
Book Reviews

Miriam Davidson
Convictions of the Heart:
Jim Corbett and the
Sanctuary Movement
Tucson: The University of
Arizona Press, 1988

Reviewed by Charles Stastny

The name of Jim Corbett has become practically synonymous with the American Sanctuary movement of the 1980s. A Quaker humanist and Arizona goatherd with a graduate degree in philosophy from Harvard, Corbett was a founder of this movement to provide haven for refugees denied asylum by the U.S. government. Together with Presbyterian minister John Fife — whose south Tucson barrio church was the first to declare itself a "sanctuary" (March 1982) — Corbett started a network of religious sanctuary institution that eventually reached from the Mexican to the Canadian border. As the struggle over United States refugee and foreign policy in Central America developed during the Reagan years, Corbett remained a dominant figure both as activist and philosopher. When the U.S. government decided to attempt to crush the movement, Jim Corbett became one of eleven defendants tried on the charge of "alien smuggling" in the seven-months-long (1985-86) Tucson trial. The Arizona jury convicted eight of the defendants while acquitting Corbett and two others.

The present book, written by a journalist who is herself a Quaker, provides a lively narrative of the events leading up to the Tucson trial and of the trial itself — within the context of the internal and external struggles of the evolving sanctuary movement. The most important internal issue involved the differences in philosophy and approach between the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America (CRTFCA) and a similar task force of the Tucson Ecumenical Council (TEC), the latter coming to be dominated by the philosophical perspectives of Jim Corbett. As Davidson points out, the factional conflict had its roots in the differing

origins of the two groups of activists. The Arizona people, frustrated in their efforts to effect changes in the treatment of refugees through established administrative and legal channels, had created the initial stations of the "underground railroad". Their immediate aim was to provide the asylum that the government was refusing to grant for those who arrived on their doorstep. The Chicago centre, on the other hand, was formed in the early 1980s with the explicit objective of challenging U.S. foreign policy. Only later, hesitantly, did it find itself (at Corbett's request) playing a leading role in "running a refugee-relay network" on a nation-wide scale. The TEC people favoured an essentially apolitical humanitarian approach, whereas the CRTFCA wanted to emphasize "public sanctuary" — sanctuary for the minority of "politicals" among the asylum-seekers willing to go public. Davidson quotes from the January 1985 *Basta* (the CRTFCA's journal): "We see little benefit in a sanctuary movement that is a mile wide and an inch deep."

The main external issue concerned the interplay between the sanctuary movement and the American government. Two months prior to the public declaration of sanctuary by Rev. Fife's Tucson church, Corbett addressed a National Council of Churches conference as follows: "With people in our midst being hunted down and shipped back, ... the fate of the undocumented refugees depends on the religious community's participation and leadership in helping them avoid capture." He then urged that, given the experiences of this century, "the right to aid fugitives from government-sponsored terror" must be "upheld in action by churches — regardless of the cost in terms of imprisoned clergy."

For Corbett, sanctuary was not civil disobedience, as the Chicago task force would have it, but rather "civil initiative" — on the practical level, a means of opposing a government that was violating its own law as well as international law. At the heart of his political (and theological) philosophy of "covenant as sanctuary" was his insistence that the decision to enter into "protective community with the poor and persecuted" must include the aim of "holding the state accountable for its violations of human rights". In his

view, since refugees cannot be "illegal aliens" and since refugee rights are spelled out in international law (Nuremberg Principles and Geneva Conventions), the civil initiative he is advocating becomes an affirmative duty of "good citizenship".

The Reagan administration evidently became increasingly dismayed at the growth of the sanctuary movement, particularly within mainline churches. At the end of 1983, the State Department's principal spokesman on Central America virtually admitted the government was "losing the battle for the high moral ground ... when a lot of church groups are opposing us and saying we don't have it." Meantime, there were apparently divided counsels and much hesitation at the top levels on how to respond so as not to "create more martyrs". But by 1984, as Davidson describes in detail, the ground for a crackdown was being prepared through an investigation marked by surveillance and infiltration.

Then comes the centerpiece of this book — the trial itself, which Davidson covered for the *Christian Science Monitor*. Corbett, along with his co-defendants, was profoundly disappointed that the presiding judge, Earl Carroll, ordered the exclusion from jury consideration of all of the substantive issues, including international law, the situation in Central America, and U.S. asylum policy. The sanctuary workers were prosecuted as "alien smugglers", whose motives presumably were no different than those of *coyotes*. The author describes the frustration on the sanctuary defence side as all of its motions were summarily rejected — except for the claim that this was a case of "selective prosecution" by the government; this last seemed to trouble Judge Carroll, who heard arguments on the issue (with jury excluded) and waited until after the final verdicts to rule against the defence motion. Only in their opening statements did the sixteen defence attorneys — while drawing admonishments and warnings of contempt citations from Judge Carroll — manage to allude to the defendants' motives in sheltering refugees in churches and homes.

The star of the prosecution's five-month presentation of evidence was a Mexican *coyote*, with a history of smuggling farm workers, who had been recruit-