

Christian Peacemaker Teams as a Current Version of Conscientious Objection

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Similarities Between CPTers and COs

I appreciate the characterization of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) as a current version of Conscientious Objection (CO). Both CPT members and CO's have taken bold steps to be free of war and war systems and both have taken at least some of those steps in ways that are at odds with the mainstream media, patriotism and consumerism of their times. Some stories of the COs of World War II and other COs resonate with me, a CPT member. Though not a systematic comparison, I want to share some of those similarities and how they inspire me, especially how they show people's freedom of imagination and conscience.

In his book, *A Few Small Candles*, Bronson P. Clark, who lived most of his life in the United States and worked for many years in the American Friends Service Committee, writes about his preparations for war-time as a CO. He recalls his task of writing the military draft board, in Ohio, asking the board for permission leave the United States and join Gandhi's non-violent army in India. That kind of cheeky idealism rings somewhat familiar to me as a CPT member (though some of us are more solemn and subdued than might be imagined). Bronson received this reply to his request to the draft board: "Dear Sir: At a recent meeting of this Board your request for permission to leave this country to join the non-violent army in India has been refused. Yours very truly, F.A. Needham, Chief Clerk."²

I suspect that Bronson wrote his question to the board knowing that it would refuse him. Still, I appreciate his refusal to let the military set the boundaries of conversation with him and his refusal to let them limit his idealism or the kinds of questions he was willing to ask.

I have met many people with CPT who speak prophetically to the military. Most notable are those whose lives are directly threatened by the militaries and paramilitaries. (I think of one of my teammates in CPT, William, who is well known for asking prophetic questions of military people). When CPT was in Mexico, we accompanied a group called the Civil Society of Bees.

The Bees consist of several thousand Mayan, Indigenous, Christian people who have been stuck in the middle of a conflict among guerrillas, paramilitaries and government troops over land. The Bees are mostly farmers, so land is vitally important to them. In the middle of this fighting, the Bees have chosen collective conscientious objection; many of their members have been killed, some massacred while praying, but they continue in their resolve not to take up arms.

When we CPTers worked with the Bees, one of our actions was to accompany them as they entered a military base. The base was on land that used to be farmland, and the Bees went there to plant corn, to reclaim it for life-giving instead of military purposes. While at the base, my teammate, William, spoke with a couple of military men. He challenged them to leave the military, talked about loving enemies and how the Bees didn't like the militarization of the area. When I originally heard the story of William encouraging soldiers toward pacifism I thought, "nice idea, William." But I also thought: "a bit too preachy, though, and not an efficient way to challenge a military system – depending on the highly unlikely personal conversion of a few people at a time, but nice idea."

I respect that ability in World War II COs and some of my CPT teammates to speak freely to people in military systems about a different vision, to choose ridiculous methods that are in line with deep truths, even if they aren't efficient or proven to be effective.

Now, while Bronson didn't get his wish to be sent to Gandhi's non-violent army, William got his. A few months after working with the Bees he was walking around downtown when two men started talking to him excitedly. The two had left the military and were looking for jobs in the civilian sector. Add them to the many thousands of COs who are making their way in the world today. (An addendum to that story: I think it's much more important for someone in William's position – as a middle class white person – to speak prophetically to economically – privileged military and political leaders in Canada than to be talking to poor soldiers in another country. William does both).

Many others of us in CPT have had similar conversations with soldiers and members of armed groups in Colombia and with United States soldiers in Iraq and those conversations have not led to the same results, as far as I know. I am sure that 99% of those conversations are 'ineffective'.

