

Chit Chat Club Talk
As delivered 12 January 2016
University Club, San Francisco

Moral Re-Armament: My Early Life in a Utopian Cult

Paul J. Karlstrom

There seem to be two desirable qualities in a Chit Chat Club paper. First, we are encouraged to step outside our professional comfort zones, and second, an approach favored by more than a few of our members, is to present an essay that provides personal insight into the individual life of the presenter. I finally decided to follow both paths this time. Describing the circumstances of my childhood to several Chit Chat friends, I saw that their curiosity was aroused; they wanted to hear more. As it turns out, I needed to learn more. The subject of the curiosity was my “secret life”—not a “secret” of which I was ashamed... but it was complicated, and through most of my life, I dodged the subject whenever possible.

The “secret” was the organization called Moral Re-Armament, in whose embrace I spent most of the first years of my life. It was founded by Lutheran pastor Dr. Frank N. D. Buchman, a Pennsylvania native, in England in 1927 as the Oxford Group. In 1938 the name was changed to Moral Re-Armament, referred to familiarly as MRA. The avowed goal of the renamed movement echoed the militarism of the time by calling for an international moral “re-armament” as an

effective means to counter the military armament underway. The grand hope was to derail the approaching world war and establish a new road to world peace. The central consistent idea of Buchmanism was that working together under the guidance of God and observing four Absolute Moral Standards—Absolute Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness, and Love—the seemingly intractable problems that hounded humanity throughout history could be resolved once and for all. That is the worldview that informed the familial environment into which I was born in Seattle, Washington, on January 22, 1941. My very dedicated Lutheran parents, fresh out of college, were among those young idealists who embraced Uncle Frank's movement.

All four of my grandparents came to this country from Sweden, uniformly carrying the DNA of strict Swedish Lutheranism, and the ministry was the preferred male occupation on both sides of my family. My paternal grandfather, former seafarer Otto Reinhold Karlstrom, was a Lutheran pastor whose unorthodox vision of a mission for Scandinavian sailors (even Norwegians), resulted in Compass Mission on Seattle's skid row. The church authorities did not approve, and so Otto had to go it alone.

My father, Paul, the second of five sons, was the one chosen to attend seminary and carry on the work of Compass Mission. He had, like his father,

graduated from Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, which I also attended for one year. He was a natural for a social service mission within a religious context, but he wanted even more real-life engagement.

I now think that my parents' course, and the decision to enlist with MRA, was set even before they began married life in Seattle. My dad, a self-proclaimed pacifist, was a steamfitter at Todd's Shipyards during World War II. We lived in my mother's dream house, purchased with her inheritance, which overlooked Puget Sound, only a few blocks north of my grandparents' weathered house on the water. Either before my birth or shortly after, my parents made a decision to give up what I remember as an idyllic family setting to go full time with MRA.

I had never considered my family as members of a cult, but recently I began to see some disturbing commonalities. One of the definitions of a cult is “a religion or sect considered to be false, unorthodox, or extremist, with members often living outside of conventional society *under the direction of a charismatic leader.*” This founder/leader is revered as a spiritual representative of God or, at minimum, spiritual truth—an authority figure who directs the membership. With MRA, it was “Uncle” Frank Buchman. Those of you who have seen the powerful film *The Master*, starring Phillip Seymour Hoffman, will remember that his character was reverentially

referred to and addressed as “Master.” The screenplay is a not-very-thinly disguised portrait of cultism based squarely on Scientology and L. Ron Hubbard. Things began to seem familiar as I watched the story unfold.

What many people don’t know is that Scientology was just one of several cultish groups assembled in Pasadena. John (Jack) Parsons, the brilliant rocket scientist and deeply eccentric founder of Jet Propulsion Laboratory, also dabbled in the occult and Satanism. A convert to Thelema—the English occultist Aleister Crowley’s new religion—he hosted orgiastic cult gatherings in the 1940s at his mansion on Orange Grove Avenue where he conducted rituals designed to invoke the Thelemic goddess—Babalon—to Earth. He was joined by his friend Hubbard in some of these spacey esoteric activities. Despite the number of scientist participants, this was hardly Enlightenment fare. And what meaningful connection could my MRA have to such off-the-charts departures from both science and religion?

Most American cults associate themselves with Christianity, and one extreme example was David Berg’s Children of God (Berg was “Dad”), in which actors River and Joaquin Phoenix grew up. A kind of libertine hippie cult, it was founded in Huntington Beach in the late 1960s before spreading worldwide. It included bizarre sexual practices such as “flirty fishing,” in which young women “evangelists” were deployed to “convert” lonely men in bars, using seduction to

gain members and generate funds. The term comes directly from Jesus himself: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19).

