

A.A.'s Roots in the Oxford Group

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Almost every A.A. member knows that two dramatic encounters in the mid-1930s were key events that helped bring Alcoholics Anonymous into existence.

The first of these encounters was Ebby T.'s visit to Bill W. in 1934, when the latter sat drinking in the kitchen of his Brooklyn home. The second great encounter came about six months later and helped spark the actual founding of the A.A. movement. That, of course, was Bill's famous meeting with Dr. Bob in Akron, Ohio on Mother's Day, 1935.

Today, both meetings are rightly regarded as the early seeding of A.A. But in fact, they were also new plantings of work by the Oxford Group, the inspirational fellowship which nurtured many of the spiritual ideas and practices that became essential to Alcoholics Anonymous. What follows is a bit of history and a discussion of A.A.'s links to the Oxford Group and its founder, Frank Buchman.

The Oxford Group was an evangelistic Christian movement that grew up in the 1920s under the leadership of Buchman, an extraordinary man who eventually became world-renowned for his work in promoting peace and reconciliation. In the 1950's he was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Buchman, a Lutheran minister at the beginning of his career, was born on June 4, 1878, in Painsburg in eastern Pennsylvania. He lived a long life that was marked by great accomplishments and some controversy. Such was his stature as a world figure that when he died in Freudenstadt, Germany in 1961, his obituary was featured on page one in both The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times. He was eulogized on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives by 11 members of Congress, while 20 heads of state sent messages to his funeral. His passing was also noted in news magazines and other periodicals.

Buchman's program was at various times called "First Century Christian Fellowship," "The Groups" (1920s), the "Oxford Group" (1930s) and "Moral Re-Armament" (1938 and on). Buchman's friends and associates knew him as a genial, intuitive, intelligent, compassionate man--a true humanitarian. He had an extraordinary ability to motivate able men and women to dedicate all their time and money in fulfilling his global vision of world changing through life changing. His tools in effecting changes in people and situations were the guidance of God and the four standards (absolutes) of

honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love. It could be said, with justification, that Buchman attempted to carry essential spiritual principles to the average person without getting sidetracked in religious or sectarian issues. He was certainly an early architect of the spiritual, mutual assistance movements which have grown up in many forms. John Drakeford writes in his People to People Therapy that the roots of modern mutual assistance renewal lie in John Wesley's group meetings, Frank Buchman's Oxford Group, and Bill W's Alcoholics Anonymous. Howard Clinebell, author of the classic textbook Understanding and Counseling the Alcoholic, says Buchman, as much as anyone, broke people out of the assumption that problem persons had to go to a professional. He demonstrated that they might get more help from other persons with the same problem.

It Started With a Resentment

There's a saying in A.A. that all it takes to start a new group is a member with a resentment. That's the way it was with Frank Buchman. He had a resentment, then he had a spiritual experience which completely turned him around. Finally he followed through by making amends and starting a movement. Here's how it happened.

Growing up in Allentown, "Pennsylvania Dutch" country where his father ran a saloon near the court house, Buchman was strongly influenced by his mother to enter the ministry. He studied at Muhlenberg College and Mt. Airy Seminary, and then engaged in church work that led to his establishing, in 1905, a hospice for underprivileged boys in the slums of Philadelphia.

But a run-in with the trustees over their plan to cut costs by reducing the boys' food finally brought about his resignation. Filled with resentment toward the board, Buchman sailed for Europe. It was 1908, and he was 30 years old. He was a bitter, disillusioned man, and his rancor towards the trustees had made him miserable and lonely.

In England, he drifted to a religious conference which turned out to be cold and unexciting. Then, in the little town of Keswick, Buchman attended an afternoon church service that proved to be the turning point in his life. It was a small gathering of only 17 people. The speaker was a Salvation Army woman. By his own admission, Buchman went into the church nursing pride, selfishness, and ill-will which he later realized were preventing him from functioning as a Christian minister should.

The woman's talk got through to him, giving him a vision of the gulf between him and Christ that had been created by his anger toward the trustees. He then had a transforming spiritual experience which completely changed his life. He stopped blaming the trustees and wrote each of them a letter of amends. This so altered his thinking that he became convinced that such an experience, if multiplied, was the answer to the world's ills.

