

**Worship & Action for Peace Letter**  
**November 19, 2004**

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting,

Last week we sent you a letter from Jens Braun inviting us to listen to our consciences, and communicate our leadings. He asked: "Think out and write down how your conscience responds to the priorities set for the use of resources, power, and force by our government." In that light, we may remember the admonition of John Woolman from his Journal (1774):

O, that we who declare war against wars, and acknowledge our trust to be in God only, may walk in the light, and therein examine our foundation and motives in holding onto money! May we look upon our estates, our treasures, the furniture of our houses, and our garments, and try whether the seeds of war have nourishment in these, our possessions.

The members of the Worship and Action for Peace working group, as well as several others with whom we have spoken, have committed themselves to responding to Jens's invitation by New Year's. We hope to share with you some of what we are hearing, and invite you to participate by sharing with others in New York Yearly Meeting what you hear in your conscience.

The Board and Corporation of the American Friends Service Committee met on November 5th and 6th. Paul Lacey, clerk of AFSC, shared with the members of the AFSC Corporation his thoughtful letter on the workings of conscience. He concludes that we "must follow where our consciences lead," while always remembering that our understanding of the Inner Light continuously may be deepened and clarified by further revelation, and that the consciences of others may in good faith lead them down different paths. If we recognize and acknowledge that we may be mistaken, we must act on our leadings, but we also "must work hard to listen well, to the inner witness of the other as to our own inner witness." We offer that letter below for your reflection.

In his speech at Riverside Church on April 4, 1967 ("Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence"), Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. closed with a poem by James Russell Lowell that begins "Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide...." M.L. King introduced those words by declaring that "new ways" must be found now to "speak for peace":

Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter—but beautiful—struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons of God, and our brothers wait eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard? .... Or will there be another message, of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever the cost? The choice is

ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise we must choose in this crucial moment of human history.

In care,

Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, Fred Dettmer, Lu Harper  
Worship and Action for Peace working group

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**Clerk's Report**  
**[to the AFSC Board and Corporation]**  
**October, 24, 2004**

Why does conscience arrive at such different judgments? Conscience is not the infallible voice of truth, of the moral law, or of anything else, but only man's ability to hear this voice. This inner ear of man is, however, just as much subject to error as is his physical ear. (*Wilhelm Mensching, Conscience, Pendle Hill pamphlet 117, 1961 p 11*)

A number of recent concerns, including worries that a military draft might be re-instated in the United States, have led me to reflect on what we mean when we talk about following conscience and on what it means to be a conscientious objector. That in turn has sent me back to re-read Robert Barclay's thoughts on the subject in his *Apology*, Plato's account of Socrates' speech to the jury at his trial, also called *The Apology*, and an essay by Pastor Wilhelm Mensching, pacifist opponent of Nazism and founder of Freundshafstheim, to refresh and challenge my own understanding of these subjects. That is by no means an exhaustive list of relevant writings on the subject. Thousands of books and articles address questions of conscience. What follows are some of my reflections, some questions, and some tentative conclusions. I offer them as an encouragement to discussion, not to foreclose it.

Wilhelm Mensching begins his essay by quoting the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article I: "All human beings are ... endowed with a conscience." He goes on to note what each of us has experienced, that people of conscience do not agree with one another on fundamental matters. When that happens to us, you and I may be tempted to explain away the differences either by assuming our opponent is not well enough informed on the subject, or is blinkered by national, religious or other prejudices, or is, in fact, hypocritical and without an active conscience. *How can they, in good conscience, believe and act that way?* And our opponents are asking the same about us.

Robert Barclay describes the natural conscience as "the knowledge that develops in a (person's) heart from whatever agrees, contradicts, or is contrary to whatever is believed by (the person).... When the mind has been blinded or contaminated by a wrong belief (the person's) conscience will still trouble (her or him) when (he or she) goes against that belief, even if it is erroneous. (*Barclay's Apology in Modern English*, Dean Freiday, ed, 1967, p 92)

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Mensching makes the same crucial and uncomfortable point – conscience, our inner ear, is as subject to error as the outer ear. So each of us may be following the clear lead of conscience with absolute scrupulosity, and each of us may also be deeply mistaken. The natural conscience may be ill-informed or wrong. Nevertheless, says Barclay, “although the conscience may err, it is always binding, and (whoever) acts contrary to (his/her) conscience (i.e. as he supposes it to be) sins because (he or she) acts contrary to the will of God.” (*Barclay’s Apology*, p 363)

Barclay distinguishes the light of Christ from the conscience, saying that the conscience “arises from the natural faculties of (the human) soul which may be defiled and corrupted.... Conscience is a wonderful thing when it is properly informed and enlightened. It has been compared to a candle holder, and the light of Christ to a candle.... It is to the light of Christ in their consciences that we direct people and not to their natural consciences.” (p. 92)

So you or I must follow where our consciences lead, taking the risk that we may turn out to be mistaken in our actions. That we feel totally sure we are following what our consciences demand is not proof that what we are doing is objectively true or wise or right. But it *is* proof that we are obeying the demands of conscience. Even Martin Luther, who is always so definite in his convictions, seems to be aware of the risk of being mistaken when, refusing to recant, he says, “It is not right to act against one’s conscience. Here I stand; I can do no other! God help me! Amen.”

