

A BOOK ON BUCHMANISM

THE cinema hoardings proclaim, if not so insistently now as a few years ago, the advertising value of the words *sin* and *sinner*. The devil is not regarded as a bore—at least by his nodding acquaintances. Vice is thought interesting, and virtue dull. Perhaps it is the fault of the novelists whose villains are more likeable than their heroes; perhaps because the notion of immorality is restricted now to the more exciting forms; perhaps because some of our vices have the reputation of virtue. These are the deadly vices, the deadly-dull. Virtues gone flat. Or, as St. Thomas says, the vice that looks like virtue; false prudence, for instance, and religiosity, and deadness to sense.¹

Anyhow, there it is, sin is definitely news. You remember how people flocked to the Albert Hall to hear *The New Sin* expounded. Only to be mocked. Similarly, the title and opening of a recent book on Buchmanism² rouse the same attention. 'It comes to grips with an unlovely subject,' we are promised. 'And'—the superb assurance—'solves its riddle.' But only to disappoint. (Pouf! call those sins, said the Borgia courtier squaring his shoulders, now if you really want, etc., etc.). Perhaps it is a back-handed compliment, but the Catholic literature of conversion is decidedly more thrilling, and does more than skate on the conventions. François Mauriac or Julien Green will point the contrast.

Making allowance for the fact that vice is often unprintable, and noticing the Buchmanite recognition of the pervasiveness of sin, this book still leaves the im-

¹ cf. *Summa Theologica*, 2a-2ae: LV, XCII, CXLII.

² *For Sinners Only*. By A. J. Russell. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932; pp. 347; 5/-)

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pression that the sins that matter are the indulgences That Spell Inefficiency. There is a harping on horse-racing and going to pubs; more than a whisper of the Nonconformist conscience; a steady ground-swell of Fordist morality; a significant antithesis, Parsons and Prodigals.³ And despite the assumption of hearty unconventionality, you are left with the thought that perhaps after all it is largely a religion of Behaving Yourself. You feel this in the account of the undergraduate's conversion: 'I decided to get the impurity, the nicotine, and the drink out of my system.' He had been a member of the Carburettor Club, three sinners snatched from a life of (besides much else) illegal speeding, climbing down drain-pipes at night and generally getting into trouble with the police. They were converted with the aid of a Springbok and a delegation backed by a squad of men 'solidly praying,' including a convert who once came home so tight that he chopped off the heads of all the chickens in the fowl-run.

It is not that all these things may not well be a matter of sin, but that the prominence which they are given is a typical exhibition of that Anglo-Saxon Protestantism which is more concerned with civil misdemeanours than with the deeper and more intimate ills of the soul. The theologian was going too far who said that an Englishman cannot commit a mortal sin because he has not the mind for it, as he was unable to conceive of an offence against God in cold blood and recognized as such at the time. Possibly he was thinking he was thinking, in his Latin way, of the very intellectual and spiritual sins of malice.⁴

Similarly, the Buchmanite ideal of virtue leaves you with the same feeling. Of something very hearty, but

³ Senators and Hoboes—another antithesis in connection with the movement, but not in this book.

⁴ cf. *Summa Theologica*, 1a-2ae: LXXVIII.

really rather empty. The type, to quote the book, that brings a breeze into the breakfast-room. Dressy; with horned rimmed spectacles flashing with kindness; radiating good feeling and self-possession; chubby; pat-on-the-back; with everybody 'Bill' or 'Sam' or 'Frank.' The religion of the males in the advertisements of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Sanitary rather than healthy. You have the sensation of being offered a substitute, something quite good, but still a substitute. There is a story to the point, of the early ministry of 'Frank'—Frank N. D. Buchman, an American Lutheran minister, the founder of the movement. 'Frank's secret of getting boys up early on Sunday morning was not to scold, but to announce there would be pancakes on the table at nine sharp.' It is all a sort of purified Elmer Gantry, with an absence of much regard for tradition, the sacramental life, mystery, intellectual truth. Its appeal would seem to be restricted to a modern type. It is hard to imagine it holding the shaggy and awkward and eccentric, the decadent and twisted, the people who really prefer absinthe to cocoa. It is all very well to be healthy, that is the meaning of salvation, but the health that smells of the druggist's store is not the only sort. Nor is the health that is so consciously cultivated. Good things should not be hidden away, but here there is such a parade of goodness, so much feeling fine and glowing, and saying so. The poor miserable sinner stuff may have been overdone in the past. But here it is just the opposite. The book names real people and describes them as among the most surrendered, fully-consecrated in the Group; modern miracles and so on. They must feel decently embarrassed.

These remarks sound unpleasantly jeering. But if they are unfair to Buchmanism in itself, they are frank reactions to it as it is presented in *For Sinners Only*. 'You may dislike the characters as they are limned

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in print,' writes Mr. Russell, 'but not in real life.' Let us think, then, that the fault is his. Yet the book captures our interest, for it is sincere and alive.

In the beginning, Mr. Russell's interest in the Group Movement was that of an alert journalist out for a scoop. It was his job 'to provide compelling newspaper features' to swell the sales. One of his stunts had proved a great success, the *My Religion* series that ran in a London daily about seven years ago. This has come to him, he is convinced, as a divine inspiration whilst he was gardening. He describes this 'supernatural experience.' 'There seemed to be a faint electrical crackling in the clear air about me . . . I felt a message impinge on my brain from the air. It alighted softly like the caress of a leaf or the touch of a gentle zephyr . . . I was just told to get twelve novelists to confess their religious beliefs in our newspaper.' To sneer at some of the simple legends of hagiography betrays a lack of the sense of proportion. We know that a sense of humour may not be absent from some of the miraculous workings of Providence; but we must confess we had never expected it to work like that. Miraculous or not, the venture proved that religion had news-value, a fact *The Daily Express* has since not forgotten.

