

From controversy to history :
The Caux-Palace, from Moral Rearmament to Initiatives of Change Switzerland

For more than a century now, the Caux-Palace has dominated the Vaud Riviera, and for more than 75 years, this striking building has been home to a movement that is difficult to define: Moral Rearmament (MRA), now (since 2001) *Initiatives of Change Switzerland*. Since its beginnings as a conference centre in 1946, at the end of the Second World War, tens of thousands of people from all over the world have discovered this small village in the Commune of Montreux. It is not easy to find statistics, but there have been perhaps more than 100,000 participants and a little over two million overnight stays since 1946.

It's not easy to define the movement either. Is it a sect? Is it a religious or spiritual movement? The current slogan on the Caux website says: 'Reconciling differences, creating trust'. My personal definition is: 'Ubuntu' a humanistic notion originating from Southern Africa which could be translated as 'I am what I am because of what we all are'. I translate it as 'humanitude'. The world of tomorrow has to be built with people; if I want to see others change their attitudes and behaviour, perhaps I have to be prepared to start the change myself. 'What strikes me above all is that one finds here the global and the intimate linked together in a surprising way,' said the French Catholic existential philosopher Gabriel Marcel in his preface to the book on the movement, *Un Changement d'Espérance (Fresh hope for the world, 1959)*. Now, with a new war underway on our continent, 'healing history', another slogan of the movement, is again becoming an obvious urgency.

There are a few other spiritual movements that are somewhat comparable: the Quakers, the Focolare, the Community of Saint Egidio from the Catholic world. Movements that do not just aim at self-improvement, but seek to 'change the world'. *Remaking the world* is the title of the only book by the founder of Moral Rearmament, Frank Buchman, an American Lutheran pastor, which brings together his speeches. The movement he founded was in the Protestant revivalist tradition, but from the beginning it was very open to other currents of thought, and involved people of all religions and ideologies.

The informal, unstructured, almost anarchic character of the movement does not make it easy to understand either. The purchase contract for the former Caux Palace was signed by Philippe Mottu and Robert Hahnloser on 25 May 1946 'acting in the name of the foundation in formation'. But the structure, the legal body, was not created until 30 November of the same year, six months later. In the small historical exhibition in Caux, these beginnings are entitled 'A group of friends' for this entirely private initiative of about one hundred Swiss families and individuals. A group of friends who trusted each other to raise and spend just over a million Swiss francs.

The beginnings of the centre were marked by Franco-German reconciliation: hundreds of Germans and their former enemies met in Caux. Then came other themes: decolonisation, and later the foundations of democracy in the former communist countries; corporate social responsibility, with Japanese business leaders meeting their American and European counterparts...

Over the years, with the European Architectural Heritage Days in 2008, and open days, many curious people from the region have been able to discover/visit this exceptional building. In 2021, a summer project of the Commune of Montreux of 'Dolce Riviera' opened the park of the Palace to the public. And visitors were able to experience this extraordinary balcony overlooking Lake Geneva, and see something of what the participants in the conferences experience. Leaving the everyday world, living a few days away from their usual surroundings, and then equipping themselves to return down the hill, perhaps a little different themselves.

A few years ago, I conducted a tour of the house for a group from the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. They were considering renting the building for a conference they were planning. I insisted on the somewhat old-fashioned charm: no mini-bars or televisions in the rooms... Wouldn't their guests have more comfort in a five-star hotel in Geneva? 'But our guests might spend too much of their time shopping - the advantage of Caux is that once there, there is only one train per hour to get away! Our guests will almost be forced to rub shoulders,' I was told. And it's true that over the years there have been a number of confidential, even secret, confidence-building meetings, a necessary precursor to real negotiations: the Balkans, Burundi, Cyprus, the Sahel, a seminar on Soviet history.

Since 1995, a large part of the house has been rented to the Swiss Hotel Management School (SHMS) for several months, a partnership that greatly helps the Foundation to maintain this more than one hundred year old palace. This is also a valuable contribution to the economy of the region, with hundreds of students, many of whom are Asian.