We may differ, too, on what we believe the priorities are in conflicting demands. “It often happens that the conscience of one (person) hears almost nothing but the appeal against war, that of another ... the call against social injustice, that of a third the call to some other service, and in listening to these fails to some extent to hear other calls. (Mensching p 12) I believe most of the sharpest differences among Friends, and separating many of us working with the American Friends Service Committee, are of this kind. We cannot ignore them or evade them with shallow compromises. Some differences are so important that they will separate us, no matter how painful that is.

But exactly because people of good will and sensitive consciences can be mistaken, we owe it to one another to treat one another, our friends and companions, our opponents and adversaries, with as much patience and charity as we can find in our hearts. We must work hard to listen well, to the inner witness of the other as to our own inner witness. We must try to speak tenderly, not to overwhelm the opponent but to welcome him or her into deep conversation

Is it possible for an organization to follow what it perceives to be clear, clearly-discerned and spirit-led policies and also find accommodations for individuals and groups that disagree with them? The shorthand way of putting the question is whether there is a place for *conscientious objectors* [to our own policies or positions] to remain within our fellowship. I believe that question continually tests us in the Religious Society of Friends and in the American Friends Service Committee.

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The term “conscientious objector” derives great resonance from the experience of generations of Quakers and others who opposed conscription into military service. The American Friends Service Committee came into existence to agitate for and provide ways individuals could serve the common interest other than military service. The term has certainly broadened out to include tax refusers, people who will not work for or invest in organizations engaged in arms manufacture, and people who refuse to obey unjust laws. And it therefore encompasses a wide variety of expressions of conscience-driven actions. In America’s wars of the twentieth century, some conscientious objectors refused all cooperation with the draft itself. For them, the draft, even with its possible accommodations for objectors, was an unacceptable evil. Others were willing to serve the common good, but could only perform “civilian alternative service” to the military.

The analogy between resistance to military service and conscientious objection to an organization’s policy and its implementation is inaccurate, I think, though it can help us see some implications of a principled inability to abide by a policy, in contrast to a principled objection to aspects of its implementation.

Where the objection is an absolute root-and-branch disagreement over policy and implementation, we must all try very hard to hear one another, to reflect on the best wisdom of each side, but if the differences remain irreconcilable, the integrity of all may require that we take different paths. Such separations, when they occur, exact a great cost in heart-sorrow, and it is especially incumbent on all of us to remember that consciences can err.

If the differences are over implementation of accepted policy, ways to accommodate them *may* be found, though it can never be a foregone conclusion that practical accommodations can be made which also keep the integrity, coherence and consistency of the policy. But our obligation to maintain fellowship with our brothers and sisters as long as conscience allows, requires us to try to find ways that everyone’s conscience be respected.

In *The Apology*, Socrates tells his judges that he had always heard an inner voice which told him when he was doing something wrong. He always obeyed that voice and found it an infallible guide. When I read that dialogue in my first-year college philosophy course, I was becoming a Quaker and deep in my struggle with the peace testimony. I found myself wondering whether I could ever know my way as clearly as Socrates did. I wondered, too, how far into error Socrates had to stray before the voice warned him. I wondered why the voice of his conscience only gave him negative warnings and did not tell him when he was on the *right* path. More than fifty years later, I still ask those questions.

Socrates, who was by no means a pacifist, helped persuade me that I must become one, when I read a passage in *The Gorgias* where he argued that the person who does evil suffers more than the one to whom evil is done. Perhaps Socrates would say I erred in judgment, but I don’t have his infallible guide to when I am wrong. I have to stumble

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along by trial and error, testing my judgment and experience against the witness of other people whose erring understanding as well as their wisdom and integrity can speak to my condition. Sometimes I am baffled in a clear way forward and can only say, following Martin Luther, "I can do no other, God help me." I believe I am right; I have no voice which tells me I am wrong; I can only follow the light I am given.

As we each try to hear the voice of our own conscience, and as we open ourselves to the light of Christ within our consciences, let us ask to be led wisely and with tenderness toward those whose consciences lead them in ways at odds with our own.

In friendship,

Paul A. Lacey