For the next few years, Buchman served as a YMCA secretary at Penn State, where he worked with students in developing his life changing methods. One of the persons who was changed by Buchman's message was Bill Pickle, the campus bootlegger who was also an alcoholic. But the Buchman disciple who was to be so important to A.A.'s early origins was Sam Shoemaker, whose life was changed as a result of a meeting with Frank Buchman in China in 1918. Dr. Sam was to become a spiritual counselor to Bill W. and one of A.A.'s strongest supporters in the ministry. After breaking with Buchman in 1941, Sam carried on the mutual assistance idea in his own "Faith At Work" movement.

By 1919, Buchman had formed a society called the First Century Christian Fellowship, which soon became known as The Groups. The fellowship sponsored house parties, and practiced a program which included prayers, confession of wrongs, seeking guidance, making restitution, and a life changing out-reach to others. The Oxford Group name was adopted in 1928, because students at Oxford University were fanning out with the idea throughout the world.

In 1923, Buchman and the fellowship were described in a book entitled Life Changers, by Harold Begbie. Oddly enough, Frank stipulated that his name not be mentioned in the book, and he was described only as "F.B." or "F." Seven other chapters were devoted to young college people--Sam Shoemaker being one--who had experienced change and were working to help others, but nobody was named in the book. This practice, certainly an example of what Bill W. viewed as spiritual anonymity, was later dropped by the Oxford Group in favor of a "key person" strategy; i.e., using illustrious names and prominent people who had been helped in order to attract others into the fellowship.

But the book that put it all together for the Oxford Group was a 1932 publication entitled For Sinners Only, written by A.J. Russell and published by Harper's. The book focused on the Oxford Group when it was enjoying its greatest success as a mutual assistance movement. Russell, himself a beneficiary of Oxford group teachings, also wrote many of the spiritual messages reprinted in the meditation book, Twenty-Four Hours a Day, which is used by many recovering alcoholics. For Sinners Only was indeed the "Big Book" of the Oxford Group, and may well have served partially as a model. Those who are interested in knowing more of Frank Buchman's background may wish to see his latest biography, out in 1988, On the Tail of a Comet by Garth Lean, published by Helmers & Howard, Colorado Springs.

The Jung Connection

In that same period, a problem drinker named Rowland H. learned from the distinguished psychiatrist, Dr. Carl Jung in Switzerland that cases like his were hopeless except when a vital spiritual experience took charge. Rowland found his experience in the Oxford Group, and passed it along to Ebby T., who then carried it to Bill at his kitchen table in Brooklyn. At Towns Hospital, in 1934, Bill W. had the same kind of spiritual experience that had come to Frank Buchman in England in 1908. And just as Frank had viewed his experience as an answer to the world's ills, so did Bill W. see it as the way out for thousands of other alcoholics. Thus the stage was set for the Akron encounter which brought A.A. into being. At first, the alcoholic recovery program was all part of the Oxford Group activity.

Henrietta Seiberling, the gracious lady who brought Bill and Bob together at her Akron home, recalled that Bill introduced himself to her over the phone as "a member of the Oxford Group from New York and a rum hound." It was a providential call, because Henrietta was herself a member of the Akron Oxford Group which had been trying to help Dr. Bob. Only two weeks earlier, in an emotion-charged meeting at the home of T. Henry and Clarace Williams, Dr. Bob, who had been attending the weekly meetings for over two years, only now admitted to the others that he had a drinking problem. Bob then and there led the group in prayer for his recovery. Now he was to meet the man whom he would later describe as the first living human being with whom he had ever spoken, who knew what he was talking about in regard to alcoholism from actual experience.

The Akron Connection

The astonishing thing about this historic meeting was that earlier events had made the Akron Oxford Group unusually strong and active at the very time an unrelated business venture brought Bill to Akron. A few years before, an Oxford Group member who was closely associated with a prominent tire manufacturer was able to help one of the industrialist's sons overcome his drinking problem. The son in turn aided an alcoholic lawyer who was winning most of his court battles and losing his bottle battles. Because the tire scion's escapades had been the talk of the town, his recovery gripped the city's attention. As a result of such recoveries, the Akron Oxford Group was locally regarded as being effective in dealing with alcoholism.

