

## A review of the present condition of a once vehement religious movement

# MRA: a leaderless crusade in decline

Seven years ago next month Peter Howard, the second and the last internationally acknowledged leader of Moral Re-Armament, died suddenly of virus pneumonia in Lima, Peru. Since his death the militant revivalist religious movement, which was founded by the late Dr Frank Buchman in 1921 and led by Howard after its founder's death in 1961, has passed out of most minds.

Few people now would decry MRA, or The Oxford Group as it was known, as forcefully as the late A. P. Herbert and others did in the thirties. Few would see it as a secret, almost sinister, attempt to subvert the world—as some did when Buchman and Howard toured the world advocating its particular style of ascetic evangelical Christianity based on four "absolute" standards of morality.

### A shadow of its former self

What has happened to MRA in the past seven years? After talking to more than a score of its present followers as well as former supporters, it is clear that the movement is a shadow of its former self. It creates less public controversy because it intrudes less into public life.

For although MRA in Britain, where it was founded and is legally known as The Oxford Group, continues enthusiastically to present plays and films in addition to touring the world with a band of supporters; in the United States and parts of Europe the movement is seriously divided. Indeed, without an acknowledged world leader, its former frequent public statements of faith and intention—always a distinctive feature of its activities—have dramatically declined.

Nevertheless, in spite of its setbacks MRA continues to exist. It has not crumpled entirely. Although accurately describing its activities is difficult, there can be no doubt of the individual enthusiasms of its supporters.

"It is hard to pin down what MRA achieves and what it does not achieve", one full-time worker explained. Since the movement publishes no figures for its members or supporters it is impossible to assess its influence or attraction at any time. "We are not interested in recruiting membership", a supporter said.

It seems clear that the active support for the movement has declined. In the past it was claimed that "millions" followed the principles of MRA; but now far fewer people appear to attend its public gatherings than did so in the thirties.

In July, 1936, for example, 25,000 supporters crowded the British Industries Fair building, while in 1937 more than 100,000 met in Utrecht in Holland. Fewer people now appear to attend its mass meetings, and at

its European conference centre at Caux in Switzerland only 3,000 people attended in 1971, less than the average annual attendance since MRA acquired the former Caux Palace Hotel in 1946.

The Annual Report of the British Group for 1970/71 shows that there are 291 full-time workers in this country and a further 87 British nationals working abroad. In Switzerland there are 110 full-time workers and 90 in West Germany. But these figures do not, necessarily, indicate the respective strengths of the movement now, or how many supporters, rather than full-time workers, it now has.

But it is in the United States that the fundamental division in MRA has appeared. The traditional MRA movement there has been almost completely replaced by an organization called Up With People, founded in 1965. This is an educational rather than a religious organization and sends groups of young people on singing tours of the world. So far more than 3,000 have travelled with the group.

There are also Up With People groups in Denmark, West Germany and Italy, as well as a small one in Britain.

Up With People is viewed with considerable concern and dislike by traditional MRA workers. They regard its aims as a dilution of the movement's faith. "It would never have happened if Howard had been alive", one British worker said.

In addition, the *New York Times* reported last year that Mackinac College, the movement's 32-acre campus overlooking Lake Huron, had been closed for lack of financial support. They also disclosed that all the MRA offices and training centres, except the New York headquarters, were being closed. Contributions to the movement have also steadily declined in the United States.

### Revenue still going up

In Britain, however, the movement is strong by comparison. In 1970/71, according to their annual report, total revenue amounted to £228,137, £14,000 more than the previous year. There have been a series of conferences on industry, religion and for young people.

The Westminster Theatre in London, which is operated with MRA help, continues to put on plays written by supporters of the movement, all of them with strong moral messages. A paperback edition of *Peter Howard: Life and Letters* written by his daughter Mrs Anne Wolridge-Gordon, wife of the MP for East Aberdeen, sold more than 35,000 copies in the year. More than 100,000 copies of Peter Howard's booklet *Britain and the Beast* were circulated free to local councillors, among other publishing ventures.

The movement also claims to have made positive achievements. In particular they claim to have helped to settle the question of the nationality of the South Tyrol, to have banished gangsterism in the port of Rio de

Janeiro, as well as playing a considerable part in settling a number of industrial disputes in Britain. It is, however, difficult to assess the validity of these claims as they are rarely publicized at the time.