My choice to frame a question in terms of faithfulness in relation to effectiveness is formed by John Howard Yoder's writings. Perhaps this faithfulness/effectiveness question is a common ground between CPT and World War II COs. I don't know what all the COs' goals were in World War II, and I am sure they were varied. But I do know that thousands of COs making their decisions of non-participation in armed

conflict did not stop the U.S. from dropping atomic bombs on Japan and killing about 240,000 people, and neither did it stop the horror of Nazi death camps. In this respect their appearance before judges with their Bibles, all the work that went into organizing the CO camps options for Mennonites, all the arguments church people advanced while they hammered out their Church Conference resolutions, and all the communication of Jesus' message to love one's enemies were of little value.³

I know that CPT members have also not managed to stop a war despite the courageous visions and thousands of hours of hard work by Ron Sider and others. For example in Colombia, though the farmers and fishers insist that a CPT presence makes it safer for them and less likely that armed groups will harass them, assassinations of civilians by armed groups still happen, sometimes just a couple of kilometers up or down the river from where CPT members are staying on a particular night. I would say our effectiveness is extremely limited.

On the another hand, COs in World War II ensured that thousands of people were not trained to kill. And on the other hand as well, in all the places CPT members have worked around the world, violence of various kinds has been averted, many hundreds of times. Paramilitary men in Colombia are less likely to kidnap a passing civilian while a monitoring group is there talking with members of that armed group about religion and about what their dream job would be if a war wasn't going on.

I want to add, on the effectiveness of peace work, that while I admire the freedom of imagination, faithfulness and idealism of many COs and CPT members, I resonate with the former director of CPT: I am not against effectiveness; if fact, whenever possible, bring it on. Lives are at stake. The tensions between effectiveness and faithfulness is central to a consideration of the work of COs and CPTers.

Differences between World War II COs and CPT

There are of course also countless differences between Euro-Mennonite war-time COs and CPTers and the on-going peace movement of today.

I will only talk about one of them explicitly. Reading just a few writings on Mennonite COs, I am struck by a particular kind of gratitude and respect expressed toward the Canadian government. For example, the notes from discussions held in the Mennonite Brethren Church in Winkler, Manitoba in 1939 contain a description of Rev. B.B. Janz's view that Mennonites should help and minister to those wounded in the war, followed by the sentence, "moreover, it is desired that everyone

prove his loyalty to the government.”⁴ Having escaped horror and violence in Europe and having come to Canada (sometimes to receive some of the most productive farmland), meant that Mennonites had a relationship with the Canadian government that was tied to their survival and economic well-being. I also read of the Mennonites’ gratitude for being able to be COs, for being here legally, and for being able to practice their religion.

Some CPT members, in comparison, have a critically different view of Canadian and U.S. governments. This is not to say that CPT members do not have enormous gratitude or do not pray for their politicians, because they regularly do so. Part of the difference, I think, is an understanding that North and South America have also been colonized in a military way, that across these two continents, according to Ronald Wright and Noam Chomsky, 85-90 % of indigenous people, native people died after Columbus arrived, and that the Canadian government, itself, and Mennonites and other settlers took advantage of that genocide, not even acknowledging those who lived since time immemorial on the land they received. Nor have they acknowledged that while Mennonites and other Christians’ freedom of religion has been granted, Indigenous peoples’ spiritual freedoms have been massively degraded, their places of prayer clear-cut to the ground. It affects how we conceptualize the subject of our gratitude, and therefore it shapes a different attitude toward peacemaking.

There are countless other contextual differences between CPT and Mennonite COs, and other kinds of COs and that is good because the details of war and colonization and domination keep changing. Peoples’ responses and abilities to pre-empt violence should continue to change appropriately.

Things have changed since World War II. Today, Canada is at war. Canadian soldiers are involved in battles in Afghanistan, some of which they are initiating in what is very clearly not a defensive or peacemaking stance. This from a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation report in June:

The massive operation, which includes Afghan police and military, started late Sunday after coalition forces learned hundreds of Taliban would be gathering in the area. Travelling by vehicle and on foot, soldiers are methodically searching the mud huts and trenches of the village. The Canadian commander of the multinational force in Kandahar says this is an effort to bring the fight to the Taliban, rather than wait for them to attack.⁵

Conscientious Objection Locally and Around the World

Right now is a fabulous time to be a Conscientious Objector. Thousands of people around the world currently are COs at great risk to themselves and their families. In the beginning I mentioned a few names. I will review a couple of them and offer a few more.

