

BUCHMANISM: OPIATE FOR THE CLASSES

BY ERNEST SUTHERLAND BATES

HISTORIANS will doubtless be busy for half a century ferretting out all the fingers that helped concoct the Munich pie last October. But already it is possible to know who heated the oven and kept the atmosphere at the proper level to create such a masterpiece of political cookery. That man was none other than Frank Nathan Daniel Buchman, known in the colleges as "Old Moral Uplift" and among his followers as the great "Soul Surgeon," founder of the Oxford Group Movement and Christian Apostle to the British aristocracy.

It sounds utterly fantastic to assert that an obscure Pennsylvania Dutch ex-Lutheran minister and YMCA secretary, later notorious as the leader of an unsuccessful erotic revivalist movement in American colleges, should ever have taken a leading part in determining the destiny of Europe, the British Empire, and therefore the whole world. It *is* fantastic. Yet the proof of it is in a pamphlet extensively circulated by members of the Ox-

ford Group Movement, entitled *Moral Rearmament: the Battle for Peace*. Edited by H. W. ("Bunny") Austin, the British tennis player, the first edition of 250,000 copies was printed in England in December and consists of some twenty-two manifestoes, all clearly Buchmanite in inspiration and phrasing, which had appeared in the British press in the preceding eight months. The signatures on these manifestoes include those of 25 peers in important government positions, 12 baronets ditto, 33 MP's, 37 champion athletes, 21 leading journalists, 17 trade union heads, a number of industrialists, and a few distinguished academicians—in short, a fair cross-section of the British ruling class. Among them are Earl Baldwin; the Marquess of Salisbury; the Earl of Clarendon, Governor-General of South Africa; Lord Desborough, President of the London Chamber of Commerce; Lord Milne, former Chief of the Imperial General Staff; Lord Stamp of the Bank of England. It was for these people, and people like them,

that Neville Chamberlain acted in his journeys to Hitler. Manifestly, then, *Moral Rearmament* is a historic document of some importance.

The slogan "Moral Rearmament" as a solution for all the ills of the world was presented by Frank Buchman on May 28, 1938, in a London speech in which he expounded the ideas reiterated in later manifestoes. Said Mr. Buchman:

The world's condition cannot but cause disquiet and anxiety. Hostility piles up between nation and nation, labor and capital, class and class. . . . The crisis is fundamentally a moral one. The nations must rearm morally. . . . Imagine a rising tide of absolute honesty and absolute unselfishness sweeping across every country. . . . A wave of absolute unselfishness throughout the nations would be the end of war.

In other words, if men would only be perfect, they would be perfect. This astounding idea fairly swept the British privileged groups off their feet — especially when they discovered that British airplanes were lacking. It was one of the impulses that impelled Mr. Chamberlain to Munich.

The manifestoes of the MP's, made public at the beginning of the Czechoslovak crisis, announced their conversion to the principles of the "crusade for Moral Rearmament which appears to be spreading rapidly." It all happened "at a recent dinner at the House of Commons in

honor of the founder of the Oxford Group and attended by members of both Houses of Parliament." A week later came the manifesto of Earl Baldwin and the other barons, asserting that "the real need of the day is Moral and Spiritual Rearmament." A week later, Bunny Austin, speaking with the political authority of a good tennis player, asked "that the youth of the world let their voices be heard in a call for the Moral Rearmament of the nations. . . ." He added, "That appeal has already been put forward by those of greater authority than myself. . . . As Herr Hitler has said, 'A great future lies before the youth of Germany. . . .'" Until the end of November manifesto after manifesto reiterated the "Moral Rearmament" slogan like the incantation of a magic formula.

The only variation on the theme came on November nineteenth, when the manifesto of Buchmanite journalists pledged them, in the interest of "a programme of Moral Rearmament," to observe "a discipline of expression in our professional dealings equal to that which we expect from a Minister of the Crown. . . ." In plain English, these journalists undertook not to write anything which might be uncomfortable for Mr. Chamberlain. Various rumors and revelations

about the Munich background were then gaining ground. The "discipline of expression" must be even more rigid now, after Moravia, Memel, and Albania.

II

A movement with such influence upon the makers of British public opinion and policy must have in its sources of appeal beyond those of the traditional religious "revival" with which "Buchmanism" has usually been confused. Actually it has almost nothing in common with the familiar revivalist movements. The difference lies in the character of the leader, in the methods employed, and in the social position of the converts.