In 2001, the Foundation made its archives public through a donation to the Vaud Cantonal Archives (ACV). Now at the disposal of the public and researchers at the ACV are more than 200 linear metres of documents, but in addition films, photos, books, periodicals, more than 5,000 hours of recordings of meetings. The current inventory covers more than 13,400 pages.

The Swiss National Science Foundation has financed two doctorates on this archive, both of which were completed and presented in 2021. The first, by Cyril Michaud, at the University of Lausanne, was titled: *'For God's sake, wake up!' Moral Rearmament on Swiss soil (1932-1969). An international of believers facing the communist spectre. Organisation, networks and militancy.* 614 pages (including bibliography and index), with 217 pages of appendices!

Michaud's thesis received an 'imprimatur': Lausanne has no system of 'honours' for excellent work, but the fact that there was nothing to correct or rewrite is a mark of distinction. It seems likely that there will be a publication in book form, but this will take some time. The jury praised 'an embodied history'; they underlined the 'rigour, perseverance, great maturity of a well-constructed and exhaustive work, of an accomplished researcher who showed generosity and shared research' with the other PhD student.

For Michaud, MRA is a movement that aims to strengthen democracy and overcome the class struggle. Socially conservative but modern in its use of theatre, cinema

and the media. In his study on the finances he notes that in the 1950s the Caux Foundation raised more funds than the International Red Cross! The movement gave women a relatively important place, at least behind the scenes; it offered them opportunities to travel, which was rare at the time, and a certain independence, as well as interesting work. But given the anti-Americanism that was quite prevalent in Switzerland, the movement's message was often perceived as simplistic and crude. With the 1960s, for Michaud, the movement's message seemed to be increasingly out of step with society.

Marie-Emmanuel Chessel (CNRS & Sciences Po, Paris, member of the jury for both theses) publicly praised the way in which the movement opened its archives, and opened itself to researchers: something quite rare in her experience. For Alain Clavien (University of Fribourg, also a member of the jury), it is important to take religious and spiritual factors seriously in the analysis and understanding of politics, culture and society in the 20th century. 'But what is Moral Re-Armament?' he exclaimed.

Nelly Valsangiacomo (University of Lausanne, director of the first thesis) noted how the movement has reinvented itself over the years. She praised the importance of Michaud's work in creating a database of 3,000 named 'fiches' for Swiss individuals involved in the early days of the Caux centre.

The second doctorate is entitled: *Conservatism, Corporatism and Christianity. The International Moral Rearmament Movement (1961-2001). Circulations and Conversions of a Utopian Circle*. The author, Audrey Bonvin, presented her research at the University of Fribourg. According to Bonvin the international dimension is important - researchers cannot limit themselves to Switzerland. She conducted 26 interviews (both juries praised the fact that the two PhD students did not just do 'paper/archive' research). The years covered by her research were marked by a drastic decrease in the numbers of participants, and a rise in controversy.

Bonvin sees concentric circles: a network of networks. It is not a cult, nor is it an NRM (New Religious Movement), given its open and public character. Rather, it is a 'militant utopian group'. A movement that seeks to connect people, but does not seek to work with other groups, NGOs. 'A philosophy of life, whose thinking allows its chameleon-like aspect.' More research should be undertaken and in other countries.

The Bonvin jury praised 5 years of research, more than 400 pages plus annexes, work that also deserves to be published (in book form). It is not easy to find the common thread, between economic liberalism, social conservatism and morals. Nor is it easy to make sense of the movement's hesitations and shifts, in its efforts to reach new generations of younger people. There seems to be little evolution over these 40 years. Bonvin notes the constant theme of 'changing the world by changing people', an ideal that remains. For her, the forms change, but the substance does not.

The jury noted and praised the teamwork of the two researchers. The interviews that both conducted with activists nuanced the official discourse. Bonvin talks of

'the soft power of a religious multi-national'. For the jury, this work opens up other fields of research. Bonvin draws attention to the fact that there are thousands of people around the world who have been marked by these ideas.