Sarah Barak applied to do her military service with the Israeli defense force in an academic posting but refused to follow out some orders because she considered them to be cruel. During her service her pacifist inclinations grew, and she applied for exemption from the Israeli Defense forces but was rejected.⁶

I think also of every young man I met in Colombia: Alex, the people who owned the store across the street; and Don Juan's son. With so many legal and illegal armed groups active in that country, it takes a lot of luck and/or privilege and/or will-power and/or intelligence not to be recruited into one of them. The Colombian Mennonite Church helps youth to get out of armed groups, and the Catholic Church gives them alternatives as well.

I have also heard stories of COs in Iraq. An Iraqi man named Bahar who refused to fight in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s had his ear cut off by a doctor during surgery, and woke to find it in his pocket.⁷ I have also heard rumours of Iraqi doctors who became COs by refusing to do the mandatory ear surgery that the government ordered for all COs. In Iraq, in the 1990's alone, about 3600 Iraqis refused to cooperate with the military.⁸

It is a crucial time for anyone to be a CO. Our country is at war. As of December 2006 44 Canadian military personnel have died in Afghanistan.⁹ As far as Afghan civilians, those numbers are a lot harder to get, but New Hampshire University Professor Marc Herold reports in "A Day-to-Day Chronicle of Afghanistan's Guerrilla and Civil War June 2003 - Present" that a low estimation of civilian deaths in the war, between October 2001 and June 2004, was 3485. In one of the thousands of civilian deaths resulting from one NATO Operation on October 19th, 2006, Abdul Karim lost his son, wife and two daughters, including one son by way of execution.¹⁰

Reflect on the names of three other Afghan civilians and three Canadian soldiers who have died in the violence. They place specific names of individuals to these statistics: Sgt. Craig Paul Gillam, from Newfoundland; Sardar Muhammad Makia, a 22 year old street vendor; Cpl. Robert Thames James Mitchel of Niagara Falls, Ontario; Bilal Gulum Rasul, age four; Trooper Mark Andrew Wilson; Kaled Gulum Rasul, age six.

This is a Good Time to be a CO

This is a good time to be a CO because Canada is not involved in war only in Afghanistan.

This country also provides 60% of the United States' Depleted Uranium, according to Gary Brouse at the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility. And while some of it might be used to build civilian aircraft, we also produce "nose cones for bullets, bombs, missiles."¹¹ Canada is carrying out military projects that are important to war-makers, internationally. For instance, the Canadian Government has been helping, for years, to produce one of the best radar systems in the world. It's called RADARSAT, and it takes detailed pictures of the Earth's surface, even through thick cloud cover or dust storms.¹²

It is complicated to be a CO and a CPT member and Peace worker, but in other ways it's amazingly simple: If you don't want to participate in an offensive war that is killing four year olds in Afghanistan, then don't pay the military portion of your taxes. Withhold that portion and pay it to a charity instead, or support someone in your community or church who is prepared to do so. Imagine if by the annual tax time in April, fifty Manitoban citizens, including at least twenty-five Manitoba Mennonites, each with strong community or congregational support behind them, refused to pay their 8% military tax to the Canadian Government, declaring, "We have decided to love our enemies, or at least to work toward that in our refusal to participate in killing them."

By choosing not to support the military financially, I am not saying that we shouldn't love and bless our troops. I am also not saying that we should avoid Afghanistan, but what would it be like for Canadians to go there, en masse, without weapons, and work with Afghan civilians on the projects they have had identified as most urgent for them? I have done that sort of thing with CPT. I dare the Canadian Government to try it.