The traditional evangelist has always been a strong personality, gifted of tongue and capable of moving vast crowds to emotional fervor. Frank Buchman is none of these things. Middle-sized and slightly rotund, bald and bespectacled, he would not attract attention on a casual meeting. The only mark of distinction which even his disciples have been able to discover is, in the much quoted words of Harold Begbie, "that mien of scrupulously shampooed and almost medical cleanliness so characteristic of the hygienic American." Supple-

menting this soapy appearance is the ingratiating and beamingly confident manner of a well-trained salesman for one of the better-class business firms. He claims to be on intimate terms with his employer. "I know that he is a personal god," he has said. "Look what he has done for me!" Without intellectual interests of any kind, but with remarkable concentration of purpose, he has devoted his entire energy to the single pursuit of spiritual salesmanship. Slow-witted but doggedly determined, he has built up a movement in which older religious techniques are adapted to modern advertising conditions.

Born in Pennsburg, Pennsylvania, of German-Swiss ancestry, Mr. Buchman was educated for the Lutheran ministry at Muhlenberg College and Mount Airy Lutheran Seminary. In his early environment he found the two religious traditions that have raised him to greatness. The Lutheran Church, which never broke away completely from its Catholic origin, retained auricular confession as a means of spiritual growth in the period before confirmation. And according to Quaker beliefs, with which every Pennsylvanian is familiar, it was possible for every man to obtain spiritual guidance from God by consulting the Light

Within. Through combining these two essentially antagonistic principles, as no one with a logical mind could have done, and vulgarizing both of them in subjection to salesmanship needs, Mr. Buchman was at last able to cross-breed the exotic flower of "Buchmanism."

But it was a long process. For the first forty-three years of his life Buchman led an undistinguished existence as a small-town Lutheran minister and college YMCA secretary. This long preparation was illuminated by but one glowing experience. At the appropriate age of 30, he enjoyed a vision of Christ on the Cross which produced in him, he says, "a dazed sense of a great spiritual shaking-up" so great that he succeeded shortly after in converting a young college student who "went to church that night, became a good Christian, and later a successful barrister."

By 1921 Mr. Buchman had formulated his program. Fortified by faith and the right introductions, he went to Oxford and gathered about him small groups of students in the two aristocratic colleges of Corpus Christi and Christ's. (He kept away from intellectual Balliol.) To them, in highly select "religious house-parties," he revealed the great principles of "Sharing" and "Guidance."

"Sharing" was the old Catholic-Lutheran principle of private confession transmogrified by having the confessions made in the presence of the whole group. Naturally, considering the age of the penitents, most of the confessions had to do with matters of sex, and the sharing came down to erotic excitement. The public "Wash-out," as Buchmanian jargon called it, was piously supposed to prevent any future return of sinful desire. After the "Washout" came "Guidance" obtained in "the Quiet Time" by "Listening-in to God" or conducting "Two-Way Radio Chats" with Him. These pleasant chats could be had either in private sessions with F. B. — as Mr. Buchman liked to be called — or in larger group meetings. The technique is fully described by a devout disciple, A. J. Russell, in his *For Sinners Only*:

Then, of course, Frank suggested the inevitable Quiet Time. Taking two sheets of notepaper, he handed me one. We sat down and listened in prayerful silence. . . . Nothing exceptional came; quite a lot of ordinary human thoughts, but no luminous ones. . . . I wrote down my thoughts; then read them aloud to Frank, who confidently and surprisingly pronounced them to be God's thoughts.

When the disciple has been properly washed-out and guided, he is able to enjoy the personal com-

panionship of the deity ever after. As another convert, V. C. Kitchen, says in his *I Was a Pagan*, "I 'emerged' into God-consciousness all at once." The proof of it? During his unregenerate pagan period Mr. Kitchen had been a most sinful smoker and drinker, but he now never downed a drop or puffed the tiniest puff; he had been in the habit of quarreling with his wife, but now no harsh word passed his lips; he had made a practice of defrauding his partner in an advertising firm by padding his expense account, but he now wrote out a check to him in full restitution. Then "miracles began to happen." God "guided me to the discovery of a check I had folded up, put away and forgotten — made out to me for the exact amount He had guided me to give my partner." Further miracles, too, were forthcoming:

One day . . . God guided me to write a plan for advertising transatlantic steamship travel. It was a branch of advertising in which I had had no experience and a subject I knew nothing about. I asked for God's help in the matter and almost immediately a complete and original plan came to my mind. . . . At another time . . . God guided me to make a certain investment. . . .