The tire manufacturer, grateful for his son's recovery, then invited an Oxford Group team of 60 people to Akron in 1933 to conduct night and morning meetings throughout the city for ten days. Henrietta Seiberling and T. Henry and Clarace Williams joined the Group during this ten-day session, and started the Wednesday night meetings in the Williams home that were joined by Dr. Bob and Anne Smith. The meetings were joyous and friendly, and Dr. Bob said the Oxford Group members attracted him because of their seeming poise, health, and happiness. "They spoke with great freedom from embarrassment, which I could never do, and they seemed very much at ease on all occasions and appeared very healthy. More than these attributes, they seemed to be happy," he wrote in his personal story. He

and Anne attended the meetings for 2-1/2 years, but he still drank every night nevertheless. He later acknowledged, however, that the Oxford Group led him to vital spiritual principles which were to be important in his A.A. work. Beyond that, of course, it was the Group connection and Mrs. Seiberling's inspiration that helped bring him into touch with Bill W.

Sam Shoemaker

Meanwhile, back in New York City, the Oxford Group was also highly active at its national headquarters in Dr. Sam Shoemaker's Calvary Church, where Ebby T. and Bill W. received much valuable help. Dr. Sam was virtually the U.S. leader of the fellowship, and was the ideal person to become Bill W.'s spiritual mentor. As Bill later said, "...the early A.A. got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgement of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others, straight from the Oxford Groups and directly from Sam Shoemaker..., and from nowhere else. Sam's teaching did most to show us how to create the spiritual climate in which we alcoholics may survive and then proceed to grow."

In 1978, Lois W. told an interviewer that for two and one half years, 1934-1937, she and Bill attended two Oxford Group meetings in Manhattan every week for most weeks of the year. Thursday evenings were personal sharing and planning. Sunday afternoons were the more public meetings where people brought new friends. In the video tape "Bill's Own Story," Bill rounds out this wonderful chain of events, saying, "We began to go to Oxford Group meetings....Dr. Shoemaker's impact on us in those early days certainly registered, and the principles emphasized by the Oxford Group later lent themselves very readily to the formation of A.A.'s 12 Steps and publication of our book Alcoholics Anonymous".

Despite this important linkage, Bill and the small band of alcoholics around him did not long remain associated with the Oxford Group. Bill began holding separate meetings for alcoholics soon after returning from Akron. In 1937 his fledgling group in New York City withdrew completely from the Oxford Group fellowship. Nevertheless, Bill always acknowledged that the important spiritual and working principles of A.A. came from the Group.

Out in Akron, it was a slightly different story. Deeply loyal to non-alcoholic friends such as Henrietta Seiberling and the T. Henry Williamses, the recovered alcoholics in Akron maintained their Oxford Group ties until 1939. They, too, eventually decided to follow a separate path in order to be more effective in aiding alcoholics. By this time, the book Alcoholics Anonymous had been published and the fellowship of recovered alcoholics had its own name. A.A. groups had been started in Cleveland, and A.A. was now well on its way as a separate society, grateful to the Oxford Group but no longer dependent on it.

Differences in Methodology

There were other reasons why A.A. and the Oxford Group followed separate paths after 1939. Frank Buchman apparently knew that this program had been effective in helping alcoholics and, according to A.A. old timer Clarence S., Buchman addressed the Akron group in 1938. But Buchman did not view helping alcoholics as a major activity of his fellowship. "I'm all for the alcoholics getting changed," he was quoted as saying, "but we have drunken nations on our hands as well." Much of his work after 1938 was devoted to bringing world leaders together in an effort to promote reconciliation and understanding without war and violence. Buchman had little confidence in a special interest program exclusively for alcoholics, and except for an appearance at the Akron Group he never showed interest in personal involvement in A.A. activities.

In addition, Bill W. and other A.A. pioneers also felt that the assertive evangelism of the Oxford Group would not work with alcoholics. Chastened by failure, Bill had already been forced to tone down his own evangelistic fervor just before meeting Dr. Bob. Another difference was that the early A.A.'s became committed to the practice of anonymity, whereas the Oxford Group sought to work with prominent individuals. The Oxford Group also emphasized the Four Standards, or Absolutes, which were not formally adopted by A.A. but are still displayed by some local A.A. groups. Bill W. believed that these standards were expressed or implied in the Twelve Steps.

There was yet another compelling reason for A.A.'s separation from the Oxford Group. Frank Buchman had been remarkably successful in building bridges to various religious faiths during his early career. Indeed, he was probably a herald of the modern ecumenical movement.

