

'The Origins and Development of the Oxford Group (Moral Re-Armament)'
Preface to David Belden's thesis

A lifetime ago, David Belden wrote a thesis on 'The Origins and Development of the Oxford Group (Moral Re-Armament)' for his doctorate at Oxford. He had grown up in 'an MRA family', his parents both 'worked full-time', as he had too, before deciding to take a little distance. His doctorate is a precious blend of proximity and distance. Years later, it was scanned and passed around in digital form, a kind of samizdat among those trying to understand the history of MRA and now IofC.

For a long time, it sat on my hard disk un-read. Then I finally got round to reading it and I was rivetted. I learnt a great deal about Frank Buchman and his origins, where his ideas came from, the evangelical 'milieu' of the pre-First World War years. Rather to my surprise, I found that I shared most of David's tentative conclusions, but I also found many fresh insights. David was not settling scores, but trying to understand, an honest search by an honest searcher. His thesis was written and submitted in 1976. So he was able to interview many of the founding generation who worked closely with Frank Buchman, including his own father. Of course, most of them have since died.

Decades later, for some years, David 'animated' a forum, an irregular 'underground' newsletter publication trying to further discussion and dialogue between those who had left the movement, as he had, and some still on the 'inside'. Some had been, have been, deeply hurt. And for some, simply to express the hurt may have helped towards healing. Who in life is unhurt? Who is not the victim of others' mistakes? May at least some of those we have wittingly and unwittingly hurt find the grace to forgive us! As a movement that talked (and practised, at least to some extent) 'change', we have been slow to examine critically our collective behaviour as a movement, to see and understand that any and every group of people, collective, create something of a culture, a mould, with pressures to conform. Which is, of course, in tension with the encouragement to find and follow an individual calling.

David and I share the same birthday, one year apart. We've never worked together, but our paths have crossed and we've corresponded. I strongly felt that his academic work from all those years ago could still interest a contemporary audience, for those who would like to understand better this rather unusual movement. David and I share a conviction that whatever mistakes were made, there were and are in this story some important lessons for those who want to contribute to a better world, who feel deeply the need to stress the human factor and its importance.

As a footnote for researchers and scholars, I would conclude by saying that there is a most impressive bibliography, and some precious appendices. One on estimated numbers of full-time workers, and another with a time-line for Frank Buchman's travels, from 1902, until his death in 1961. Last summer, during the Caux Forum, my wife and I had a meal with an Australian academic working on a history of Moral Re-Armament in Australia. 'How many times did Buchman visit our country?' she asked. Neither of us knew, but I told her, I can send you a copy of David Belden's thesis, and in Appendix 3 you'll find the answer in seconds, and she did!

Andrew Stallybrass, 8.11.2018