Episode 404: Conscientious Objectors: Their Fascinating History, and Their Role Today

Guest: Bill Galvin

WOODS: Before we went on, I was just telling you that I found out about you, because I had a case of somebody who wrote to me saying, "I'm a conscientious objector," and I guess he had to prepare some kind of statement -- I don't even know what the steps are -- I'm going to ask you about that a little later. And he wanted some guidance, and he thought, since I'm antiwar, I must know all this stuff. And I didn't know the first thing about it. So I sent him to Daniel McAdams at the Ron Paul Institute, and I said, "What do I do with this guy?" And he said, "You've got to send him to Bill Galvin. He is the best; he'll know exactly what to do." So then when I looked at your website, I thought, "I would be an idiot not to have this guy on my show."

This is very interesting to me, the whole history of conscientious objection. You yourself were a conscientious objector. I guess I want to ask -- I do want to get into the history and where does this all get started in U.S. history -- but I'm just so compelled by your own story and by the Vietnam era, that part of me wants to know -- given that there was so much opposition at that time, given that people were actually drafted, unlike today, where people are volunteering for the military -- why didn't millions of people claim conscientious objector status? What was the obstacle to that?

GALVIN: Well, first of all, there were a lot of conscientious objectors. There were, I think, like 175,000.

WOODS: Oh, that's more than I thought, okay. I didn't realize there were so many.

GALVIN: But part of it is that the law is somewhat restrictive. And the law is broader now than it was for most of Vietnam. But actually the law that's still in effect is essentially the law that was passed back in 1940 for the draft during World War II. And

the law that was passed back then said that, to be a conscientious objector, you had to be opposed to participation in war in any form because of your religious training and belief. And so that restricted it from a lot of folks. For example, if you weren't religious, you didn't qualify. If you thought, "Well, I know that this war is wrong, but I don't know that I can say absolutely all war is wrong," you didn't qualify.

WOODS: So you pretty much had to be a Quaker or something.

GALVIN: Well, sort of. Now that's interesting, because that goes back even further into history, because during World War I the law said you actually had to be a member of a church that prohibited its members from being a part of war or the military to qualify. And the church had to have this as a policy before the draft law went into effect for World War I. So, you know, it was very restrictive. And to be honest, the law in 1940 was more broad, because it allowed for an individual to say, "This is my belief." You don't have to necessarily belong to a particular church.

WOODS: I see.

GALVIN: Now, what happened during the Vietnam War -- there was a massive resistance in many ways, and the non-registrants for the draft were at least half a million. There were hundreds of thousands of people who went AWOL from the military and things like that. And what happened was some of these conscientious objector cases actually broadened the definition of conscientious objection. It started with Dan Seeger. One of the questions on the form at the time was, "Do you believe in a Supreme Being?" And Dan Seeger considered himself religious, but he said, "That's not how I think of God." So he said, "No," to that question, and the draft board turned him down, and ultimately, his case went to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court decided that you didn't have to believe in a "Supreme Being" to be a conscientious objector. And that happened in 1965. So then in the late sixties, when I was dealing with it, one of the questions on the form was, "Explain how your beliefs are religious." So I remember, I played this stupid game where I looked up "religion" in the dictionary, and I explained how Christianity fit within that definition, which was kind of stupid. And I was, like, so compliant back then. But anyway, along came Elliot Welsh around that time, who said, "I'm not religious." Now, he essentially believed the same thing that Dan Seeger believed, but Dan said he was religious; Elliot said he wasn't. And it went to the Supreme Court again, and the Supreme Court basically said that ethical and moral beliefs qualify, as well as religious beliefs. So that was a major breakthrough, and that happened in 1970, I think -- '70 or '71. So that was at the end of the Vietnam period, but that did open it up quite a bit.

WOODS: Huh, okay.

