U.S. Supreme Court

United States v. Seeger, 380 U.S. 163 (1965)

United States v. Seeger

No. 50

Argued November 16-17, 1964

Decided March 8, 1965\*

380 U.S. 163

*CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS*

*FOR THE SECOND CIRCUIT*

# Syllabus

These three cases involve the exemption claims under § 6(j) of the Universal Military Training and Service Act of conscientious objectors who did not belong to an orthodox religious sect. Section 6(j) excepts from combatant service in the armed forces those who are conscientiously opposed to participation in war by reason of their “religious training and belief,” *i.e.,* belief in an individual’s relation to a Supreme Being involving duties beyond a human relationship but not essentially political, sociological, or philosophical views or a merely personal moral code. In all the cases, convictions were obtained in the District Courts for refusal to submit to induction in the armed forces; in Nos. 50 and 51 the Court of Appeals reversed, and in No. 29, the conviction was affirmed.

*Held:*

1. The test of religious belief within the meaning of the exemption in § 6(j) is whether it is a sincere and meaningful belief occupying in the life of its possessor a place parallel to that filled by the God of those admittedly qualified for the exemption. Pp. 380 U. S. 173-180.

(a) The exemption does not cover those who oppose war from a merely personal moral code, nor those who decide that war is wrong on the basis of essentially political, sociological or economic considerations, rather than religious belief. P. 380 U. S. 173.

(b) There is no issue here of atheistic beliefs, and, accordingly, the decision does not deal with that question. Pp. 380 U. S. 173-174.

(c) This test accords with long established legislative policy of equal treatment for those whose objection to military service is based on religious beliefs. Pp. 380 U. S. 177-180.

2. Local boards and courts are to decide whether the objector’s beliefs are sincerely held and whether they are, in his own scheme of things, religious; they are not to require proof of the religious **[p. 164]** doctrines, nor are they to reject beliefs because they are not comprehensible. Pp. 380 U. S. 184-185.

3. Under the broad construction applicable to § 6(j), the applications involved in these cases, none of which was based on merely personal moral codes, qualified for exemption. Pp. 380 U. S. 185-188.

326 F.2d 846 and 325 F.2d 409 affirmed; 324 F.2d 173 reversed.