But it is in altering individuals' perceptions of themselves, and thereby changing their attitude to the world that MRA claims its principal effects. "We aim to give people a view and a way of life", a supporter explained.

It is in this field, however, that the principal criticisms of the movement are often voiced. In particular it is often alleged by MRA's opponents that it is behind reactionary and conservative groups in society; and it is clear that the movement's moral attitude could be described as conservative. Criticism of the movement for its anti-communism, for example, is sharpened by Dr Frank Buchman's personal statements in the late thirties.

### Opponents of all selfishness

Individual MRA supporters are defensive about their political views. "We believe communism is wrong and more importantly has failed. But we are not anti-communist or anti-capitalist, we are against the selfishness in both", a supporter said.

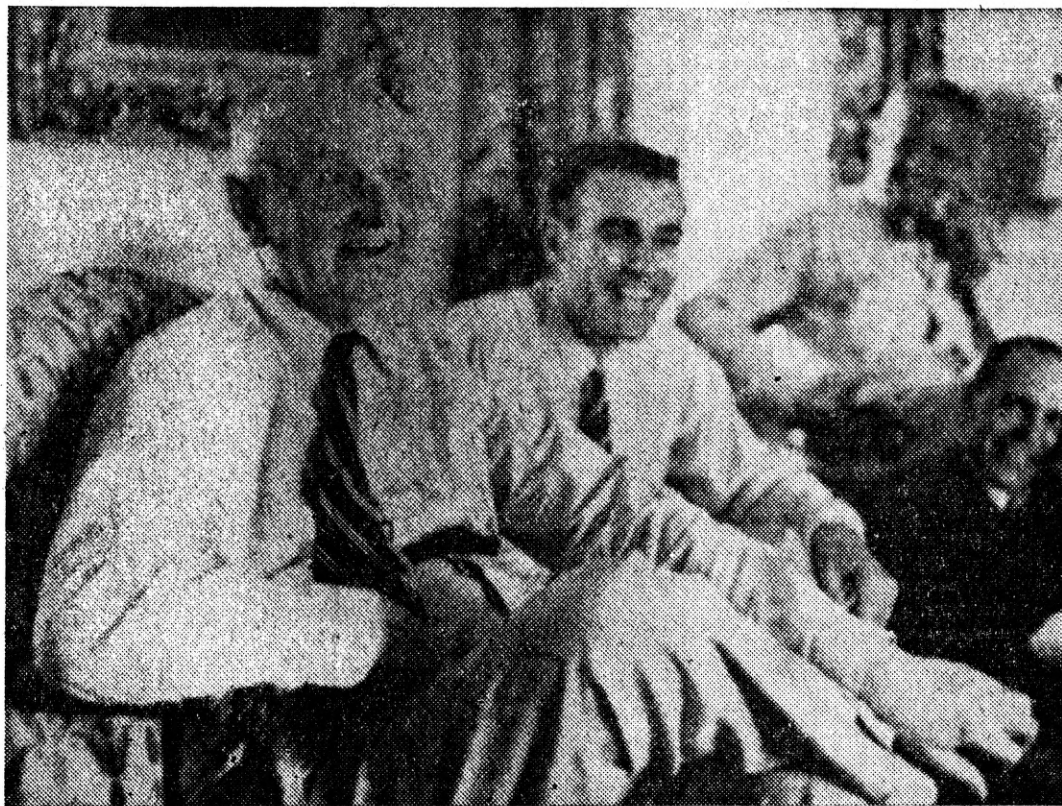
They are strongly against any criticism of the movement for being directly against anything, although they admit that its four "absolute" standards of absolute purity, absolutely honesty, absolute unselfishness and absolute love do not help its supporters to fit easily into modern permissive society.

"But if we can be lumped with Mary Whitehouse in the anti-permissive camp, people think they have us," one supporter said. "This is only a small part of what we are against."

The view of MRA as a broadly conservative force is bolstered by the tone of a letter from 1,088 civic leaders supporting the movement last year. One paragraph read: "There are those in this land who, in the name of culture and freedom, seem determined to use the mass media to destroy the Christian faith and morals and to foist self-indulgence on the nation. The moral anarchy which they propagate directly affects the character and home life of our people. It is the first step to industrial and economic breakdown and can lead to dictatorship."