GALVIN: But you also had this business of everybody objecting to the Vietnam War as opposed to all war. Or, you know, the wording in the law is "war in any form." And there were court cases about that too. There were people who were objecting to the Vietnam War primarily, and they were applying, and they were getting turned down. And their cases went to court, and probably one of the most famous cases is Gillette --

I think his name was Guy, Guy Gillette -- and he lost his case. They decided that he was what they called a "selective objector": he objected to some wars and not others, and so he didn't qualify. But, in that case, the Supreme Court said -- and this is a direct quote -- "Unwillingness to deny the possibility of a change of mind in some future hypothetical circumstances may be no more than a humble good sense, and I cast no doubt on the claimant's present sincerity of belief." So we were able to take that and try to interpret this as widely as possible. And so, one of the quotes that I have used many times -- it came out of a handbook for conscientious objectors that came out in the '70s -- and we said, "Some will fight only when Allah commands, but Allah remains silent. Some will fight only in Armageddon, which seems to always lie in the future. Some will fight if there were no nuclear weapons, but there are. Some would fight if certain theoretical criteria could be met, but they can't be. And in the meantime, these people might find themselves conscientiously opposed to participation in war in any form, and can say so honestly." So we're doing all we can to broaden the definition to make it as inclusive as possible for real people who are facing these crises of conscience. But I think the common thought throughout our culture and that's perpetuated, because -- I think, especially in the military, but in general our culture doesn't want to try to affirm conscientious objection so much -- is that the only people who really qualify this are, like, Amish and people like that. And that it doesn't really apply to real people.

WOODS: Right. Well speaking of that, today things are somewhat different, in that, we don't have the draft, and I think people, if anything, might even be less sympathetic to conscientious objection, because, "You knew what you were signing up for," I think would be the argument; I'm sure you get that. But there must be people who go there, who see things, and the things that they see cause them to engage in real soul-searching. It's not just that, "It's scary, and I don't want to be over there anymore"; I think it really is, "I simply cannot take part in this." So what has changed between how conscientious objection cases were dealt with in those days, as compared to now, when people did in fact volunteer for it? Is it more difficult, or is it easier to get the exemption or to actually get discharged?

GALVIN: It, to some degree, depends on the politics of the country. I would say that it's always been -- except for the very end of the Vietnam period -- it's always been difficult to get out of the military as a conscientious objector, and there have always been conscientious objectors in the military. It's one thing to think, "I would fight to defend my country. I want to serve my country." Or even, some of the cases we have now, the folks say, "I thought of war as a necessary evil -- not something I really wanted to do, but I was willing to do it, because I thought it was necessary and sometimes a good thing to do, given the circumstances. And I'm up here in a culture that's trying to get me all excited about killing people, even celebrating killing kids and babies. And that just struck me as wrong -- this is not the way I was thinking about war. I thought of war as a necessary evil, not something to be excited about and celebrated." And so that's one of the things; it's even in the training that some people get, their consciences move. But virtually nobody who joins the military knows what they're getting into. I mean, recruiters are trained salespeople, and you really don't know what it is you're getting into when you join. And it's one thing to say in the

abstract, "I would fight to defend my country." It's quite another thing to be looking down the barrel of your gun at a live human being, knowing you've got that person's life in your hands. That does something to you, deep in your conscience or soul or whatever you want to call it.

And the military knows this. Their own studies found -- I don't know how well folks know this, but General S.L.A. Marshall, who was the official Army historian for World War II, in his research found out that in many units -- most units -- fewer than 25% of the soldiers were shooting their weapons at the enemy to kill people. And they did more research, and there was more research done by a guy named Grossman, who was an Army psychologist -- he actually taught at West Point for a while -- and his research shows that it wasn't just U.S. soldiers in World War II, but throughout history, most soldiers have not been trying to kill the enemy. So they basically learned that normal human beings have an aversion to killing other people. And so the military has changed its training. And it's now specifically focused on overriding the conscience, overriding the innate sense that it's wrong for me to kill somebody. So the troops are more lethal now than they used to be, because they've gone through that training -- they call it "reflex" training, where you just shoot your weapon as a reflex, rather than thinking about whether this is something they should do or not. But the problem is that the conscience is still there.

The conscience is strong, and we're seeing the statistics in recent years: Suicides among active duty soldiers are at an all-time high, roughly one a day. And suicides among veterans -- 22 a day! 22 veterans a day kill themselves. And from our observation, this is directly tied in with the fact that military training, getting folks to do these things, that's designed to just override your conscience -- I mean, your conscience is still there. And it's going to come back, and you're going to have to deal with the reality of what you're doing.

