

For the conscientious objector, it is better to die than to kill

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VAJRABANDHU is a conscientious objector. An ordained member of the Western Buddhist Order in Bethnal Green, East London, he was known before his ordination as Darren Foster. He is a former Lance Corporal of the Royal Army Medical Corps from Gillingham, Kent.

After seven years with the RAMC he bought himself out of the Army, as he grew uneasy about the realities of war: "As a theatre technician I was dealing with the aftermath of Northern Ireland. Then there was a massive explosion in a munition store in Pakistan. Some of the civilian casualties were treated in British military hospitals. It was horrific and it sowed a seed of doubt about what the politicians were doing." Announcing that "there's no way I'm going to war", he was immediately put under military arrest.

In his appeal statement to the advisory committee on conscientious objectors, he said: "I am beginning to be attracted to Buddhism as being the closest expression of my own beliefs. Consequently I cannot accept the threat or use of violent force as a tool in the furtherance of personal or national objectives. I have no option therefore but to oppose the ethos of force through the military community and would be unable to accept any substantive or supportive role with it."

Conscientious objection is as old as religion. Its pacifist form in the Christian Church takes biblical precedent from the New Testament. In Matthew, for example, "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew v, 44).

Modern conscientious objection emerged in response to the horrors of the First World War. In the 1930s, as the threat of another war began to grow, there were those who looked for alternatives to slugging it out. Vulnerable to charges of cowardice and lack of patriotism, the opposition to war took a big step forward when, on October 16, 1934, a letter appeared in the *Manchester Guardian* calling on people to write a postcard stating that they would "renounce war and never again support another". Written by the Rev Richard Sheppard, Canon of St Paul's Cathedral, the letter drew a huge response and led to the founding of the Peace Pledge Union (PPU). Sheppard had been an army chaplain during the First World War, and by the 1930s he was increasingly alarmed at the failure of the great powers to agree to international disarmament.

The response was immediate. Within a few weeks, some 30,000 people had pledged their support, and by the time Sheppard died three years later there were 100,000 members of the PPU. They formed a focus for peaceful resistance to war. Crucially, they included significant literary, political and religious figures, from Siegfried Sassoon and Aldous Huxley to Bertrand Russell and George Lansbury.

By the time of the Second World War, the question of conscientious objection had become primarily one of individual response rather than group religious belief. Benjamin Britten and Michael Tippett, for instance, were both resolute objectors to the “just war” of 1939-45. Both cited their connection with the PPU in presenting their cases.

When the inevitable call-up came, Tippett’s letter to the review board outlined a nascent political philosophy. He wrote: “My first political act was to attend an International Congress of Youth at Brussels in 1922 called by Jeunesse Suisse Romande to discuss methods of raising money to send victims of the Great War to sanatoria in the Swiss mountains. I was 17 years old. It is not now possible for me to be at war with what amounts to those same children . . . Our present day pacifism holds that the present horrors and evil results of modern total war are far greater than the evils which the wars hope to eradicate.”

Tippett also acknowledged the influence of the non-violent resistance campaigns of Gandhi and Nehru in India. His letter ended: “I imagine that only by the endurance of individuals who refuse (non-cooperation) can the madness of war be in any degree shortened.”

To be a conscientious objector was to invite public opprobrium. As Tippett later wrote of his time in jail for refusing to accept the quasi-military options offered him: “To the screws, we conchies were the lowest of the low. Our crime was despicable.” Conscientious objection to war stems from the individual’s conviction that refusing to wage war is a more effective means of resisting evil than fighting back or supporting pre-emptive strikes. Its critics argue that peaceful protest is itself only possible because of the threat of force.

Sixty years ago, Tippett was confronted with this argument in a letter from Ralph Vaughan Williams: “I will not argue with you about your pacifist scruples, which I respect though I think they are all wrong. But I do join issue with you in the idea that it is anyone’s business at a time like this to sit apart from the world to create music until he is sure that he has done all he can to preserve the world from destruction and helped to create a world where creative art will be a possibility.”

Mahatma Gandhi likewise faced the key question of whether non-violent resistance would be of any use against the absolute evil of a Nazi empire. John Briley’s script for Richard Attenborough’s *Gandhi* boils this down to a crucial exchange in jail between Gandhi and the *Life* magazine photographer Margaret Bourke-White: “Do you really believe that you could use non-violence against someone like Hitler?” “Not without defeats and great pain, but are there no defeats in this war, no pain? What you cannot do is accept injustice from Hitler or anyone. You must make the injustice visible, be prepared to die like a soldier to do so.”

Gandhi’s moral authority flowed from his offering to die but refusing to kill. The formula has inspired a range of civil rights movements, but how effective is such a strategy against today’s Hitlers? “It’s not that simple,” says Vajrabandhu. “You have to look at how we came to be where we are. America takes a high moral stance but they have the bloodiest hands of all. You don’t arm dictators all over the world and then wave your fingers at them. We have to stop manufacturing and supplying arms.”

He regards all war as a profound failure, a stance informed by the new fusion of Eastern and Western ethics now widespread in Britain. And like earlier objectors, he will not accept the

terms of an argument that answers force with violent force. “I don't believe that the means justify the ends,” he says. “Unless you object, you could end up becoming just like the people who attack you.”