Anabaptists have inspiring stories from in WWI and II about economic war resistance:

Here is an excerpt of a transcript of Amish Mennonite Private Henry H. Miller's court martial proceedings from World War I:

Q: Do you pay war taxes?; A: So far, I have not; Q: Would you pay war taxes if they should be levied against you by Congress?; A: Well, I have always thought that it is right to pay taxes; Q: To pay taxes for war?; A: I do not say that; Q: Would your conscience permit you to pay money for the war?; A: I do not think so; Q: Would you pay taxes then, for war if they should be levied by Congress?; (witness hesitated); Q: Do you refuse to answer the question?; A: I cannot give you an

answer, I think, to that; Q: You can't; why can't you?; A: It is something that ain't; Q: Ain't what?; A: Well...I must say no; Q: What do you mean by that; that you would not pay taxes?; A: Not war taxes.¹³

I like the man's gumption.

It is an important time for Euro-Mennonites to resist war. Their subculture is well-resourced, materially and academically. People within the Mennonite subculture have a reputation with provincial and federal governments of being cooperative, pleasant, industrious citizens, who pay their taxes. They have an historical and theological imperative to love neighbours and enemies, and not to kill people. When civilians are dying violent deaths in a war in which Canadian troops are increasingly involved, and in a country that has never declared war on Canada, it is time for people of peace and conscience to use their political and social influence to take a few risks.

This is also a great time for Canadians to support COs who are coming to Canada from the U.S. in order to avoid being sent to Iraq. I appreciated a *Harper's Magazine* interview with U.S. soldiers who are going Absent With Out Leave, one named Jeremiah.

The next day, a sergeant addressed the recruits with a speech that Jeremiah says he'll never forget. 'You know, when I joined the Army nine years ago people would always ask me why I joined. Did I do it for college money? Did I do it for women?' People never understood. 'I wanted to join the Army because I wanted to go shoot mother-fuckers....' On his third day, Jeremiah went to one of the drill sergeants and told him, 'I'm sorry, the military's not for me. For whatever reason, I'm not willing to kill.'¹⁴

When I read this, I think also about the US soldiers I met in Iraq when I was there with CPT in 2003. They are lovely men. We talked about our families and about the Iraqis they had helped and the Iraqis they had killed. Matthew, whose last name I don't remember, was one of those soldiers. My CPT teammates and I encountered him a number of times while he manned a checkpoint near the hotel where we stayed. He seemed happy to spend time with peace activists. Once, he gave me an army-issue double-dutch brownie.

We also saw him while he lost his cool, arresting an Iraqi man named Ihsan. Ihsan did not have weapons and had not physically pushed or attacked the soldier. Ihsan is an engineer, one of the many thousands of civil servants who lost his job in the destruction of Iraq's basic forms of civil society. He explained that he was at the checkpoint that day

because a Japanese media agency had offered him a translation job, and he needed the work to feed his two children and his pregnant wife. When Matthew, the soldier, denied him entry through the checkpoint, he yelled at Matthew and Matthew violently arrested him. The military released him twenty minutes later, probably because CPT members insisted on knowing the charges against him. There were none. If young men like Matthew do not want to be soldiers in Iraq, they should not have to be.

As of December 2006 there were about 200 US soldiers in Canada, escaping the U.S. Military, and about another 7800 living underground in the United States.¹⁵

I propose that we support these men and women. I know that the War Resisters Support Campaign is helping people who are escaping the U.S. Army to get refugee status in Canada and they need funds of do that legal work.

Creation is groaning with the weight of nuclear weapons, genocide and the blood of innocent people. Let us deepen our inheritance as peacemakers, figure out how we can be midwives to the peace and redemption that wants to happen, and strengthen the momentum of Christian, Interfaith and every other kind of active pacifism.

Let us make the momentum of conscientious objection a more powerful momentum than this supposed War on Terror, and stronger than any tired inclination we might have to passively participate in Canada's and the US's war machines. If we play our cards right, our descendents will look back and say, "Now MY people – they chose to be free, to be faithful to God and their ancestors and to the Least Of These."

Peace to you.