As perhaps the extreme perversion of the Christian source, the tragic history of Jim Jones and People’s Temple provides a chilling reminder of the horrors which allegiance and unthinking obedience given to a charismatic cult leader may bring. I live in a neighborhood—the Lower Haight—which in the late 1970s lost a large part of its mainly poor African-American residents who fell under the insidious spell of Jones, moved to Guyana, and never returned. Surely all of us here remember the shock with which the reports from Jonestown following the November 1978 mass “suicide” of 909 members was greeted here.

Some supposedly religious organizations are undeniably cults, some of a sinister character. The territory is not clearly marked. But with the attention focused on one of these so-called religions—notably last year’s riveting HBO documentary about Scientology, entitled *Going Clear*—the power and danger of cult in our open society is worth pondering. I was surprised to see that MRA and Scientology shared some important features. In addition to the charismatic leader, there was the requirement of apologizing to individuals wronged or slighted (whether in fact or in perception), followed by confession, sometimes in group settings. Also, the choice of life partners, of pairings, was the business of the cult.

But exactly how do MRA and my youthful self fit into this cult category? That's the question I kept asking myself as I read from the many books written about the movement, propaganda intended to create a historical record. MRA was convinced its ideas and work were historic. Every speech by Frank Buchman seems to have been reverently recorded, and they are peculiarly unvaried.

The MRA-vetted literature is massive, repetitive, and faithful to doctrine with frequent references to and quotations from Uncle Frank. The most ambitious hagiography is Garth Lean's *On the Tale of a Comet* (1985), which slogs along for 590 pages. It is frankly—no pun intended—boring, limited to the same main points about the MRA mission.

Buchman's chosen successor was Peter Howard, and his 1951 history of the movement, *The World Rebuilt* is hardly modest in its claims for MRA. To wit:

When Moral Re-Armament was launched in 1938 the democracies of the world were caught unprepared before the Fascist onslaught. . . .

When the war ended it moved forward as the most dynamic and basic force answering the new Communist onslaught.

My parents' decision to go full time with MRA grew from their apparent belief that Frank Buchman's "Guidance" was closest to the truth of God's plan for all people. My father had been assigned for several years to headquarters on Mackinac

Island, Michigan—where we were eventually allowed to join him. I spent one carefree year in that relatively unfettered environment with two forts and no cars. In 1949, we left the communal life at Mackinac and traveled west to Los Angeles, my father's new assignment.

At age eight or nine, I became more aware of my different family circumstances, even though we lived in two average suburban neighborhoods in North Hollywood and Burbank. But these residences were owned by MRA members and made available to full-timers, such as my folks.

We paid no rent during the MRA years. My understanding is that when my folks elected to pursue Uncle Frank's utopian vision, they gave all their worldly goods to the organization. What they didn't fully realize then, and maybe never did, was that in doing so, they largely ceded their autonomy to Uncle Frank. I recall the growing realization that my immediate family was suspect in terms of Lutheran orthodoxy, not to mention judgment and common sense. I suspect the broader family considered mom and dad to be, at best, naïve.

It now becomes clear to me that their total commitment to MRA cost them dearly from a conventional perspective. But in the end, it was never rejected or regretted. Our eventual departure from MRA was in response to the strong recommendation from my mother's psychotherapist. She was diagnosed as manic depressive, with strong suicidal tendencies. Dr. Janiger believed firmly that guilt

and group confession did not help her condition. That occurred in 1953, effectively ending my direct connection with the practices, ideas, and requirements with which I had grown up.

However, my parents did remain attached to the teachings of Uncle Frank and MRA, and they continued to observe the ritual of Quiet Time and divine Guidance (in effect, conversing with God and writing down His directions). This belief apparently was not metaphorical but literal.

But by the time of my parents' seemingly amicable separation from MRA, I was already, making my own way. Previously it seemed to me that my family circumstances were somehow irregular when compared to those of my classmates in primary school in Burbank. We didn't even have a TV until 1953, when I had saved enough from my paper route to contribute half of the cost of a used small-screen model. I was thrilled because I could now at school discuss the previous night's *I Love Lucy* and my favorite short—*Crusader Rabbit*. I wanted very much to fit in. When my new classmates would ask me what my dad did, I was at a loss.

