

THE METHODS OF THE GROUP MOVEMENT

IS any religion better than none? The Church of England has evidently come to this conclusion, for it is hard to believe that any other alternative would have led the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London to give a personal 'commission' at Lambeth and St. Paul's to an American Lutheran minister and a mixed crowd of five hundred amateur evangelists of every religious denomination for the purpose of converting London. I think it is true to say that fifteen years ago this could not have happened, and it is little less than a confession of spiritual penury that it can happen now. That the Bishop of Calcutta is sponsoring the Group Movement 'Campaign' has, perhaps, something to do with this official patronage, but nevertheless there is little that accords with the traditions and beliefs of the best type of Anglicanism in this strange mingle-mangle of Lutheran pietism, psycho-analytic methods and modern publicity propaganda.

It seems as impossible to discuss this movement impersonally as it is for its members to refrain from giving a personal experience whenever they are asked about it. Therefore I make no apology for giving an account of its methods by means of impressions gathered at the meetings of a house-party. Though I had read a good deal of the literature with considerable difficulty and distaste, I went to the meetings trying to think that perhaps there might be something to be learnt from the movement, though it was uncongenial to me. From being repelled by the reiterated personal testimonies, most of them very trivial, I went on to be somewhat impressed by the accounts of homes united, lives changed, and ministries made more useful, but I ended with a reasoned conviction that on the whole the thing is not good, although many good people are involved in it.

It is not easy, from merely listening to people one after another talking about themselves, which is all that ever seems to happen at the meetings, to find out what are the

methods of the group with individuals, but I at length ascertained that they are as follows.

A state of interest and expectancy is aroused by a series of personal narratives from people whose lives have been 'changed,' who feel, that is, that they have become good and happy. Each one is introduced by a chairman who carefully explains any worldly interest or distinction they may have, even if it is only a distinguished relation. The hearers are moved to ask whether they can be 'changed' too. Four standards are spoken of, *absolute* purity, *absolute* honesty, *absolute* unselfishness, *absolute* love (in that order). They are bidden to examine themselves, and those who fall short of this entirely self-set standard, for nothing positive is explained, are invited to 'share' their shortcomings in these respects in every detail with a member of the 'team of life-changers.' 'Under four eyes' is the term they use. One after another testified to the painfulness of this process of 'surrender,' as it is called, which in the last resort means the surrender of one's most private life to one who may or may not have the training or experience to deal with moral and spiritual problems. Nothing must be hidden in being 'taken through on the four standards.' It is a ruthless inquisition into every detail of past life, and I had a suspicion that some of those who talked about this experience had really rather enjoyed it. Then follows a demand for restitution, which seems to consist very largely in telling people to their faces what you have been saying about them behind their backs, an act of doubtful benefit to the victim, as sometimes appeared, but which affords much uplift to the one who does it. It also means telling to those who know you best the dark secrets—if any—of your life, if not, of your most trivial breaches of positive law. The point is that you must tell something. This produces in some people a kind of 'release' due possibly to the feeling that they have nothing to hide. For the purposes of this technique of 'sharing' the real meaning of sin is almost lost sight of, and in effect becomes anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. The sin of 'self-consciousness' is a very favourite one, and 'release' from it

means an unbounded capacity and willingness to talk about yourself to anybody. In some cases, however, it is clear that 'sharing' has led to deliverance from long-standing grudges and resentments, though sometimes at the expense of the one who has caused them.

What chiefly seemed to me significant and disquieting about this was that the whole thing was apparently done in the light of the ideal self and not of the holiness of God. The practice of confessing your sins to God alone was frankly spoken of as apt to be unreal 'because God is so unreal to us,' and confession to a priest was said to be unsatisfactory from the 'sharing' point of view because he has to keep secret your misdoings, but repeatedly I heard that 'release' not only from sin but from temptation had come through confession to some 'life-changer,' or even to a group, who apparently may talk about it as much as they like. This puts the emphasis entirely on the psychological fact of having told, and what, if anything, an act of contrition and the forgiveness of God has to do with the subsequent sense of release, I could not make out: direct questions on this point only elicited further experiences of release. One cannot doubt the reality of the experience, but it is hard to feel entirely satisfied about its origin, or its probable permanence. Lacking, as it seems to do, the profound stimulus of a presentation of God against which the sinner can see himself in relation to the infinite Goodness, one cannot but suspect in this process the presence of such motives as the desire to be all that one would like to think oneself, to be a centre of interest to some other person, to talk about oneself, as well as the desire for excitement and change and to be 'in' something big, as the movement is perpetually said to be. In fact, in the speeches of some of the official leaders, and especially Mr. Buchman himself, I heard all these motives played on with extraordinary skill.

