

# The pioneering spirit behind MRA by Garth Lean.

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Lloyd George once remarked that the biographers from whom a public man has most to fear are of two kinds—the excessively derogatory and the excessively laudatory. He added that what he would most enjoy reading, were it possible, would be his obituaries, as the writers of such tend to “preserve a slight bias in favour of their subject”.

Frank Buchman, the initiator of the Oxford Group and Moral Re-Armament who was born 100 years ago yesterday, suffered both brands of excess in his lifetime. While Mr A. P. Herbert, for instance, called him a charlatan in the House of Commons, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* described him, on his eightieth birthday, as having become “more and more the conscience of the world”.

At his death, too, the usual rule did not seem to operate—at least in Britain. While Robert Schuman spoke of the world’s “irreparable loss”, much of the British press contented itself with labelling him pro-Nazi.

Frank Buchman was born in the tight-knit Swiss-German community of Pennsburg, Pennsylvania, and was always intended for the Lutheran ministry. His first charge was a down-trodden district of Philadelphia, where he also founded a hospice for poor boys. A bitter disagreement with the business-trustees of the hospice led to his resignation in 1908.

In the following year, during a sermon in a small Keswick chapel, he encountered in sharp reality the love of Christ upon the Cross and the gap which his bitterness against these trustees placed between them. He wrote to apologize to them and began to help other men, not from a position of rectitude but from the experience of his own sin net by grace.

Seven years as YMCA secretary in Pennsylvania State College and three working with the evangelical movement in India and China left him with definite convictions. He felt that much mass evangelism was

“like hunting rabbits with a brass band” and that quiet person to person work was more important.

He resumed his work among American students and Henry van Dusen, the future head of New York’s Union Seminary, in the *Atlantic Monthly*, commented: “Of the fifty ablest young ministers on the Atlantic seaboard today somewhere near a half were directed into their vocation through his influence at the time.”

By now Buchman had worked out—or collected squirrel-like—the principles upon which he worked all his life. In Philadelphia he had first tested for himself the validity of the old truth that where God guides He provides. At Penn State he had begun the practice of two-way prayer—what St Teresa of Avila spoke of as a “conversation with God”—something which he believed anyone could in some measure experience.

At about that time, too, he accepted the “four absolutes” of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love as a serviceable summary of the moral implications of the Sermon on the Mount.

He had also absorbed some things of the triumphant—some today would say “triumphalist”—faith that the Holy Spirit could change anyone and even, in John R. Mott’s heady phrase, that “the world could be won for Christ in a generation”. Just before coming to Oxford in 1921—having resigned his lectureship at Hartford Theological Seminary—he had received the compelling thought that he should aim at nothing less than “the remaking of the world”.

By 1932, when I met his friends in Oxford, about one hundred undergraduates and dons were working in the Oxford Group there and in the thirties Buchman initiated sizeable Christian movements in most western European countries, as well as in Canada, South Africa, Australia and elsewhere.

The unregenerate Mr Muggeridge, in *The Thirties*, des-

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cribed it as the only successful revival of the period and Bishop Berggrav, so soon to be a hero of the Norwegian resistance, spoke of it as “the greatest movement since the Reformation”.

Even then, in fact, it was far more ecumenical than that description would assume, and, after the launching of Moral Re-Armament in 1938—and particularly after the war—the work became world-wide. One of Buchman’s most constant characteristics was a keen dissatisfaction with his work at any and every moment.

The launching of Moral Re-Armament was partly an effort to meet the needs of the hour as war loomed up and partly an expression of his unease that many who had found personal freedoms through the Oxford Group were settling down to enjoy its fruits and fellowships instead of grappling with the challenges of the day. For Buchman felt that the Christian must fight to enthrone Christ at the power centres of nations.

When confronted with this challenge, many British and American leaders replied: “Why don’t you work where change is really needed? Go and change Hitler.” Friends like the Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, warned Buchman of the risk to his reputation, something he never cared much about.

