

MRA's Battle of Britain

As Christian organisations go, Moral Re-Armament is quite extraordinary. It is an amorphous creature of world-wide influence at impressive political and industrial levels but without any kind of conventional organisational structure. It does little to pursue publicity and yet is said to receive nearly £1 million a year through public donations.

Its supporters, from every class and caste of life, can be numbered in their many thousands, but they are without any established form of local or national leadership.

Its global fieldwork is carried out about 800 full-time members - mainly highly professional men but few, if any, with any theological qualifications - who have dedicated their lives to spreading the MRA gospel of "four absolute moral standards" - honesty, purity, unselfishness and love.

They spend endless time and energy in bringing together people from kaleidoscopic walks of life and origin to encourage a greater understanding of working together in peace and harmony to the glory of God.

And yet it is probably unique in provoking in some Christian quarters a nose-sniffing disdain that clearly implies all is not well, although its critics seem frequently unable to analyse precisely the cause of their concern.

It may well be an expression of discomfort experienced by the establishment intellect at any Christian organisation which doesn't conform

to an institutional stereotype.

MRA supporters themselves are inclined to believe that its image still suffers, especially in the eyes of its more older critics, from the final tremors of a gung-ho spiritual militancy which reflected its immense popularity among the young more than forty years ago.

Others recognise the damage, compounded by repetition on the Christian gossip circuit and inevitably whenever MRA is the subject of media coverage, caused by the publication of a newspaper interview with MRA's American founder, Dr. Frank Buchman, who gave birth to the movement in 1921 when it was known as the Oxford Group.

In the *New York World-Telegram* on August 26, 1936, Buchman was quoted as saying: "I thank heaven for a man like Adolf Hitler who built up a front-line of defence against the anti-Christ of Communism."

In the socio-political circumstances of that time, such comments were not particularly controversial. There were no indications of a Europe dominated by a pure Aryan race, and the enormous sufferings they were to unleash, were known only in the madness of his mind.

In that same year, on September 17 in the *Daily Express*, Lloyd George ludicrously described Hitler as "the George Washington of Germany, the man who won for his country independence from all his oppressors."

A year earlier, Winston Churchill pinpointed the world's uncertainty about Hitler's military intentions by writing: "We cannot tell whether Hitler will be the man who will once again let loose upon the world another war in which civilisation will irretrievably succumb, or whether he will go down in history as the man who restored honour and peace of mind to the great Germanic nation

and brought it back serene, helpful and strong, to the forefront of the European family circle."

However, Buchman's comparatively innocent comment was to be used by Labour MP and journalist Tom Driberg, a homosexual of singularly perverted practices and later directly implicated in espionage activities for the Russians, to denigrate the MRA's aims in a pamphlet entitled "MRA - A Critical Examination", which was issued at the World Book Fair on June 15, 1964.

Buchman's comment, taken out of the context of its time and circumstances by Driberg and then subsequently corrupted beyond recognition by others, has been used time and again to devalue the MRA's pursuit of absolute moral standards.

A classic example of how it has been exploited to the detriment of MRA was given in *The Sunday Times* of May 28 when, under the headline "Sect Wants Police to Join its Moral Crusade," a controversial news story claimed that "a religious movement with a mission to establish a worldwide puritanical moral order is trying to win the support of British police force."

Midway, the story read: "Buchman gained notoriety when he said 'Thank God for Hitler' in a newspaper interview." This totally misleading distortion was essential to the story, whose theme was to clearly imply that MRA is a right-wing pro-Nazi religious organisation which is trying to establish some sort of covert association with British police forces.

And without the infamy of that Nazi link, the story's newsworthiness would have been greatly devalued. To reinforce the implication that MRA is up to no good in its association with senior police officers, the newspaper went to the Methodist peer, Lord Soper, who said: "I have

known about them all along. They are a menace. It looks as if they are trying to make a comeback." Regrettably, the newspaper offered no evidence to support the threat of its "menace."

The depth and substance of the story is perhaps best assessed by a quote from a Supt. Derek Lane, head of community relations for Avon and Somerset, who has in the past declined an invitation to attend an MRA-organised conference on inner city crime.

He stated: "I am not happy about them as an organisation. I'm not sure what they are about, and I don't like things like that."

Neither *The Sunday Times*, nor Driberg in his pamphlet, took much heed of a 126-page Gestapo report, *Die Oxfordgruppenbewegung*, written in 1939 but published in 1946, in which the Oxford Group is denounced because "they encourage their members to place themselves fully beneath the Christian cross and to oppose the cross of the Swastika . . . The Group as a whole constitutes an attack upon the nationalism of the State and demands the utmost watchfulness on the part of the State."

Despite the flagrant inaccuracies and disinformation of general media coverage, MRA continues to flourish. Buchman, who died in 1961, said of MRA membership: "You can't join. You can't resign. You are in or out according to the way you live."

Its very strength seems to be in its loosely structured network of members who use their initiative and enterprise in organising conferences to examine and discuss the need for absolute moral standards in industry, politics and the world at large.

The conferences - and training courses entitled "Studies in Effective Leadership" to emphasise moral standards in politics and industry and



Bill Jaeger - indefatigable MRA Ambassador to International Labour.

which include current affairs and voluntary Bible studies - are held at MRA's magnificent centres in India, Japan, Australia, Switzerland, France, America and the UK.

Men like Bill Jaeger, an indefatigable 76 years old, born in Stockport, Cheshire, the son of a working-class cabinet maker, travel the world, sometimes at their own expense, to spread the ideals of MRA.

In October, 1932, at the age of 20, his plans to become a Baptist minister were swept aside by an introduction to the Oxford Group. "It was through the Oxford Group that I learnt how to listen to the Holy Spirit and bring a new moral standard into my life," he said.

After four years at Baptist college, he was invited to a Baptist Church in Lancashire, "but I felt my calling from God was to take His word into the working classes in the East End of London."

"There were terrible fights between the fascists and the communists. I won over some of those people to Christ. It was great training."

In 1936, when Moral Re-Armament was officially launched in Britain at East Ham town hall, Bill chaired the meeting. "About three thousand people turned up for that

first meeting, plus leading politicians, mayors from about 26 local boroughs, and the world press.

"At the annual meeting the following year, about 7,000 people arrived and we had to have overflow meetings in a nearby Methodist church and a dance hall."

Since then, Bill has met major politicians, industrialists and trade union leaders in most countries and with one object in mind: to bring about greater understanding through the qualities of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love.

He said: "We must apply God's teachings to everything we do day and night and no matter where we are. I have never been on a salary but I have been able to support my wife, to whom I have been married for 43 years, because God has always looked after our needs."

His American wife, Clara, has chronicled their lives together in her autobiography, "The Philadelphia Rebel", published by Grosvenor Books.

Added Bill: "If you are doing what God tells you and you see the urgent needs of a nation, you don't bother about your own problems. You just go and do it."

Terry Lovell