WOODS: Well suppose somebody is in that situation, as, indeed, this correspondent of mine is: what does he do? Of course, he can contact the Center on Conscience & War and be guided through the process, but tell us, what is that process?

GALVIN: Sure. I just should mention that the Center on Conscience & War, we've been around 75 years, and you can Google us -- CenterOnConscience.org and our toll-free number is 800-379-2679 -- and we're probably the best group in the country for helping such people. And, well, it's a lengthy process. It's not easy. It starts with submitting a written application, and the application has 20-some questions on it, but there are about six or so that are really the important ones that deal with, "What is it that you believe?", "How did your beliefs develop?", and "How do your beliefs influence your life?" Those are the key questions. And they have to show how their beliefs have changed since they joined the military. Obviously if you knew you were opposed to being part of war, why would you join the military? But for a lot of folks -- actually, almost everybody -- there's something that happened in their military service that triggered this. Sometimes it's in training; sometimes it's on the battlefield. It's different for everybody.

One of the guys we had a couple of years ago, who was a very sincere libertarian; he was in the Navy and they were in international waters and encountered a ship where they had to search the ship, and that included going through the personal belongings of the crew of the other ship. And that so offended his libertarian mindset, that that's what triggered his thought process and got him thinking about what he was a part of. So it's different for everybody.

I've worked with conscientious objectors who were part of military activities that, they said it's only a matter of luck that we did not start World War III. Obviously the folks who are on the battlefield and kill somebody or see their best friend die -- and one of the guys we dealt with a couple of years ago was an interrogator at Abu Ghraib, and he was a conservative Christian, a very sincere Christian. And he said, "You know, most of the people we interrogated, they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time and got picked up somehow. And they had nothing to do with terrorism or al Qaeda, or anything like that. But one day, I had a genuine Islamic jihadist, and he told me that if he could, he would kill me. And he said that he was at peace with himself, because he knew that what he was doing was the will of Allah. And then he challenged me on my faith. He said, 'Do you have that kind of peace in your faith? I mean, Jesus talked about "loving your enemies" and "turning the other cheek." How do you feel about what you're doing?'" And this guy said, "At first, this really offended me -- that this Muslim would even be trying to talk to me about Jesus. But the question wouldn't go away." And he could cite that interview with the jihadist as his crystallizing moment. So it's different for everybody, and that's part of what we do here at the Center. When they get in touch with us, we listen to their story; we help them tell their story in the best way they possibly can, because the legal issue is, "What do you believe?" Well, how do you prove what you believe? It's kind of hard to, but when you talk about experiences like that one, then you can say, "Well, I can see how that would affect you."

WOODS: I'm sitting here thinking about all these different stories, as you say -- it hits people in different ways, and you can't tell what's going to affect what person in what way, but I bet the testimonies of people -- particularly those who would care to share them with a broader audience -- if you were to write them down and compile them into a free eBook, it would be a quick and easy way to promote what the Center is doing; get the word out about the center. I'm all for the free eBook that more or less writes itself. If you get people who are interested in sharing their testimony, you can collect 10 or 12 of them; you have a little book, and this can maybe be used for fundraising. I'm just thinking out loud here.

GALVIN: That's a great idea. I was writing that down as you were saying it.

WOODS: Oh, good, okay, I like to do what I can to help. What else do you do at the Center? Is it just guiding people through the conscientious objection process? Are you also trying to educate the public about it? What is your full range of activities?

GALVIN: Sure, but let me just finish about this process.

WOODS: Oh yeah, my apologies, yes.

