

worldview

A JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

"IN CONSCIENCE I MUST BREAK THE LAW"

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AND THE STATE

QUENTIN L. QUADE

THE U.S. AND REVOLUTION

PHILIP BERRIGAN, S.S.J.

THE PRESS AND FOREIGN POLICY: A NEW DIMENSION

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"And since I am a reasonable man, not given to emotive decisions, one who by no stretch of the imagination could be called far out, one who is not active in the New Left, one who still shaves and wears a necktie — a typical Establishment-type middle-class WASP — I feel it important to record why it is that such a person as myself finds it impossible to stop merely at the level of vigorous protest of our policy in Vietnam and feels compelled to step over the line into civil disobedience."

The words are those of Robert McAfee Brown, ordained Presbyterian minister and professor of religion at Stanford University. He quite justly considers his example to be important, for his sentiments are shared by an increasing, if still small, number of Americans. And since he has over the years earned a reputation as a thoughtful, informed and dedicated person, his example is, in itself, a powerful form of persuasion that might swell that small number. It is useful then to consider his reasons as an example of what reasonable people are injecting into our present political debate.

The argument, as it is presented in the October 31 issue of *Look*, is already brief and direct, and an even briefer summary may do it some injustice. The weight of the argument rests, however, on several propositions:

He has "utterly lost confidence in the Johnson Administration" which is pursuing in Southeast Asia a policy that is "becoming more hard-nosed, more irrational, more insane."

He must, therefore, attempt to influence that policy.

But the "ways of genteel, legal protest have shown themselves to be ineffective."

And since "civil disobedience seems to me the only honorable route left,"

"I no longer have any choice but to defy those laws of our land that produce such rotten fruits."

Dr. Brown's eloquence matches his evident sincerity and his argument has a winning simplicity. But that simplicity has been gained at the cost of not engaging the most profound issues involved in the acts of civil disobedience that he recom-

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1967 VOL. 10 NO. 11

mends. For the step from vigorous dissent to civil disobedience is not simply an "escalation of moral protest" but a step into quite different action with vastly different political consequences—consequences which must be soberly evaluated.

Dr. Brown asserts that he must defy the laws that "produce such rotten fruit," and invokes the name of Martin Luther King and the struggle for civil rights. That the comparison is misleading is evident when we ask whether it is our present laws or our present foreign policy that has led us to Vietnam. Surely it is the latter, and it is the latter that the protestors wish to change. But that policy did not spring full blown from the head of President Johnson and a few of his advisors. Our actions in Vietnam derive from a policy that was and apparently still is supported, actively or passively, by a majority of U.S. citizens. And the attempt to change that policy through acts of civil disobedience is an attempt not only to frustrate the intentions of the Administration but to impose a minority position on that majority. The intended attack upon policy thus opens the door to an unintended attack upon the political system itself. Unless this fact is recognized by those who advocate and practice civil disobedience, they are

not intellectually free to assess the possible cost of their position.

The article by Quentin Quade which appears in this issue was not designed as a response to the position advanced by Dr. Brown, but he raises questions which are relevant to that position. "Follow your conscience, and if that comes out to mean disobedience now, so be it. No one can say a government should never be disobeyed or never overthrown. One only hopes that you have bothered to inform this conscience you must follow." And Mr. Quade goes on to discuss those issues which must be considered before a responsible person can believe that he has properly informed his conscience.

It is unfortunately true that these issues are all too little considered in our present debate. Those who offer guidance to uncertain 18- and 19-year-old boys in this debate shoulder a special burden, for not only must they be morally certain of their own position but they must also offer the kind of reasoned guidance which will allow these young men to forge their own free decisions. The need for moral guidance in our country is evident. The need for intellectual guidance is no less acute.

J. F.

in the magazines

Edgar M. Bottome of the Boston University Department of Government examines the "Mythology of the A.B.M." in the October 20 issue of *Commonweal*, tracing some underlying themes (the "gap" cycle, for example) of previous debates about American defense policy and discussing some realities of the present situation.

He states at one point that "to assume that the Chinese would launch an attack on the unbelievable power of American nuclear forces is to assume complete irrationality on the part of Chinese leadership. If this irrationality is taken for granted by American leaders, then no amount of A.B.M. effort would prevent a Chinese attack. However, if we assume that the Chinese will use their power rationally, and avoid a direct confrontation with the United States (which

they have done up to this time), then American offensive missile forces would deter any Chinese attack, with or without an A.B.M. system.

"The above notion of presumed rationality," Bottome comments further, "deserves additional emphasis. The assumed rationality of national leaders in a nuclear age means that they will not commit national suicide, and it is upon this basis that the theory of nuclear deterrence functions. If this assumption is incorrect, then no amount of offensive or defensive preparation will be of any deterrent value to a nation facing a maniac who disregards the national consequences of launching a nuclear attack that can only result in the annihilation of both nations involved.

"Accordingly, it seems that the only reason for the deployment of even a limited A.B.M. system by either