If one gets safely through this process—and it is quite clear that some do not; either they escape in the middle, or they become hysterical, as those psychotherapists know who have coped with them—one becomes almost at once a

'life-changer' and applies the same process to others. Here again it is impossible to help seeing the implicit appeal to other than purely evangelistic motives. The love of being *in* the movement, of self expression, of influencing others, of 'having a purpose in life,' and of the companionableness of being in a team—it is all quite harmless and much like what some of us remember about the war. But is it religion, and does it constitute apostolate? The immense and overmastering sense of God, without which attempts at changing other lives are sheer impertinence, seems to be almost completely lacking. The impression is that of propaganda rather than apostolate, the emphasis is on results, in oneself and in others and in the world. Of disinterested love of God for His own sake, or the acceptance of defeat and failure in conformity with His will, I heard nothing at all. Indeed several young people spoke of 'life-changing' activities as 'such fun,' and this kind of statement seems to be encouraged rather than deprecated.

Constantly one hears the testimony, 'I had been a Christian worker for years, but had never changed anyone. Now, I do it all the time.' The readiness, even eagerness, with which they speak of the results of their work is not easy to distinguish from self-advertisement, and the lack of reticence which is induced by oft-repeated and indiscriminate 'sharing' can hardly fail to end in shallowness. A group or a team hold every day what they call a 'quiet time,' which appears to resemble a monastic chapter in which all matter for confession is stated as well as faults against the Rule. One cannot resist the impression that the light-heartedness and jollity which some observe among Buchmanites is due partly to the fact that they are living on the surface of life. There are no more dark places, no secret fears, but equally there are no secret depths, no reserves, no holy places. It is to be feared that this 'quality of life' is a nostrum for the pains of living rather than an increase of God in the soul. And, after hearing interminable testimonies, some of which gave me an uncomfortable impression of prepared spontaneity, I was left wondering whether the benefit of the release which was con-

stantly being claimed from various failings was not outweighed by the danger of spiritual pride. 'Surrender' is put into practice by undertaking various small methods of mortification, such as sleeping less than nine hours (this a parson), thinking less about food, and so on. But when you have spoken many times in public about these efforts, and about the wonderful effects your 'surrendered' life is having, are you not perhaps in the danger of those who do their good deeds that they may be seen of men, and who—how deep the irony—'have their reward'? If only all this were undertaken secretly and under the impulse of a new and powerful conception of God and eternity, it would be, one may say, a Good Thing. But the prime motive is openly stated, and it is not a wholly self-forgetful or Godward one. 'I came here to be changed,' said one, 'and I have been changed.' Another announced that he was going to stay till he *was* changed. And several young women said that they were going back to start changing the Vicar or some other tiresome person.

Where the 'changed' are life-long Christians who have become 'stale'—and a very large proportion are such—one can well understand that they may, against the background of their previous knowledge and training, gain refreshment and encouragement through a fresh abandonment of their lives to the will of God and from the new association with others likeminded. But for those who have had little or no religious training or experience, the violent *catharsis* which is the centre of the life-changing method and the immediate assumption of life-changing responsibilities for other people, would appear to be in general very dangerous.

'It is so easy to be a life-changer,' said one enthusiast, 'the world is waiting for us to change it.' There is no idea whatever that conversion may involve, among other things, the intelligent acceptance of a new intellectual outlook by a free individual. 'Sound doctrine' is a catchword to raise a laugh, as does also the mention of a Bishop, unless of course he is in the movement, when he is spoken of with as much awe as if he were a Big Business Man. It is as-

sumed that those who have missed the groups have missed Christ, and little or no account is taken of the fact that there are various Christian bodies in the world who have been and are getting on with the work of preaching Christ and saving souls. It is generally assumed that this work is entirely futile, and much scorn is thrown upon the ineffectual Church to which it appeared one and all belonged. The horrid habit of blaming the Church for the sins of oneself and other people was painfully evident, though perhaps it is too much to expect that non-Catholics should have much sense of the Church as an entity over and above its individual members.

It seems to be feared by some that Catholics may be 'got hold of' by the Groups. I do not think there is very much danger in this, even if a few are attracted—not unnaturally—by their enthusiasm and courage, not to speak of the quite genuine charity which animates the best of them. Despite the somewhat arrogant assumption of a monopoly of spiritual experience—a maximum experience of Christ, as they rather oddly express it—the group authorities do appear to urge all the 'changed' to go to the Churches where they belong. A Catholic thus sent about his duties is not likely to take much harm or to be in a position to accept his subconscious impulses as direct guidance from God, which is a real danger for those without a religious background. Also, a Catholic, with the confessional to resort to, is less likely to fall into the hands of the amateur 'life-changers.'

From a nonconformist weekly I have recently gathered that the movement is already in the throes of disunion. The tendency of the so-called Oxford Group to make Mr. Buchman their infallible oracle is evidently resented by some who claim to belong to the movement, and a writer in this paper was asserting with some heat that there was an Oxford Group and a Cambridge Group and an Evangelical Group, and many more beside, and that all alike belonged to the movement. A movement which has already its schismatics claiming catholicity is not very likely to fulfil the oft-repeated fears that it will become the origin of

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another sect. It will pass, for there is nothing about it to give it permanence. And, please God, some of those whose religious desires have been aroused by it may find at last the Church which is founded on a Rock.

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