Being convinced that even Hitler was not beyond the range of God’s love and power

to change, he penetrated where he could, never met Hitler, totally failed to redirect the Nazi purpose and is, to this day, frequently called pro-Nazi.

This charge, which is all that many people know of him, was based on a single phrase in a New York evening paper interview where Buchman is quoted as “thanking heaven for a man like Adolf Hitler who built a front line defence against the anti-Christ of Communism”.

The interview went on to deal with the need for Hitler to change and the beneficial effects which he felt, I think naively, could flow from such change. That was in 1936.

To have spoken favourably of Hitler, also, seems astounding to us now, but a year earlier Churchill was speculating whether he might be “the man who restored honour and peace of mind to the great Germanic people”. A charge of pro-Nazism against Churchill in the context of his whole life would, of course, be ridiculous and, I believe, that anyone who studies Buchman’s life must feel the same about him.

When his attempt in Germany failed, Buchman concentrated on strengthening the morale and spirit of the Allies, as Presidents Roosevelt and Truman both testified. Many asked him to denounce Hitler, as later they asked him to denounce Stalin or—to descend ridiculously in scale—Tom Driberg, his most constant English detractor.

He always refused to denounce anyone. And, of course, the Nazis knew exactly where he stood. In its 144 page secret report, *Die Oxford-gruppe bewegung*, Himmler’s Gestapo said that the group had “uncompromisingly taken up a frontal position against National Socialism” (*The Times*, December 29, 1945).

Like Moscow radio in Stalin’s time, the Nazis regarded Buchman as dangerous to, rather than simplistic about, their type of evil, and MRA leaders in occupied Europe died in concentration camps for their stand.

Buchman was nothing if not persistent. After the war, he returned to Europe and Germany. “His name”, writes Munzinger-Archiv (the official German archives), “will forever be linked with German-French understanding, for which the first encounter between Germans and French at Caux [the MRA centre] helped lay the groundwork”. Both governments decorated him for this work.

During the war, a stroke had left Buchman with a paralysed arm, and, although he travelled prodigiously, much of his work was done thereafter from international assembly centres like Caux in Switzerland and Mackinac Island in Michigan.

His interests extended world-wide, and he was credited by politicians and scholars involved with making contributions to such varied events as the coming of independence without bloodshed to Tunisia and Morocco and the improvement of feeling between Japan and her former enemies.

Such claims were sometimes exaggerated—a contributory factor being elevated to “the cause”—but the quality which bound most people to Buchman was not so much any “achievement” as a sense that this man was living more constantly in God’s presence—searching painfully for His direction without cutting himself off from the world of affairs—than anyone else they knew. Indeed, when critics point out his defects they

seem rather to underline his own statement: “I have done nothing. I have been wonderfully led.”

Buchman’s death in 1961 made little outward difference to his work which sustained its momentum, with Peter Howard widely accepted as *primus inter pares*. When Howard died, only four years later, the effect was more evident. The Oxford Group had always produced offshoots—Alcoholics Anonymous is one example—and its main work had always been done by individuals applying their Christianity in their own jobs.

But now strong personalities in several important countries resisted the task of evolving a collective leadership and led portions off into efforts which, whatever their merits, turned aside from Buchman’s basic spiritual emphasis. Various newspapers issued premature obituaries.

Slowly, meanwhile—and not without pain—an informal international leadership has evolved which has not only been able to reestablish firm bases in the countries affected, but to consolidate elsewhere and carry forward initiatives in such crisis points as the South Tyrol, India, southern Africa, the Sudan and Northern Ireland.

Valuable lessons have been learnt, including a greater appreciation of other people and movements working for good everywhere. The absence of a dominant personality has also forced people to find their security in a deeper dependence on God instead of on any person—something Buchman fought for, but did not always achieve, in his life time.

MRA’s purpose is still the same, radically to change the motivation of men, starting with themselves, by a submission of their lives to God. It recognizes that economic, social and international problems will not be solved by such changes alone but maintains that such changes are a vital—and often a missing—element.