But in the late 1930s, for whatever reasons, the Oxford Group was misunderstood by a few denominational spokesmen, and negatives appeared in the press. Bill W., who was already well along with the idea of avoiding public controversies, did not feel that A.A. could afford to be linked with the Oxford Group any longer in the public mind. Subsequently, prominent prelates in the same denominations reversed those positions and publicly supported Buchman's work. Nevertheless, in Bill's mind, controversy diverted attention and energy from A.A.'s singleness of purpose. There was even the fear that the use of the Four Standards and other Oxford Group terminology could arouse prejudice against A.A. Finally the Oxford Group itself, as it was transformed into Moral Re-Armament, placed less emphasis on the small group, mutual assistance concept that was so useful to recovering alcoholics. In 1939, when A.A. had only 100 members, Frank Buchman was introducing MRA to the nation in huge mass meetings at Madison Square Garden, Constitution Hall (D.C.), and the Hollywood Bowl.

Moral Re-Armament

For the rest of his life, Buchman sought to make MRA an instrument of world peace. The society operated conference centers at Mackinac Island, Michigan and at Caux, Switzerland, on Lake Geneva. Buchman was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1951 and 1952, and during the latter years he also addressed a joint session of both houses of the Indian Parliament in New Delhi. In addition, he received decorations from eight governments for his peacemaking efforts. MRA also promoted its philosophy, centered around the Four Absolutes, in newspaper advertisements and through stage and screen presentations. Although MRA activity and membership in the United States went into some decline following Frank Buchman's death in 1961, significant work today is seen in India, England, Switzerland, and elsewhere.

In America, substantial MRA financial resources and energy went into a young people's travelling, inspirational program, "Up With People." There is now no connection between the two entities. In recent years, the Moral Re-Armament program has been steadily re-building in the United States, with centers in the East, Midwest, and West Coast. International conferences have been held in Washington and Atlanta. The world assembly center at Caux, Switzerland, attracts each summer several thousand representatives from all continents.

While A.A. received much of its spiritual program from the Oxford Group, there are many other A.A. practices and ideas which were developed independently or came from other sources. On the medical side, for example, Dr. William D. Silkworth, a physician specializing in alcoholism, gave A.A. its clear understanding of alcoholism as a disease. The Traditions which have guided many A.A. activities were developed independently, mostly through trial-and-error. The Twelve Steps were written by Bill W. and reflected the six principles that were used when the early A.A.'s still attended Oxford Group meetings. The Serenity Prayer and the A.A. slogans also came from sources other than the Oxford Group. On the other hand, the Lord's prayer was said at, or near, the close of most Group weekly meetings.

Appreciation

Bill W. was justly proud of his correspondence with Dr. C.G. Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist, whom he thanked for telling Rowland H. that the only hope for his alcoholism was a transforming spiritual experience. Bill regretted he had not also expressed appreciation to Frank Buchman for providing Rowland with the experience Jung called for. A month after Frank's death in 1961, Bill wrote to a friend: "Now that Frank Buchman is gone and I realize more than ever what we owe to him, I wish I had sought him out in recent years to tell him of our appreciation."

The inspirational, mutual assistance portion of A.A. and its concept of a Higher Power—all of that came from the Oxford Group and the early inspiration of Frank Buchman. Is that important? Many A.A.'s would say that it was all God-ordained and God-directed anyhow, so who cares if everybody is properly credited for his role in the development of our fellowship?

One A.A. member who did care was Al L., a retired rubber engineer from Akron who lived in Pompano Beach, Florida until his death. He attended his first meeting in 1937 at the Williams home and finally established continuous sobriety in 1941. Dr. Bob was his sponsor.

Al carried a small stack of wallet-size pictures which were a sort of pictorial history of A.A. There were shots of T. Henry and Clarace Williams, Dr. Bob and Anne S., Ebby T., Bill and Lois W., and others.

But the very first picture in the stack was a portrait of Frank Buchman. Al had a stock answer for anybody who asked, "Why do you keep Frank's picture on top?"

It was this: "Because that's where it all began. None of this would have happened without Frank."

That's not the whole story, of course. Many A.A. members feel that God could have used hundreds of different channels and people to bring A.A. into existence. But He apparently chose Frank Buchman and the Oxford Group. If that bothers you, take comfort in the fact that it bothered Bill W. when the Group message was first presented to him by Ebby. But didn't it all work out in a wonderful way!