in a law is not inevitable, nor in every instance desirable.

There is much the churches can do to help the selective conscientious objector who is imprisoned because of his stand. They can work, for example, to see that prison conditions are improved, that he has an opportunity to use and develop his talents and abilities, that our society better understands the

reasons for his action. All of these are useful acts that fall short of actual changes in laws that consign the objector to prison. The churches can also engage in that political education which our society, including many of the selective objectors, so sorely needs. It can teach the potential objector — and thus the entire society — that not every moral right can readily be translated into legal terms, that indeed conflicting moral rights may test the very foundations of our legal structures. Speaking to this point and on the issue of selective conscientious objection, which he supports, Paul Ramsey has said:

“If political community is not to be torn to pieces between upright and errant consciences, or for that matter between various assertions of upright conscience disagreeing as to the justice of the cause, there must be in each some significant measure of acknowledgment that political authority must dispose the energies of the whole toward the common good as this has been determined by the legitimate decision-making processes of the community. This is simply the bracing requirement that a man should concede the judgements of justice that have been made on behalf of the nation *unless and until*, by looking into his reasons, he is searchingly sure in his own mind that these are unjust.”

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This cautionary note is the more important when we reflect upon the political climate in which the World Council issued its statement. There can be no doubt that the shadow of Vietnam fell on all the deliberations and effected their conclusion. However generalized the statement supporting selective conscientious objection, its main thrust is directed narrowly toward the United States, and this for two reasons. First, because the United States is a principal agent in that war, and believed by many to be waging an unjust war, it is the United States that most comes under the implicit judgment of the resolution. Second, the United States is almost the only major country where the issue of selective conscientious objection can be seriously considered within the existing legal framework. For most countries in the Western world it would be a considerable advance, in moral and political terms, if they provided for pacifists the exemptions now provided by the United States. The United States, briefly, is more humane in its consideration and treatment of citizens who reject participation in war than most countries in the world. It is, therefore, more

prepared to take the step that would exempt the conscientious objector to a particular war than are most other countries.

The issue is important apart from the war in Vietnam and should not be confused with that issue. The churches that supported this resolution in Uppsala have a particular, political obligation, as their delegates return home, to see that these related but distinct issues are not confused. It is possible, as the late John Courtney Murray proved by his own example, to support both the war in Vietnam and the concept of selective conscientious objection. That possibility should not foolishly be diminished. J.F.

## JUSTICE AND PEACE

On the four succeeding Sundays in August, *James Finn* will moderate a series devoted to “Justice and Peace” on the NBC-TV network. Sponsored by the National Council of Catholic Men, the series will explore the role of the churches in the world’s basic social and economic problems. Among those who will appear on the series are:

*Henry B. Taliaferro*, Acting Executive Director of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.

*Pastor Richard J. Neuhaus*, of the Lutheran Church of St. John the Evangelist, Brooklyn, N. Y., and Co-Chairman of Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam.

*Bishop John J. Dougherty*, Chairman of the U. S. Committee for World Justice and Peace.

*Barbara Ward*, author and economist.

*Irving S. Friedman*, Economic Advisor to the President of the World Bank.

*Msgr. Joseph B. Gremillion*, Secretary of the Pontifical Commission: Justice and Peace.