

An exchange on Frank Buchman and the Nazis

9 July 2008

Below we publish a criticism of “Not quaint at all—The BBC’s Filth: The Mary Whitehouse Story” followed by a reply by the article’s author, Paul Bond. The criticism centres on our characterisation of the Oxford Group, a Christian organisation that Mary Whitehouse and her husband joined in the 1930s, and its political orientation. Whitehouse remained loyal to the Oxford Group and its successor, Moral Re-Armament.

In particular, the correspondent criticises our portrayal of the connections between Frank Buchman, leader of the Oxford Group, and leading figures within the German Nazi Party.

The slur on Buchman is unfair. See: <http://www.frankbuchman.info/> for a more accurate portrayal of Buchman’s efforts to reach and change the leadership of Nazi Germany.

Many of the men and women influenced by Buchman and his work in the 1930s served with honour in the war. At the war’s end, a Gestapo report came to light. “The Group as a whole,” the document stated, “constitutes an attack upon the nationalism of the state and demands the utmost watchfulness on the part of the state. It preaches revolution against the national state and has quite evidently become its Christian opponent.”

Andrew Stallybrass

Thank you for your recent email objecting to a “slur” on Frank Buchman, the founder of the Oxford Group—a charge that is without foundation.

The only mention of Buchman in my article on Mary Whitehouse came in the following paragraph:

“During the very period when [Mary] Whitehouse was recruited to the Oxford Group, Frank Buchman, its founder, met several times with Heinrich Himmler. Buchman told the *New York World-Telegram* in 1936, ‘I thank Heaven for a man like Adolf Hitler, who built a front-line of defence against the anti-Christ of Communism’.”

You object that many of the Oxford Group’s members “served with honour in the war.” That is almost certainly true—and completely beside the point. It is still incontrovertible that in the period *before* the war, Buchman had links with leading figures of the Nazi Party, both personally and through one of his German supporters, Moni von Cramon.

Heinrich Himmler was fascinated by the Oxford Group, inviting Buchman to Nuremberg Nazi Party rallies, and to the

Berlin Olympics.

You also mention the hostility of the Gestapo towards the Oxford Group. As Garth Lean’s biography, *On the Tail of a Comet: The Life of Frank Buchman*, makes clear, the Nazi leadership was at no point unanimously behind turning towards the Oxford Group. It is hardly news that there were factional disputes within Nazism. Buchman sought meetings with Hitler from January 1932. Lean offers evidence that these were mostly blocked by other figures within Nazi ruling circles. There is circumstantial evidence that Hitler at one point did seek a meeting with Buchman, although this does not seem to have occurred.

So why did Buchman seek links with Nazism? Fascism is a last resort of the ruling class, at a point when all of the previous forms of capitalist rule have broken down. Confronted with the possibility of socialist revolution, which would sweep it aside, the bourgeoisie is forced to desperate measures against any movement of the working class. Fascism requires the smashing up of the organizations of the working class. It represents the arming of the atomised and, in times of acute economic crisis, ruined middle class and lumpen (criminalised) proletariat to forge a counterrevolutionary army in a last-ditch effort to rescue capitalism.

You write that Buchman was trying “to reach and change the leadership of Nazi Germany.” As the *New York World-Telegram* interview made clear, what appealed to Buchman about Nazism was the extent to which it had been able to stave off a Communist revolution in Germany, thanks above all to the policies pursued by the main workers’ parties, the Social Democrats and the Communist Party.

There is some dispute as to the actual words Buchman used during this interview, but even the comments of his close supporters endorse this interpretation. Even Garrett Stearly, who was present during the interview and disputed the published version, summarized Buchman’s comments thus: “He said that Germany needed a new Christian spirit, yet one had to face the fact that Hitler had been a bulwark against Communism there—and you could at least thank heaven for that” (quoted in Lean, p. 239).

The material you cite in support of the innocence of Buchman’s mission in Nazi Germany simply emphasizes the extent to which his main concern was opposing Communism,

which he regarded as a “more dangerous force” than fascism. In 1934, Buchman was quoted as saying that “National Socialism had built a temporary wall against Communism, but that was not enough.”

