

Author's Preface for the 2018 Online Edition

by David Belden

Rereading this thesis I am both glad and sad to realize it is still one of the best things written about one of the most interesting movements of the 20th Century.

Glad, because I think most of my judgments have worn well.

Sad, because long before now there should have been a considerable academic industry analyzing the Oxford Group / Moral Re-Armament. This thesis would then be seen as an early attempt, which left out major areas worth studying, and made assessments that have been effectively challenged elsewhere. I'm sad this thesis has not been challenged.

Why should the Oxford Group /MRA be both well known to the public and discussed with scholarly acuity today? Here are five reasons I find convincing:

- 1. Recovery Movement:** Alcoholics Anonymous started life as 'the alcohol squad of the Oxford Group'.¹ The Recovery Movement is one of the most successful personal change movements of the last century, and still today. Even so, it is not the only method of treating addictions. The religious nature of its origin—not just in the Oxford Group but in the Christian movements from which the Group descended—is highly relevant in discussing it.
- 2. Reconciliation:** In the history of warfare and its aftermath, is there any more remarkable example of reconciliation and generosity than the creation of the European Community and the Marshall Plan? MRA was credited by key players (e.g., Truman, Schumann, Adenauer) with a significant role in enabling both to happen. Think about this: After centuries of warfare and two world wars major countries voluntarily unified their armament industries so they could not go to war with each other again—with financing from but without conquest by the dominant power of the age. Other reconciliations of note happened through MRA's work, mostly before the current conflict resolution profession began. These reconciliations deserve more serious study than they have yet received.
- 3. Experientialism:** Frank Buchman, MRA's founder, has been described by a current American religious scholar, Jeff Sharlet, as 'the gnome of early twentieth-century fundamentalism'² and by actress Glenn Close, raised in MRA, as 'a violently anti-intellectual and possibly homophobic evangelical fundamentalist.'³ But the last four presidents of the movement he founded have been an Egyptian-British Muslim woman, and three men: an Indian Hindu, an Algerian Muslim, and a Swiss Catholic. How many gnomes of US fundamentalism have a legacy like that? If Buchman was a fundamentalist, is there a kind of fundamentalism that is curiously similar to those today who claim to be 'spiritual but not religious'? I believe a more useful word than 'fundamentalist' for Buchman is 'experientialist'. I think study of this may hold possibilities for bridging the believer/unbeliever divides in the modern world.

¹ *Busdrivers Never Get Anywhere*, by T. Willard Hunter. Regina Books, Claremont, California, 2002, p 116

² *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*, by Jeff Sharlet. Harper Perennial, 2008, p 126

³ *New York Daily News*, October 16, 2014. <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/gossip/glenn-close-reveals-spent-childhood-cult-article-1.1976946>

4. **Sects and Cultism:** Most (perhaps all?) previous Christian movements like Buchman's that attempted to breathe vigorous new life into the churches either remained in their church (e.g., the Franciscans, Pietists, Oxford Movement) or were expelled and formed their own sect, denomination or church (e.g., Lutherans, Methodists). MRA's ability to avoid either course says much about Buchman's skill and perhaps more about the churches' greater tolerance in the 20th Century, as their power declined. MRA never became a sect or church—in fact it tried very hard not to—but it did suffer internally from cultic pressures that rigidified it and arguably led to its decline and to its eclipse in public memory. As a case study in what groups who wish not to become cults can do to avoid that fate, it can be instructive.
5. **Bridging personal and socio-political change.** Today climate change threatens our civilization. People are asking if humanity is even a viable species, given our materialistic talents and our lack of self-restraint, spiritual depth and biophilia. For remedies we all too often split into two camps, or siloes. One silo includes all ideas and practices concerning personal change and growth, whether secular or spiritual. The focus is individualistic and emphasizes personal responsibility. In a rival silo we find all ideas that reveal the limitations of personal choice, including analyses that uncover the effects of culture, socialization, social structure, the economy, and systemic forces like racism and sexism. In that silo we find political organizers and all those trying to change “the system.” The most successful movements find ways to combine both: e.g., the Civil Rights Movement in the US that combined church and nonviolent resistance; feminist consciousness-raising that enabled women to see how patriarchy had colonised their personal lives; and the courageous coming out of LGBTQ people that has led to legal rights.

MRA tried much harder than most personal change modalities to effect Buchman's vision that “MRA believes in the full dimension of change, economic change, social change, national change and international change, all based on personal change”.⁴ MRA's successes in this realm are fascinating and deserve serious study. Given those successes, its failures are even more fascinating. It was largely because of those failures that I left MRA and returned to Oxford to research and write this thesis. I tell that story in an afterword, along with a sketch of what I left out of the thesis, which included both those successes and failures! This thesis was a preparatory work to doing those studies, so that scholars would have a better idea of just what kind of work Buchman's was.

So there is something worth studying in this movement!

Strange then, that around the year 2000, when a friend of mine wanted to do her own sociology doctorate on MRA at an American university, she was told by her supervisor that she could not, because if the movement was important he would have heard of it. That sums up the obscurity into which MRA had fallen.

Luckily for me, Oxford University did think it was important enough in 1971, when I applied to do this thesis.

⁴ Quoted in *Never to lose my vision : the story of Bill Jaeger* by Clara Jaeger, Grosvenor, London, 1995 p 98