Notes

¹ I thank My Great Uncles on my Dad's side, Henry Martens, who has passed away, and George T. Martens who now lives in Grunthal, Manitoba, both who worked in the pulp and paper industry in Ontario instead of doing their military service. I am thankful for John Goossen, one of many COs who had the nerve-wracking experience of sitting before a Judge in Morden Manitoba to hear what his fate would be, at least as much of his fate as a judge could dictate. [Website 'Conscientious Objectors in Prison' in *Alternative Service in the Second World War: Conscientious Objectors in Canada: 1939-1945*. I thank Bronson P. Clark who was imprisoned by authorities for his CO stand. [Clark, Bronson P. '[Bronson's Chapter]' in Larry Gara and Lenna Mae Gara ed., *A Few Small Candles*. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1999.] And I thank Oleg Bar On, an Israeli Roman Catholic pacifist who has been jailed several times for his refusal to serve in the Israel defence forces, [Amnesty International Website AI Index: 15/049/1999, 'ISRAEL: The price of principles: Imprisonment of conscientious objectors. [Also Bahar in Iraq, who refused to fight

- in the Iran / Iraq war when Saddam Hussein's government ordered him to do so. ['Iraq Reflection: The Story of Bahar' by Greg Rollins on CPTnet July 20, 2004 I thank God for all of them.
- ² Bronson P. Clark, "Prison Memoir" in Larry Gara and Lenna Mae Gara ed., *A Few Small Candles* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1999), 4.
 - ³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid_4740000/newsid_4749200/4749229.stm.
 - ⁴ P.A. Toews, David Schulz, Jac. F. Barkman, and David P. Reimer, *Experiences of the Mennonites of Canada during the Second World War 1939-1945*. Np., nd., 41.
 - ⁵ Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Website. 'Canadian Offensive Continues in Afghanistan' in CBC News World June 13, 2006 <http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2006/06/13/afghanistan-cda.html>.
 - ⁶ Amnesty International Website 'ISRAEL: The price of principles: Imprisonment of conscientious objectors.' AI Index: 15/049/1999. <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGMDE150491999>
 - ⁷ Christian Peacemaker Teams Website. Rollins, Greg. 'Iraq Reflection: The Story of Bahar' on CPTnet July 20, 2004. <http://www.cpt.org/archives/2004/jul04/0028.html>.
 - ⁸ Christian Peacemaker Teams Website. Gish, Peggy. 'Iraq: A Badge of Honor,' February 11, 2004 on CPTnet. <http://www.cpt.org/archives/2004/feb04/0013.html>.
 - ⁹ Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Website. 'Bodies of 2 soldiers killed in Afghanistan return home' from 'Canadian Press'. Last updated Friday December 1, 2006. <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2006/12/01/afghan-soldiers.html>
 - ¹⁰ <http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2006/10/26/civilian-deaths.html>.
 - ¹¹ Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Website. 'September 2006: A Short History of Radiation in Ontario: Uranium refinery boosted economy, not workers' health' by Joanne Young in Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Monitor Issue, September 1, 2006. <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/MonitorIssues/2006/09/MonitorIssue1455/>
 - ¹² For more than 10 years, in exchange for NASA's launch of RADARSAT-1, the U.S. government has been allowed to "direct approximately 15% of the satellite's observing time" (NASA media release, Oct. 27, 1995).... A Pentagon source told Space News: "It's doing great things... It's working like gangbusters" (March 31, 2003)." Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Website. Sanders, Richard. June 2006: Serving as the U.S. Military's Spy in the Sky: Canada taking a key role in the militarization of space.' Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Monitor Issue, June 1, 2006. <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/MonitorIssues/2006/06/MonitorIssue1389/index.cfm?pa=BB736455>
 - ¹³ Joint Effort of the Schowalter Oral History Collection of Bethel College and Mennonite Central Committee peace Section. Oral History Interviews with World War One Conscientious Objectors. Printed by Mennonite Central Committee, 1986.
 - ¹⁴ Kathy Dobie, "AWOL in America," *Harper's Magazine*, March 2005, 37.
 - ¹⁵ Alternet Website. Pupovac, Jessica. 'Antiwar Vietnam Vets Mentor Next Generation of Resisters', Alternet, December 7, 2006. <http://www.alternet.org/waroniraq/45194/>