Lean writes that Buchman “hoped Hitler would be a temporary bulwark” against the socialist revolution. He continued, in Lean’s words, to see Communism as a “more universal and long-term threat” than fascism. Perhaps most revealing of Buchman’s priorities was his later comment that “Hitler fooled me. I thought it would be a bulwark against Communism.”

This was made early in 1940, after the Stalinist leadership of the Comintern had signed a non-aggression pact with the Nazis in 1939 and before war between the two sides broke out on June 22, 1941, when Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa (Lean, p. 240).

Buchman talked of winning the Nazi leadership to Christ, but this perspective was based on a defence of British and world capitalism.

He railed against what he called “moral Bolshevism” (Lean p. 147). He explicitly rejected a materialist analysis of social crises, calling “trade depression ... God’s way of reminding us” to “change our temperament and our environment,” and expressly rejecting an economic understanding of capitalist development. He suggested that the conversion of a capitalist government to his religious programme could resolve such crises.

And the best vehicle for accomplishing his self-professed mission was to convert the most dictatorial of capitalist regimes. The *New York World-Telegram* reported him as saying, “But think what it would mean to the world if Hitler surrendered to the control of God. Or Mussolini. Or any dictator. Through such a man God could control a nation overnight and solve every last, bewildering problem ... Human problems aren’t economic. They’re moral and they can’t be solved by immoral measures. They could be solved within a God-controlled democracy, or perhaps I should say a theocracy, and they could be solved through a God-controlled Fascist dictatorship.”

In 1932 Buchman told 150 German churchmen that Nazism was here to stay, and it was necessary to try and win it for Christ.

On reading the *World-Telegram* interview the theologian Reinhard Niebuhr wrote, “The social philosophy of the Oxford group, long implicit in its strategy, is made explicit, and revealed in all its childishness and viciousness.”

Niebuhr noted, amongst other things, that it explained the interest the Oxford Group had in recruiting big businessmen.

Even for many of those who welcomed it as an obstacle to socialism, the crimes of Nazism were to prove repugnant. Buchman was not alone in distancing himself from Nazism. In the *World-Telegram* interview he dismissed Nazi anti-Semitism as “Bad, naturally.”

Attempts by his supporters to portray him as politically naïve founder here, as he made the astute observation on the reasons for fascist anti-Semitism: “I suppose Hitler sees a Karl Marx in every Jew.”

The “God-controlled” nation, he explained, would be capitalist. “Business,” he told the *World-Telegram*, “would be owned by individuals, *not by the State*, but the owners would be God-controlled.” In this way, “capital and labour would discuss their problems peacefully” (emphasis added).

It is unsurprising that after the war this perspective of calming down class conflict won a hearing among sections of the ruling class and their agents within the working class.

The North Rhine-Westphalia Minister August Halbfell saw Moral Re-Armament (MRA) as the “one big hope” against a rising tide of class struggle in the Ruhr mining region. Buchman’s position that management and worker could “work together, like the fingers on the hand” (Lean, p. 429) also received support among trade union bureaucrats keen to control their members, for example in the London docks.

MRA made recruits from former Stalinists disoriented and betrayed by the politics of the parties they had joined. MRA was able to make several recruits from former members of the German Communist Party in the wake of the suppression of the East German revolution and Khrushchev’s Secret Speech.

The characterisation of Frank Buchman offered in the article is well supported by the historical evidence. The organisation he founded was a religious movement with definite and explicitly reactionary political aims. These aims were supported and put into practice by Mary Whitehouse.

You have written extensively in defence of Buchman in publications of Initiatives of Change, the latest incarnation of MRA. It now has its own NGO, and works “in the quest of ‘good governance’”, according to its web site. Your defence of Buchman is made necessary by a desire to distort a historical record that is damaging to your group’s present credibility. In contrast, the *World Socialist Web Site* insists above all on historical accuracy, confident that this is the only genuine basis for the political education of workers, students and intellectuals.

Yours sincerely,
Paul Bond



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