Thus the author was quick to respond to the rumour of a new religious force in our midst, of an evangelical revival spreading out of 'dear old Oxford,' of 'B.A.'s who live on faith and prayer.' He determined to investigate and write it up. But interest was followed by conviction, and this, 'the book of the Oxford Groups,' is by an enthusiastic adherent. That a movement so lacking in reticence, in its character so like a religious Rotary Club, and so opposed to the local manner, should have caught on at Oxford is sufficiently puzzling. But, in fact, the coupling of the two names, Oxford and Buchmanism, has not passed with-

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out protest, and to some it has seemed a cleverly engineered piece of publicity. However, what chiefly merits attention is the underlying nature of the movement.

It is a form of Evangelical Protestantism, with an insistence on the religious experience of 'conversion,' differing only in degree from other forms of Protestant Revivalism. The swaying crowds are absent, the suggestion is through a small drawing-room group. More intimate, more middle-class, possibly more intense. It must be difficult to rebut the charge that it is built on emotion. It claims to be founded on the spiritual experience of living the Gospel life. The work of the reason is certainly not stressed. The rational approach to Christianity is considered a fifty-fifty affair, for and against. You become a Buchmanite, not by an intellectual assent, but by giving it a trial in practice. Life, we are told, is more effective than logic. It is not a sect, but a way of life, an inner group in all the churches. This is a rough account of its genus; its specific difference is what chiefly interests, for this is largely the cause of its success.

This is a recognition and exploitation of the psychologically sound principles of Confession and Sharing. To this end, and not directly to the worship of God, individual converts are formed into small 'groups,' under the guidance of a leader. The beginner is led to unburden his soul and receive direction. He is, we imagine, given that sense of 'belonging.' This is all to the good, and it is not in a niggardly spirit that a Catholic recognizes two deficiencies here.

In the first place, Confession is undoubtedly a release. Psycho-analysis has paid tribute to the therapeutic value of the Confessional, and the sturdy old arguments about its unhealthiness no longer have the same force. But getting things off your chest is only one half of the situation. There is also an intake of something.

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Religion is not merely a sort of exercise for keeping fit inside ; it draws on something outside the soul ; and that not a creature, not the spirit of a group. Now there is no guarantee that the confession of sins to a psychologist, whether amateur or professional, will do more than release certain of their undesirable psychological effects—complexes and all that. After all, in confession we desire something more than a psychological evacuation, we desire forgiveness and that our soul should share again in the Divine Life. To ensure this, a wise and experienced psychologist is simply not competent, even if he be called a ' life-changer ' and talks the language of Evangelical Christianity. We must look for a man, not self-qualified, but officially appointed by God. Confession to a group-leader may be a relief ; but to regard it as a guarantee of forgiveness verges on magic. Sacramental Confession, on the other hand, is a means of forgiveness officially appointed by God. Here there is not only a discharging of sin, but, given the dispositions, a divine promise that the soul is also charged with the vitality of grace. It supplies something not only purgative but tonic as well, something that takes the place of sin. For sin is not entirely negative ; it is the choice of a good out of place. Even from the narrowly psychological point of view mere emptying-out has its dangers. The wisdom of the parable of the room swept and garnished is confirmed in practice by the after-effects of moods, whether individual or communal, of religious exaltation. It is not affirmed that the reactions of Buchmanism are of this nature, but still the movement is young and can best be judged only by the test of Gamaliel. In the meantime, we are not disposed to deny the impressiveness of some of its results.

In the second place, Sharing, or the pooling of experience, is a recognition of the truth that we belong to one another and must help one another in ways be-

yond good nature and square-dealing and material charity. It is at least a shadow of the idea of the Mystical Body. Yet it is of little more lasting significance than a friendly society unless it all goes on within a society, founded by God, whose transactions have an eternal value. But here again we are not disposed to deny that many of the actions of Buchmanites go on in the soul of the Church—to risk the theological censorship of Dr. Coulton.

Admiration must go out to some of the aspects of Buchmanism; the sense of the presence of God; the complete surrender to His purposes; the attempt to revive what Protestantism considers first century Christianity—simple and fresh; the affirmation of our stewardship over things for God; the conviction of dependence on the guidance of the Holy Ghost. But behind dislike of much of its manner, there is the lurking feeling of being offered a substitute, the feeling that emotion is substituted for rational conviction, results for principles, the sense of well-being for spiritual integrity, the honest glow for spiritual duty. The world is deeper and darker, better and worse, than Buchmanism would seem to allow. Sex is more than a matter of hygiene; solicitude for the morrow is not really relieved by blindly banking on Providence; virtue is not something that makes you feel good; cleanliness may be next to godliness, but it is a bad second; and God is not a combination of kind clergyman, family doctor, and football-coach. *For Sinners Only* is a book to make you feel that the confessions of some of the—let us say—more morbid mystics have more to recommend them than once you suspected. Or, failing the mystics, the—let us say—leprous line in French Catholic novels. There is not much rude health about them, not much breezy assurance that all will be well with your soul if You Play the Game.

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