For Marie-Emmanuel Chessel the fact that Bonvin had considerable problems defining the movement is actually more interesting than her efforts to arrive at a conclusion! Michaud in his work points out the Anglo-Saxon domination: in the 1950s, often the printed papers/periodicals were only translations from English. But later on, *Tribune de Caux* and then *Changer* gave an independent French-speaking and Latin expression of the movement, and periodicals in German also came into being.

For myself, Michaud and Bonvin have a hard time understanding that many (most?) initiatives have come from below, not from above. The researchers came to their work thinking they were looking at an organisation. They have a lot of trouble understanding the organic, anarchic movement/network aspect. And both also had great difficulty defining the movement: is it religious? spiritual? political? The jurors suggest looking further into the sociology of organisations. But for us, perhaps we also need to turn to philosophy and theology to understand better. Their insistence on describing the movement as anti-communist, as if that were its essential contribution, may have prevented them from seeing other strong themes in MRA.

Both researchers point to the considerable financial contribution to the regional economy, but also to the extent of in-kind donations to keep the enterprise going, and above all to a massive contribution of volunteers. Perhaps it is impossible to renew and maintain this in an increasingly regulated world?

There are other archives of the movement outside Switzerland, notably in the USA, at the Library of Congress, and in Great Britain, at the prestigious Bodleian Library in Oxford. And in several countries, the movement is seeking to make its archives available to historians and researchers. There is a major project underway that puts much of this history online ('For A New World', an independent foundation based in Sweden), a 'Wikipedia' of the movement: <https://www.foranewworld.info/> where one can already find more than ten thousand books, periodicals, photos, articles and films.

And apart from these two PhDs, there is a small mountain of other research on the movement and its history coming out in academia. Raphaël Fourmon, a French student, also from Fribourg, has just completed a master's thesis on the Oxford Group (the forerunner of Moral Rearmament) in France before the Second World War. He noted (as we did) the inability of some researchers and academics to consider the possibility that businessmen, for example, might be driven by something other than their economic interests!

Other studies and research are underway, of considerable variety and scope. On the Oxford Group in Norway 1934-1940; on Alcoholics Anonymous, AA and its links to the movement; on Papua New Guinea and the Bougainville Island conflict; on racial dialogues in the USA; on the fight against corruption; on ethics in business; on

reconciliation among Somali exiles; on Robert Schuman and the birth of the European Union...

Democracy is currently under attack in many parts of the world. At the end of the Second World War, Caux welcomed hundreds of refugees. And again, the war in Europe has brought Ukrainian refugees to the Villa Maria (a building in the meeting centre, which had been the infirmary for Jewish refugees during the Second World War). Today, the economic, climatic and political horizon globally is darkening.

Without trust, life in community becomes impossible. So I am more convinced than ever of the importance of building trust: between communities, ethnic groups, religions, tribes, social groups. The future of the Caux centre remains uncertain, after two years of Covid and no face-to-face meetings. The movement is discovering how much can be done 'online', at a distance, without travel and carbon footprint. Hundreds of people from all over the world have participated remotely, through Zoom, at no cost. Maybe this is the end of the big summer gatherings of people from all over the world. But there is no substitute for the face-to-face experience of living together. Perhaps this is the beginning of a new chapter, with more focused meetings throughout the year? More discreet meetings, taking advantage of this location close to Geneva, and its communications, but away from it all, a little secret, confidential.