To F. B. himself, in the Quiet Time, God has suggested a remarkable series of slogans:

The Four Absolutes — Absolute Purity, Absolute Honesty, Absolute Love, and Absolute Unselfishness.

Sin Blinds and Sin Binds.

Jesus Christ still Suits, Saves, and Satisfies.

P-R-A-Y stands for Powerful Radiograms Always Yours.

A Supernatural Network Over Live Wires.

A Spiritual Radiophone in Every Home. God has a Plan for Every Man.

The vulgarity and lack of intellectual content in the Buchmanite parody of religion limited F. B.'s Oxford following in the early days to less than 5 per cent of the students, and in 1924 he decided to shift his attack to America. At that time no Oxford sponsorship was claimed for the movement. Invitations to the Buchmanite gatherings in New York were given simply in the name of "The Groups: A First Century Christian Fellowship," meeting at the Hotel Plaza. The likeness to First Century Christianity consisted, of course, in the common devotion to the principles of "Sharing" and "Guidance." The First Century Christians shared their little property and were guided to persecution and death; their Twentieth Century followers shared their little erotic excitements and were guided to the Hotel Plaza.

F. B.'s most devoted American follower, the Reverend Samuel Shoemaker, an Episcopal clergyman, had formerly been secretary of the

Philadelphia Society at Princeton. This organization, virtually a local branch of the YMCA, was comfortably housed in a handsome Gothic building guarded by Daniel Chester French's statue of "The Christian Student" — a stargazing youth doubly armed with a football and Bible. The society was easily persuaded to invite Mr. Buchman to Princeton.

The results of this first incursion were somewhat disappointing; only a few sheepish sheep were gathered into the fold. But after more adequate preparatory propaganda, Mr. Buchman launched a second Princeton campaign in 1926. There were the usual "religious house parties" and erotic confessions. Without winning many actual converts, the Buchmanites did succeed in making themselves a public nuisance. They were denounced in the *Princetonian*, and the students decided, by a large majority of those voting, that "Buchmanism in any form" ought not to be connected with any religious organization in the University. In defense of his activities, Mr. Buchman is said to have told President Hibben that 95 per cent of the students were addicted to one or another form of sex perversion. But the President, at whatever cost to free speech, banished Mr. Buchman from the

Princeton campus. Joyous undergraduates gave the "Christian Student" a fine coat of gilding, and finally pulled him off his pedestal.

By the time he departed once more for England, Mr. Buchman was guided to seek his converts less among sex-morbid college students than among those college and community leaders who were most conscious of failure and impotence. "Stress Slogans, Not Sex," said the alliterative Voice Within. The shift in policy soon brought results. Mr. Buchman always had a fondness for men in key positions, but to gain their adherence was now the central point in his program. His godly "boring from within" to win over the people of influence and importance was very similar in method, however different the ultimate aim, from that used by Nazis and communists. And it worked even better in the highly class-conscious groups of society to which he addressed his efforts. "Snob appeal" was on his side. Every distinguished convert brought half a dozen others in his train. Old friends in high positions gained the courage to come out openly in his support, and new friends of still higher position were won over: Dr. Streeter, the Provost of Queen's College in Oxford; Dr. Geoffrey Allen, Fellow and Chaplain of Lin-

coln College; Dr. P. S. Allen, President of Corpus Christi College; Julian Thornton-Duesberry, its chaplain; Loudon Hamilton, ex-master of Eton; Howard Rose, priest of St. Peter-le Bailey; Dr. Grensted, professor of the Philosophy of Christian Religion. With such names enrolled, the Buchmanites felt themselves justified in ceasing to be merely a "first century Christian brotherhood" and becoming "The Oxford Group Movement," though legally they were denied the right to use the title — an attempt to incorporate under it being refused by the authorities.