In both of my mainly blue collar neighborhoods many dads worked at the local studios—Warner Brothers and Disney—or Lockheed Aircraft. Those were “normal” jobs to my mind, and I hit upon a solution that turned out to be most serviceable. My dad drove daily to downtown L.A. to MRA's West Coast training center (it had previously been a hotel), called The Club. So, with TV's *Lucy* in

mind, I casually announced, “Oh, he works at The Club.” To which the typical response was: “Wow! Just like Ricky Ricardo, huh?” I didn’t bother to disabuse them, and they didn’t bother to ask *which* club. Looking back, I see that I manufactured various subterfuges to avoid describing something that as a child I didn’t fully comprehend.

The reality of my adolescence, parking with girlfriends on Mulholland Drive and then feeling guilty at St. Matthews Lutheran Church the next day brings us to Absolute Purity. Although purity of spirit must be what was intended, I think sex inevitably took center stage in the MRA regulatory program. In the earliest published history of the Oxford Group, the anonymous author writes about the Four Absolutes—and Purity gets the most ink. The basic idea is that purity of body and mind will make possible the connection with God and his Guidance. This is, given human nature, a tall order, especially if it is interpreted as proscription of natural impulses. Pre-marital and extramarital sex were not just discouraged but prohibited. The question is, to what extent was “normal” conjugal sex controlled by the doctrines of MRA? The issue is important to me in terms of what my parents endured in that regard. I gathered that sexual pleasure by itself, for its own sake, was considered out of bounds—even in marriage. I’m not sure why I knew that, but my folks took all the instructions too much to heart—a blatant effort to

control human behavior under strict rules and guidance from a Christian fundamentalist's viewpoint.

My mother was especially susceptible to how her behavior was regarded and was ambivalent about her own nature versus the “morality” dictated by Uncle Frank. Even lipstick was forbidden. In retrospect it seems that the cultured life she truly sought was crushed rather than fulfilled by MRA. Dad, with his social worker conscience and basic suspicion if not outright disapproval of wealth, was a better fit.

This also explains why he never understood the career I later chose. There were too many naked women involved, in museums and even on the walls of our small home on an alley in Santa Monica. His disapproval of the large painting of a nude beach bride with veil and bouquet was immediate and vehement: “What are you trying to prove?” A puritanical equation of nudity and sex in a kind of retrograde art criticism was apparently consistent with the attitudes of Buchmanism. The fundamentalist approach is unmistakable—again, in *What is the Oxford Group?*:

That pictorial art must shock to attract attention is the belief of some of those who have an artistic capacity. Modern art galleries and exhibitions exude suggestive nudity from their walls. Grossness is mistaken for artistry; blatancy for originality; indecency for truth,

until the average person often wonders if these artists are half-wits who have never grown beyond the silly crudity of their childish sex-obsessions.

I realize that this same Puritan prudery at one time informed my own perceptions of depicted nudity. On one occasion in the home of a neighbor friend, I encountered the small porcelain figurine of a chastely posed female nude. I actually wince to recall my own condemnation of this inoffensive object. I pointed out to my pre-teen friend that such displays were immoral. He immediately confronted his parents. Well, in terms of my views on such matters, I could not have traveled further. But that incident should be traced straight to MRA.

To the end of her troubled life, my mother strove to be a good observant MRA-style Christian, and she aspired to live up to the real-world all but unobtainable absolute standards. As a result, there were a few occasions in high school when I was subjected to weird criticism along MRA lines. Too much time in the shower, for instance, might bring a worried inquiry from mom. Uncle Frank would surely have applauded. During the early days of his zealous campus ministry, he sternly warned his charges at Princeton and elsewhere about the danger of warm showers leading to unhealthy sexual behavior. Absolute Honesty is even more problematic, if not impossible in practice.

The doctrine of Change is shared by the pseudo-religious program of Scientology, and MRA is a most likely source—as it undeniably is for Alcoholics Anonymous. When AA was founded in 1935, co-founder Bill Wilson lifted verbatim many methodologies and principles from the Oxford Group—meetings of which he regularly attended. MRA is acknowledged in the introduction to the AA handbook. And there are other parallels between the movements founded by Frank Buchman and L. Ron Hubbard. Neither man was entirely self-sacrificing, especially Hubbard, who brazenly and openly declared that what he was after was money. And he further proclaimed that the easiest way to get it was to found a religion, which he proceeded to do with enormous success and the rather shocking blessing of the IRS.

