

Muste: 'a grad Hope can be proud of'

by Donald L. Cronkite

"Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because men are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love."

Thomas Merton
New Seeds of Contemplation

"The moral of all this may be that there is no telling what goes into the education of a pacifist."

A. J. Muste
Sketches for An Autobiography

We just don't know what influence we are going to have on someone else or how long it will be before an influence is felt. We who are teachers have to believe that. There are short-term rewards, to be sure, but at Hope College we tell each other that we are building character as well as scholarship, that we want students to think deeply about their values and to act on what they learn from that thinking. Teaching becomes an act of faith that someday, somehow, what we are doing will matter in a way that far transcends grades on tests or papers or friendly teacher/student relationships. Sometimes it works out. Sometimes what we do and say interacts with a student's own personality to produce a wonderful result. One such result was A. J. Muste.

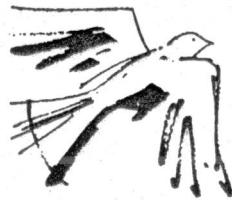
In 1936, when he was 52 years old, Muste was sitting in an empty church in Paris. He was a tired American tourist then, a radical labor organizer who had come to Europe to rest and to visit the exiled Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky. That visit, apparently a congenial one, was over, and now he and his wife had come to Paris to see the sights. He was tired, very tired. The radical labor movement in America was divided into bitter factions, and he had often found himself in the middle of that division. For the last 17 years he had given himself to the task of labor organizing with his characteristic wholehearted enthusiasm, but enthusiasm was waning.

A number of his friends, many of them members of Trotskyite factions of the labor movement, had given him the money for the trip because they saw what his work was costing him. Now here he was in a church, not a place frequented by the men and women he associated with then. And as he sat there by himself in that place, he had an experience of a deep and abiding peace and a powerful conviction that "this is where you belong, in the Church, not outside it." This realization transformed his life, and his life has transformed many others as well.

Muste graduated from Hope College in 1905. When he was here he was captain of the basketball team, editor of the *Anchor*, a



A. J. Muste, arrested at demonstration at Induction Center, Whitehall Street, New York, December 15, 1966. Photo by Robert Joyce, Courtesy of War Resisters League



member of the debate team, and an employee at the library. In many ways he was the very model of what a student of Hope College was like then. He had grown up in the Dutch community of Grand Rapids, had been an active member of the Reformed church, and had even stayed at Hope College because it was his "duty as a Dutchman." After Hope College he went to New Brunswick Seminary and became a Reformed Church minister, serving at Fort Washington Collegiate Church in New York. After that his path began to diverge from what was then expected of Hope alumni, and as the path diverged the College grew more uncomfortable with him. He became a labor organizer, one of America's leading advocates for pacifism, and a key figure in the struggle against nuclear arms. During the Viet Nam war he even went to Hanoi to meet with Ho Chi Minh to discuss ways of ending the war.

1985 is the 100th anniversary of the birth of A. J. Muste. He may well have been one of our most influential and prominent graduates. For 80 years the response of his alma mater has been ambivalent at best, in the way that institutions often respond to their saints. Saints take seriously what they have been taught in ways that their institutions wish they would not. But saints spring from the same roots as their institutions, and sooner or later those saints must be taken seriously. There have been times of periodic rediscovery of Muste at Hope College, followed by times of almost studied indifference. This is a good time to look again at the influence Hope College had on Muste, and the influence he has had on some of us. Muste is a graduate

we can be proud of for the same reason he is someone who makes us uncomfortable. For if he makes us uncomfortable it is because he chose to take seriously what he was taught at Hope College.

Someone said of Muste, "This is an awfully smooth world and it contains very few men of absolute principle. A. J. stood so far on that absolute end of the spectrum of principle that he's influenced thousands of people to at least move in his direction, and they have influenced others. He builds up everybody's backbone."

I think this is the key to Muste and to his appeal. He was indeed a man of principle. He was consistently vocal in his opposition to war—all war. He spoke out against World War I, World War II, Korea and Viet Nam. He spoke out against nuclear war and the cold war, sparing no one. He handed out leaflets in Red Square in Moscow as well as in Washington, D.C. As a man of principle, virtually incapable of pragmatic short-term politics, he irritated his friends as well as his opponents. Yet he was someone people could trust precisely because he was a man of principle, and as a result it was he who was able to bring together divergent factions of the peace movement to present a united front against the war in Viet Nam.

I am not a man of absolute principle like Muste. I wish I were such a person, but I am not. Time and again I have compromised my values because it seemed like a good idea at the time or even because I wasn't thinking very carefully about values when it happened. I'm glad for Muste for the hope he gives me and for the times I have stood on my principles because people like him have shown it could be done. He wrote some good essays that have helped me think through my position on war and civil rights and movements for liberation. But Muste means the most to me as the man who went beyond "This is what I think" to "This is what I must do." Such a person witnesses powerfully to those of us who share Muste's principles. But he also witnesses to those who have forgotten those principles in the day-to-day rush for

short term "practical" solutions.

Few of those teachers at Hope College in 1905 could be sure what influence they had had on A. J., and none of them could have imagined that people they would never even know would feel its effect. But measured against the words of Hope College's own catalog, Muste was one of our success stories. He was a genuine example of "students and teachers vitally concerned with a relevant faith that changes lives and transforms society."

Pacifist's 100th marked

Hope College observed the centenary of the birth of one of its most prominent graduates, A. J. Muste, on April 8 with an address by Dr. Jo Ann Robinson, professor of history at Morgan State University and the author of a biography of Muste published in 1982.

Robinson's address was titled "A. J. Muste: An Historical Remembrance and Affirmation."

Her book, *Abraham Went Out: A Biography of A. J. Muste* (Temple University Press), comes to the conclusion that "Muste was unique." No other dissenter of his day, she writes, "was shaped by a range of influences so vast as to include the orthodoxy of Reformed theology, the radicalism of Marxist thought and the perfectionist ethic of Christian pacifism."

The centenary lecture was organized as an inaugural activity in a series of events at Hope to recognize Muste. A reading room in the College's proposed \$8.5 million library, scheduled for construction during 1986-87, will be named in Muste's honor and funds are being sought for the establishment of an annual A. J. Muste Peace Lectureship.

Donald L. Cronkite is associate professor of biology and chairman of a committee formed at Hope to seek recognition for Alumnus A. J. Muste (1895-1967), one of America's most prominent pacifists. Cronkite holds a Ph.D. from Indiana University. He joined the faculty in 1978.