Andrew Stallybrass, 30.01.2023

A non-exhaustive list of the research we are aware of is given here:

- Boobbyer, Philip, *The spiritual vision of Frank Buchman*, Penn State Press, 2013
- *And Moral Re-armament in Africa in the Era of Decolonization in Missions, nationalism, and the end of Empire*, 2003
- Bouzouzou, Mahmoud, *From Two Prisons to Freedom, Memoirs of Mahmoud Bouzouzou*. The Cordoba Foundation of Geneva, 2015
- Chambers, Andrew, *The Missional Legacy of Frank Buchman*, Newman University - For Mission College, MA Missional Leadership and European Studies, 2022
- Cooper, Nigel, Bougainville reconsidered: *The role of moral re-armament in the Rorovana land crisis of 1969*, *The Journal of Pacific History*, Volume 26, 1991
- Dawson, Andrew, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Formation Through The Oxford Group*, Minor Thesis, University of Melbourne Divinity, 2020
- Dent, Eric B. & Randall, Craig, *Moral re-armament: toward a better understanding of the society-corporation relationship before the emergence of 'corporate social responsibility'*, *Journal of Management History*, 2021
- Fourmon, Raphaël, *Le Groupe d'Oxford et la France, se confesser pour s'unir, 1932-1939*, l'Université Bretagne-Sud, 2021

- Gathogo, JM, *Nahashon Ngare Rukenya and the moral re-armament in Kenya: the turning point and the post Mau-Mau war reconstruction (1959-1970)*, Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae, 2018
- Griffith, Allan, *Conflict and Resolution. Peace-building through the ballot box in Zimbabwe, Namibia and Cambodia*, 1998
- Grimm, Kevin E., *Encroaching upon trade union preserves: the 1950s fight over global labor norms between the international confederation of free trade unions and moral re-armament*, in Labor History, Volume 62, 2021 - Issue 4, 2021
- Hofmann, R, *The conservative imaginary: moral re-armament and the internationalism of the Japanese right, 1945-1962*, Japan Forum, 2021 - Taylor & Francis
- Jarlert, Anders, *The Oxford Group, Group Revivalism, and the Churches in Northern Europe, 1930-1940, with Special Reference to Scandinavia and Germany*, 1995
- Jenner, Pam, *Changing Society Through Drama - Moral Re-Armament at the Westminster Theatre, London*, Published doctorate on the theatre and drama of the movement, 2008
- Krabbendam, Hans, *The Transformers: Continuity and Change in the European Campaigns of American Evangelists Frank Buchman and Billy Graham, 1920-1960*, in *Journal of Religion in Europe* 7 pp.223-245, Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, The Netherlands, 2014
- Lachazette, XavierP, *A Desperate Attempt at Conflict Resolution: Daphne du Maurier, Moral Re-Armament, and World War II*, Quaina, University of Angers, 2020
- Palmer, Richard H, *Moral Re-Armament Drama: Right Wing Theatre in America*, Theatre Journal, Vol. 31, No. 2, 1979
- Sack, Daniel, *Moral Re-Armament: the reinventions of an American religious movement*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Schieder, CS, *To Catch a Tiger by Its Toe: The US-Japan Security Treaty, Moral Re-Armament, and Cold War Orientalism*, Journal of American-East Asian Relations, 2016
- Van Die, M, *A new spirituality for a war-torn world: one Canadian family's investment in Moral Re-Armament*, Peace Research, 2019
- Whelan, Bernadette, *'A real revolution': Ireland and the Oxford Group/Moral Re-Armament movement, 1933-2001*, University of Limerick, Irish Historical Studies 45 (168), 262-281, 2021

Andrew Stallybrass is Anglo-Swiss. He has worked as a 'full-time volunteer' with the movement for over 50 years, organising and running conferences in Caux. He was the director of the small publishing house Caux Edition. Now retired in Caux, he has a passion for the history of the village, the Caux-Palace and the movement, and often serves as a guide for tours. This article was written at the request of the

Montreux Archives, but has not been published or printed: they ran out of space in their planned publication.

Note: The Initiatives of Change Switzerland Foundation has donated to the Montreux Archives all the documentation, correspondence and photographs they have found covering the history of Caux Palace before 1946. These documents, including the hotel registers and account books, are available to researchers (<https://www.montreux.ch/archives>). The archives related to MRA/IofC are now in the Vaud Cantonal Archives: <https://www.vd.ch/toutes-les-autorites/archives-cantonaux-vaudoises-acv>