

Center on Conscience & War

National Interreligious Service Board for Conscientious Objectors

A Call to Support Conscience: What is Conscientious Objection?

We all have a conscience. Most simply defined, a conscience is an inner wisdom that shapes our moral and ethical convictions and consequently controls and inhibits our actions. There have been times in all of our lives when we, in good conscience, could not participate in an activity—perhaps this was activity that we had previously supported, or in which we had previously participated—because we had a sincere belief that such participation would violate our moral, ethical, and/or religious beliefs.

Throughout history, there have been those who, in good conscience, could not participate in the killing and violence of war. In the Western world, conscientious objection has deep religious roots as many of the early Christian martyrs were executed for refusing to fight as they sought to follow the teachings of Christ. Many of our country's earliest settlers came to this land seeking religious freedom in hopes that they would be able to escape religious persecution for their unwillingness to participate in war.

The religious freedom of conscientious objection has been tested throughout our country's history in both times of peace and times of war. During the Revolutionary War, a group of Quakers had their muskets forcibly tied to their backs only to be sent home by George Washington. During WWI, eighteen conscientious objectors were killed in jail as a result of abusive treatment. And today there are those who sit in prisons, live in exile, and await court-martial for following the leadings of their conscience.

Despite facing harsh treatment and ridicule for saying no to war, conscientious objectors throughout our country's history have been integral members of our society. They not only have taken a stand against war and killing, but they have been instrumental in shaping our country. Conscientious objectors have been an integral part of activities such as undermining the slave trade and resisting slavery, revolutionizing our mental health system, racially integrating our federal prison system and being at the forefront of the civil rights movements.

Honoring the religious freedom of conscientious objections has improved throughout history as our country seeks to fulfill its founding ideals, but much work needs to be done. Today, there are few people who wrestle with their conscience more than those in our armed forces. And today, there are members of our military who will arrive at the conclusion that they can no longer, in good conscience, serve in the armed forces due to the maturing of their moral, ethical, and/or religious beliefs. We must work as a nation to protect the religious freedom of conscientious objection for our brothers and sisters in uniform. The Military CO Act seeks to afford them such protection.

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