Buchman, the ordained Lutheran minister was more genuinely idealistic, proceeding from orthodox, albeit extreme, Christian values. Some MRA idolaters even compared him to St. Francis! But in fact Uncle Frank also favored the good things in life, and both men sought out the rich and famous. MRA's anti-materialism appears to have applied primarily to followers like my parents and those of Heidi Nobantu Saul, a fellow child of MRA with whom I had the privilege of comparing notes during Christmas week in Santa Fe.

Heidi's parents met at MRA in Europe in the late 1940s. They fell in love, an unwelcome development for MRA leadership. Uncle Frank's permission to

marry was given more quickly than usual based on his liking for Heidi's mother and twin sister—and her handsome father. Heidi described MRA as a cult that, in her words, “stole my childhood.” She refers to MRA as “Scientology Lite.” Born in South Africa in 1959, as a six-month-old baby she was deposited at Caux, the palatial MRA center in Switzerland, where she was assigned to and raised by different people. At age three she was transferred to Mackinac Island under the same adult supervision: “I wasn't primary to anyone,” she says. In the misguided belief that marriage and family interfered with the movement's work, MRA often separated parents and children.

Heidi's father was stage manager for the MRA play *The Good Road* and other polemical productions, which took him around the world. An extremely sad moment for Heidi—and for what it reveals about MRA—was when after a long absence her father appeared and she ran joyfully to him. His response, almost inconceivable to most of us, was to step back and extend his paternal hand for her to shake with her small one. On another occasion (at Mackinac), when her uncle stooped down to pick her up, her father warned his brother to “put her down.” Such were the rules. She carried this memory for years. There was a dark paradoxical coldness at the heart of this organization ostensibly dedicated to the warmth of human interaction and positive individual Change.

Heidi's father eventually left MRA, and he himself described it as a cult. As an adult, Heidi learned from him that Uncle Frank was considered a closeted homosexual. Perhaps his own frustrations and guilt could explain his surprisingly rigorous anti-sex moral program. As MRA began to decline in the mid 1960s, the criticism of the movement included its upbeat offshoot Up with People. Red-baiting and gay-bashing were among the charges.

Another friend, and colleague, with whom I've shared stories is Elizabeth Goodenough, an English professor specializing in childhood studies. She was subjected to aspects of MRA that have provoked her thinking about spirituality and the body over the years. Interfering with sexuality and the autonomous body seems to be chief among them: "MRA should have stayed out of our pants."

Despite all that I've learned over the past year, I can't measure the depth of the MRA cult "darkness." I can say that Frank Buchman was the unlikely leader of an idealistic reform movement that enjoyed acknowledged success on the international stage and even earned high-level endorsements. However, the irony is that the admirable mission Dr. Buchman initiated was predictably destroyed by a far more powerful adversary. Human nature, the good and the bad of it, was inescapable. Uncle Frank appears to have been a deeply flawed individual who founded his cult with the authority of his personal conversations with God—and increasingly prominent and influential human beings.

Oxford served as the birthplace of the Oxford Group only inadvertently. The name represented no official connection, only a few followers among students and faculty. From the beginning, Buchman's passive-aggressive Christian extremism and focus on redemption of sexual sin were, it seems to me, at the heart of the movement. His prescribed redemptive therapy consisted of confession with detailed descriptions of the renounced transgressions. Again, this spiritual cure was practically identical to that of L. Ron Hubbard.

The similarities between MRA and Scientology are there, but among the significant differences is the absolute standard of Unselfishness. Hubbard's invention is fundamentally self-oriented and self-promotional. MRA, despite predictable lapses, hews much closer to the ideals of personal redemption and world change. Sing Out/ Up with People and Initiatives of Change, the successors to MRA, both seek to adjust to contemporary life while honoring the ideals. As Buchman's successor, Peter Howard, put it at a planning meeting shortly before his death, "We need to think more for ourselves." The movement continues in a different form to this day, mainly in Europe.

I now recognize that MRA did indeed have an impact upon my life. Uncle Frank's strong disapproval temporarily formed my views of sex and nudity. Life and art history—and especially the 1960s—pretty well took care of that. And I

know that this was also true for other youngsters. Fortunately, our human natures, educations, and hormones eventually came to our rescue—in most cases. I now look back and think that I had a rather intriguing beginning as a full-time child of Moral Re-Armament. I think I emerged relatively unscathed. Others did not. But I have discovered, in this long-ignored past, a topic for thought and writing to which I plan to return.

© Paul J. Karlstrom