### Arguments with the Catholics

MRA has also been accused in the past of anti-Catholicism. There have certainly been occasions in the past 20 years when arguments have broken out between the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the movement. The Church viewed it with some concern, but as one supporter put it: "There was at one time a certain reserve in the Catholic Church, but that reserve is diminishing."



Peter Howard and Dr Frank Buchman in America in 1960.

Dr Frank Buchman was born in Pennsburg, Pennsylvania in 1878, and was ordained as a Lutheran Minister in 1902. He later reported a spiritual experience while in Keswick in the Lake District in 1908, which formed the basis of his beliefs. In 1921 he founded the First Century Christian Fellowship based on those beliefs, which then became The Oxford Group.

The first qualification for followers of the movement which Buchman founded is a dedication to the four absolute standards of morality. There is also an informal process of "sharing" experiences, in which the penitent explains his sins and perplexities to other followers; and the crucial period of "quiet" during which followers write down thoughts that may have been divinely inspired. These tenets of the movement's basic beliefs are unshaken.

### Dictatorship under God's spirit

In 1934 Buchman defined his objective by stating, "The Oxford Group is a Christian revolution, whose concern is vital Christianity. Its aim is a new social order under the dictatorship of the spirit of God." But in 1938 at East Ham Town Hall he launched Moral Re-Armament, which slightly changed the style of the movement from personal conversion towards international action.

It is the element of personal commitment and conversion in Dr Buchman's beliefs that has caused the most vehement objections to the movement. One former supporter of the philosophy said: "They use personal friendship like a truncheon to involve you." Indeed some supporters now admit they may have been a little overzealous in their efforts for personal conversion, but they believe as one put it: "Our ideas are spread by personal contagion."

Nevertheless some people view MRA with scepticism be-

cause of the enthusiastic efforts of its supporters to convert anyone that comes into contact with them; a type of approach which makes any conversation about the movement's aims complicated.

Another persistent criticism of the movement has been its rigorous standards, which prevent supporters drinking, smoking or being sexually promiscuous. "We have no rules whatsoever", one supporter said, but he admitted that members who drank, smoked or were promiscuous would probably not fit happily into the movement.

### Source of finance is criticized

A further criticism of the movement, which is often heard, is of its source of finance. It is often alleged, for example, that the movement fails to produce accounts—although in reality this is untrue—and that it supports a luxurious style of life, involving regular "house parties" for large numbers. The British group's accounts for 1970-71 reveal that they received £139,388 in gifts and legacies from individuals in that year.

This money, coupled with the proceeds from sale of property and the income from plays and films, is used to support the movement's workers. These are paid no salary, but are—apparently—given some help with living and travelling expenses. Undeniably there is not a vast sum of money to support the efforts of the full-time staff.

In the face of this persistent criticism supporters of the movement retain a certain paranoia. "Choose anything nasty and say it about MRA", one said. "No one is ever neutral about what we do, they are either entirely for it or against it." The supporters feel, for example, that there are those who have a vested interest in stopping their work, and that their enemies circulate malicious rumours about them.

Indeed with some arrogance

they cast themselves in the role of Christian martyrs. As one put it, "The fact that we are hated does not prove that we are in the true Christian tradition, but if we were not we could not be."

Formed as a religious movement in the evangelical tradition, MRA came into existence—at least implicitly—as a campaign against the decadence and decay in international society. This was partly seen as stemming from the influence of communism. Now, however, this particular preoccupation is no longer so fashionable, and its shibboleths have become outdated to many people, and therefore irrelevant. This, to some extent, accounts for its public decline.

Undeniably MRA remains a claustrophobic organization. Speaking to its supporters is difficult, rather like conversing with a native tribe who do not speak your language. It is, for example, generally difficult, to escape the impression that each member is attempting to convert whoever expresses an interest in their work. This itself creates a suspicion that the movement is attempting to subvert the beliefs of the most ordinary people.

### Members remain enthusiastic

Now, more than a decade after Buchman's death, individual members remain as enthusiastic as ever. But Peter Howard's death came as a considerable shock to them, and as a result some of the movement's drive to appeal to a mass audience has diminished. For without a recognized internationally acknowledged leader as a public focus for attention, MRA's attraction has declined throughout the world, which leads the observer to the inescapable conclusion that it remains a shadow of its former vehement and campaigning self.

Geoffrey Wansell