Legal or not, the new name helped greatly. With the prestige of Oxford behind him, Howard Rose led a "team" of fifteen Buchmanite missionaries to Holland in 1927 and another team of seven to South Africa in 1928. In 1930, the Reverend J. W. Margetson, Provost of St. Mary's Cathedral, welcomed a team of fifty to Edinburgh. In 1933 F. B. himself brought a team of sixty with him in one more attempt to conquer his native land. The Oxonians secured a crowd of 2300 curiosity seekers at their spiritual mass meeting in the Waldorf Astoria, but they obtained few distinguished American sponsors besides Bishop Manning and William Gilliland, an 84-year-

old ex-bootlegger, known in his profession as "Bill Pickle." Mr. Buchman discussed the Depression and gave his solution:

The President's social trends report indicates there will surely be a revolution in this country. We are going to make it a spiritual revolution. What hunger marchers need is to be "changed."

There followed a much-advertised house party at Briarcliff Manor and a quick transcontinental trip.

On his return to England, his welcome was almost a royal one. The Archbishop of Canterbury gave a reception for him, and the Lord Mayor of London another. In the spiritual week-end that followed in London fully 5000 people took part, with representatives from forty nations among them. Henceforward, Frank Buchman's position was established as one of the pillars of the British Empire.

III

Since the movement has not been organized as a separate sect, but represents itself to be an interdenominational revival of spiritual energy throughout the Protestant Church, accurate statistics as to the number of Buchmanites in the world are quite unavailable. The center of their strength is in England; they have made some

headway in South Africa and in Canada; their "teams" have been enthusiastically received in Norway, Denmark, and Holland, and they claim to have missionaries in sixty countries; the only great nations left uninvaded are Russia, Germany, and Italy, which have new religions of their own. Probably at least 100,000 individuals have at one time or another been present at Buchmanite "house parties," but this estimate is somewhat invalidated by the number of "repeaters" included. The Buchmanites themselves have rather carefully refrained from compiling lists of conversions, relapses, or reconversions. The importance of the movement is not to be judged by its numbers but by the social position of its devotees.

Obviously Buchmanism matches, for certain people, the emotional needs of our day. The lingering belief in a Special Providence — a deity intervening in the details of human affairs — may be made to seem plausible when these humans profess to desire only such universal goods as absolute honesty, unselfishness, love, and the preservation of peace. Through its doctrine of "Guidance," Buchmanism has reinstated the idea of Special Prov-

idence just at the time when it was being abandoned by most of the orthodox churches. The emotional relief obtained by transferring human burdens to the shoulders of deity is naturally great. In the present period of world catastrophe it is not surprising that Buchmanism flourishes to the degree it does.

This explains, also, why the reception of Buchmanism has been so different in America and in England. American statesmen and businessmen are far from convinced that they are through; their energy is still strong; they still have abundant faith in themselves and are little disposed to trust the solution of their problems entirely to God and Frank Buchman. But the ruling aristocracy of Great Britain is tired and ready to welcome a philosophy of escape.

In the mid-Nineteenth Century a noted English clergyman and writer, Charles Kingsley, declared in the bitterness of his heart that the Christian churches had so far forgotten Christ's message of social justice that religion had become little more than "an opiate for the masses." It was left for Frank Buchman, in a further stage of decadence, to turn religion into an opiate for the classes.

MISDEAL

A Story

BY ANDRÉ MAUROIS

Now you are back in France, dear friend, and an ocean separates us. This gives me courage to write you. You hadn't noticed, at least I hope not, that your stay here was a fairly unhappy little episode for me. As long as you were in New York, I wouldn't have dared tell you about my pitiful little disappointment. Now I think telling it will relieve me.

Do you remember the letters you wrote me before coming to America? I suppose you have forgotten them. They are on my table at this very moment. They are enthusiastic and charming. You had just published your first book, but you were not yet known in this country. You had read the two articles I wrote about you. I think they gave you genuine pleasure. You told me, "No masculine critic has written about this novel the profound, fine things it inspired in you. Only a woman could describe the character of Clarissa with so much penetration. . . .

It is for readers such as you that one writes!" After the second article, in which I had tried to analyze not only your work but, by reading between the lines, your character, you told me, "I cannot imagine a greater pleasure than talking with you some day about the books we both love. The authors you mention are those I most admire; what you say of them is also what I think. What evenings we could have together talking about our mutual friends, of Merimée, of Chekhov, of Foerster, and of delightful Katherine Mansfield."

I don't believe you can imagine what these sentences, to you probably banal and polite, meant to me. You don't know what my life is. I live with my parents who are booksellers of modest means, in a middle-class section of New York. The apartment is homely, somber, and furnished in the style of the 'nineties. My room has plain, one-colored white walls with two or three photographs on them,