

A challenge to the Church and a dilemma

Moral Re-Armament and the Soviet collapse

A former editor of this magazine, R. D. Kernohan, finds that Moral Re-Armament has more to commend it than he once believed and may well have a distinctive role to play in the changing European scene.

IT IS appropriate to begin reflections on Moral Re-Armament with a confession. Not surprisingly, a movement devoted to absolutes of purity, unselfishness, honesty and love often provokes confessions of failure.

When Frank Buchman, MRA's founder, died in 1961, I reckoned the movement might not survive, except as a footnote to religious history. That was a reasonable worldly-wise judgement, not especially hostile as journalistic hostility to MRA used to go. Even now, I don't understand the irritation that the "Oxford Group" (as some old hands still called it) aroused.

Sometimes it may have derived from particular encounters, sometimes from political dogmatism or resentment at calls to repent. But it may just have been irritation at the way media people were pursued.

Better prepared

I first encountered MRA when a pair of emissaries arrived at my office in the old *Glasgow Herald* Buchanan Street building, when I was half-way into a leader. The clock was racing like a referee's watch when you're behind and into injury time.

Those were the days when a doorman would let respectable-looking visitors wander around in search of any journalist whose name they could remember.

I was sceptical about MRA publicity about hurricanes of change sweeping Brazil or New Guinea, and about its alternative "ideology" to Communism.

I even used the argument that its good intentions were flawed by lack of a

doctrinal, evangelical Christian basis. Buchman's faith and inspiration were Christian, but he led "an expeditionary force from all faiths and races".

I have changed my mind. That itself is unimportant, but the reasons are not. First, MRA proved itself better prepared than the Churches for the moral as well as political and economic collapse of Communism.

Secondly, MRA provides one forum within which co-operation between different kinds of Christian and between Christians and others is possible without doctrinal compromise, surrender to syncretism, or the stilted artificiality of formal ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue.

Reconciliation

And thirdly, the Christians I encounter in MRA, from the Kirk and far beyond, seem to show the faith in their lives and from their hearts.

MRA analyses of conflicts that cry out for reconciliation — in South Africa, Yugoslavia or Ireland — may not always be realistic or profound enough. But reconciliation has to begin where conflicts begin, in the heart; and those who follow Jesus have to do what they know to be right, not what they are sure will be effective.

MRA's main recent emphasis has been in seeking the right response to the revolutions in Eastern Europe, although it has also brought Germans and Poles together for the reconciliation which history makes difficult and Soviet policy obstructed.

This time it has avoided the oversimplification which sometimes seemed to mark its aspirations — so much so that it may occasionally pro-

vide a platform for enthusiastic nationalists.

But those who want to assist reconciliation need to discover the full force and depth of feelings suppressed at home and concealed abroad under Communism — sometimes with the collaboration of Churches which reckoned conformity the price of survival.

The World Council of Churches, for example, never addressed itself to these tensions, any more than it admitted the reality of Soviet religious persecution. And anyone in the Kirk who feels exempt from such strictures might like to re-read the report of the Kirk's last special committee on Communism, both for what it said and what it ignored.

At MRA seminars and conferences over the past two years at Caux (high above Lake Geneva) the dangers and hatreds left over from the Communist collapse have been only too apparent.

No-one who had been there could be surprised by the break-up of Yugoslavia or, more important, of the old Soviet Union.

Soviet Christians

While the Churches were still listening to the cautious, conformist dignitaries who had compromised with the Communist State, MRA was meeting in Russia and inviting to Caux a much wider range of Soviet Christians and others: academics, ex-dissidents, journalists, even secular people who had come through the system but were moving beyond it.

They offer no glib formulas about the future. They may disagree strongly with each other and can be scathing of political leaders — and Church ones:

"Our hierarchy are too busy blessing new banks and swimming pools to concentrate on Gospel teaching."

Some suffered in the recent past, but those who have most to forgive are often most forgiving.

And if I owed nothing else to MRA it was this. When the reactionary Communist coup was sprung last summer I was able to pray not just for Russia and the other nationalities in the abstract but by name for those I had met and for whom I feared: for Gassan Gussejnov whose mixed Azeri and Jewish background makes him warn of the dangers of nationalism; for Denis Dragounsky, a Russian whom I remember for his awkward enthusiasm for things Georgian; for Tanya and Viktor Popkov, who suffered persecution after finding Christianity and the Orthodox tradition through Russian literature and now run an "unofficial theology faculty" for Christians of any denomination with 60 evening students and 6000 taking correspondence courses.

Rummaging through my notes to check a spelling I see I noted to myself: "You have no faith compared to this lot." But at least I could pray for them and others by name, when it mattered most.

And, in a way the Churches never did, MRA recognised the extent to which Soviet failures have been not just political and economic but moral. "Soviet man" was not just supposedly liberated from economic exploitation. He was to be morally superior, a new creation, pure and spotless — and instead was cynical, opportunist, exposed to old sins with new corruptions and utterly disillusioned.

If the Church had listened to those who told the truth about religion under Communism (notably Keston College) this would have been no surprise. But the Church listened to those who were afraid to speak and dimmed its eyes to the signs of the times.

Spontaneity

But there are profounder ways in which, if my MRA friends will forgive me for saying so, the movement poses a dilemma for Christians.

No-one who shares in the ethos and spirit of Caux, with its themes of confession, repentance, forgiveness and prayer (whatever form the prayers may take) can regard it as anything but religious experience.

Yet, superficially at least, it separates that experience from worship, sacrament and biblical preaching. On a Caux Sunday the Protestants go up the hill to one church and the Roman Catholics across the road to another; many participants would not be at home in either.

Yet when I have heard the Word preached there (by an Estonian, say, or a Swede) and we have shared in the Lord's Supper I have had no doubt that, in the words of the Confession of Faith, we have inwardly and spiritually received and fed upon Christ crucified

and the benefits of his death. And it equips us to encounter the absent friends.

The challenge and dilemma arise from the way (in my experience at least) that there is an spontaneity and lack of self-consciousness in the personal ecumenical and inter-faith relationships missing in the formal structures set up by the Churches.

The ultimate reason may be that the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways and performs wonders, but there are two more immediately definable causes.

First, when Christians meet non-Christians in this mood of response to God's will they surrender nothing, but discover much. This is not inter-faith dialogue overshadowed by different doctrines but the discovery that much

holy ground is also common ground.

Secondly, when Christians share together and work together in this setting they inevitably, if sometimes tacitly, recognise the practical irrelevance of the clerical obsession with orders and Church order which has such a stranglehold on the ecumenical movement and inevitably obstructs full sharing of the Lord's Supper.

But perhaps there is a sacramental quality in shared experience and especially shared forgiveness and guidance.

There can only be two sacraments in the life and worship of the Church, but outward and temporal signs of an inward and enduring grace — Augustine's definition of sacraments — are surely not confined to forms of worship.