GALVIN: So, yeah, then they submit the written application. And then it's not an easy way out, I should say. Then they have to go through a series of interviews, and then, ultimately they get a report with a recommendation as to whether their application should be approved or not. Then it comes back to the conscientious objector, and if necessary, they can write a rebuttal, which we can definitely help with that. Their application is theirs, so we can't really do that for them, because they know what they believe better than anybody. But with the rebuttal of what happens with them, we can help with that even more. And then it just goes through the process and ultimately goes to the Pentagon level, where it gets ultimately decided. So when somebody makes these statements, a lot of folks in the chain of command in the military are reading them. And we think that's pretty important for raising the consciousness level for the military. But the other issue that sometimes becomes difficult is the process still takes at least six months -- could take a year or even longer -- and during that time, you're still in the military. And you've officially, publicly stated, "My conscience won't let me do this." And yet, you're still required to obey orders and things like that. So that often also causes problems, and so for various things, we try to do what we can to help folks who are dealing with those kinds of problems. So there's a wide range of things we do, in terms of the conscientious objector process, besides helping people put together their applications. But, yes, we do some general outreach to educate the country about conscientious objection to encourage young folks to think about what they're really getting into, if they're thinking about joining the military. And in fact, I know this show doesn't actually play until next week, but we're recording this on May 15th, which is International Conscientious Objector Day.

WOODS: I found that out, and if I had known in advance, I would have made sure that this was today's episode!

GALVIN: (laughing) Yeah, we're here in D.C., and we had an event last night at Busboys and Poets, which is a restaurant that has a political forum -- an extra room that has all sorts of activities in there -- and we actually had three conscientious objectors tell their story. We had some great music, and we just had kind of a celebration of conscientious objection last night.

WOODS: I would be remiss if I didn't ask you before letting you go if you feel comfortable saying something about your own experiences as a conscientious objector.

GALVIN: Sure, sure. Well, I was a conscientious objector back during the Vietnam War, facing the draft. My draft board was Catonsville. People who were old enough may know what that means. I don't know if you've heard of the Berrigan brothers, the Catholic priests that --

WOODS: Oh, I sure have, yeah.

GALVIN: Well that was my draft board. So they didn't like people like us. So my draft board turned me down. In the end, I lucked out, and my lottery number was high enough that they did not draft me, but it came close. But they asked me -- I remember very vividly, I'll never forget this; it's probably one of the reasons that I still do this work, because I remember this so vividly, and I remember the help I got -- "What if we turn you down and we draft you?" And I remember saying, "Well," -- my mind was racing at the point -- "Well, I know I can't go in the Army. I don't think it would be responsible to leave the country, because I don't see going to Canada as an option, so I guess that means I'll go to jail." And I said that, thinking that I just might be going to jail, which kind of scared me. I was 20 years old or something, and that didn't exactly excite me. Now I know a lot more about it than I did then, and I'm fairly certain that I would not have gone to jail, had I not lucked out with the lottery. But at the time, that's what I was thinking.

WOODS: That's a very, very frightening prospect to be in. On the one hand, you can say, "Well, I'm being loyal to my conscience, and I guess my place is to be in jail," but nobody really wants to do that, and to have your life taken away from you, in effect, by people who think they can dispose of your life however they want is a shocking thing.

GALVIN: Mmm hmmm.

WOODS: So here you are doing what you -- I mean, I can't tell you what divine providence has in mind for you, but you sure seem to be doing the thing that you're supposed to be doing. So I'm really glad we had this chance to talk, and also I'll have a show notes page; this is Episode 404, so TomWoods.com/404 will have information linking to your site and about our conversation. But also, people can get there directly at CenterOnConscience.org. So, Bill, any parting words?

GALVIN: Just thank you for your interest in this. And people need to know that the human spirit is against killing other people, except for psychopaths. And we need to affirm this, and we need to stop talking like people who say, "I object to killing," are weird -- because they're not. They're the norm.

WOODS: Yeah, I couldn't agree more, and I say this as somebody who, when I was growing up and I was in high school and early college, frankly, that is what I thought. I thought, "What's wrong with these freaks? Why can't they just salute the flag and go do what they're told?" So I feel like I've been doing a form of penance since then in the writing and speaking that I've done, because it's very easy to get caught up in conventional modes of thinking, and as you say, there are all different ways that they try to get you to adopt these and to forget about your natural inclination not to kill people and to have sympathy for people. But, as you say, that's always there, and the attempt to deny this is at the root of so much suffering and suicide and so on and so forth. So the work you're doing is heroic; I'm glad to have spoken to you today. I hope people will check you out and visit our show notes page for today's episode, TomWoods.com/404. Bill, thanks so much.

GALVIN: All right, thank you, Tom.