

## THE SPIRITUAL MOVEMENT FROM THE WEST by Grigory Pomerants

An essay written in 2002 as a foreword to a new edition of 'Dynamic out of Silence'. A project that was never completed.

Frank Buchman remains for us an example of moral will unclouded by resentment, indignation, intolerance or hatred – a will to goodness, reconciliation, forgiveness, a will growing out of quietness in the heart and finding its way to the heart of the next person. Many followers continue his practice of meditation at daybreak. But in the morning silence they are seeking answers to questions which did not confront Buchman.

Buchman was born in the century before last. His ideas crystallised at a time of fruitless disarmament conferences on the eve of the Second World War. Hence the expression 'Moral Re-Armament' which today does not resonate and is not fully understandable without further comment. (MRA was the name by which Buchman's work was known for over 60 years. A new name, 'Initiatives of Change', was adopted in August 2001.)

Buchman's spiritual energy cannot be separated from Anglo-Saxon empiricism and pragmatism, from the spirit of practical work, of deeds. He found the words understandable to a Muslim which could reconcile a pasha with the King of Morocco; but his ecumenism did not go beyond practical collaboration between people of diverse beliefs. It did not discuss theological problems. This is splendid, but not sufficient. The idea of a dialogue of religions grew elsewhere, most recently on Catholic soil.

For Buchman the modern age had been shaken but not finally exhausted. The morality of the pioneers who conquered the New World was still alive; just an effort of the will was needed to revive it. This was not only his personal attitude. It played a great role in history, helping the Anglo-Saxons to resist the insane ideas that took hold of Russia, Italy, Germany, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Cuba... 'Eurasia' came true; 'Eastasia' came true; 'Oceania', thank God, remained a figment of Orwell's novel (1984). Today, however, in the West itself people talk of a post-modern age. It is not the age of communism or of Nazism – but nobody knows what it is. We have started to drift, and in an unknown direction. The global terrorism proclaimed by bin Laden is just one further cause for alarm, a rash on the skin which hides a disease of the blood.

The spread of technological civilisation has depended on the resources of the biosphere and the resources of humanity itself. If the whole of Africa and Asia were to attain the level of the USA there would be no air to breathe. Western comfort is founded on a spontaneous mechanism which transfers ecological, social and psychological stresses onto less developed countries. The gap between rich and poor nations is constantly exhibiting new aspects. At one time it seemed to trouble only the conscience; today the flood of migration is threatening to overturn Europe's settled order. And there is a range of spiritual problems which cannot be quantified.

Buchman lived in a European culture that considered itself Christian. Today Europe is calling itself post-Christian, Europeans still have the habit of honest toil, but their ideal is the 'playboy' out for. Pleasure. After Buchman's death the Pandora's box which was already being prized open by the process of modern development gaped wide and buried us in an avalanche of the new. Development has become a cascade of revolutions. The connection between the generations is breaking down. The young, coming into a changed world, no longer understand the language of the sacred books. The refrigerators that have caused the hole in the ozone layer are emblematic. Every new invention turns out to be like a medication with unknown side-effects, which we discover for ourselves when it is too late. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the productive forces turned into their destructive opposite. This reverse side had always existed, but when development happened slowly the whole culture had time to assimilate the new and find an ecological niche for it, so to speak. At headlong speed the new becomes an elemental force, a hurricane that carries away the roof. Karl Popper has compared the influence of commercial television with having an alcoholic father in the family. The creator of the theory of the

'open society' has asked helplessly what could take the place of censorship, and not found a convincing answer. His appeal to the journalists: 'Do no harm!' sounds like a voice crying in the wilderness. Many have written about the destructive influence of television but when a business is making billions in profits it does not listen to criticism. To fight against moral pollution looks like attempting to dam a mighty river by hand.

Every five or ten years we are nonplussed by new problems, while an old, bedevilled problem remains unresolved: the incompatibility of endless growth with the limitations of the Earth. Up to a certain point the development of civilisation broadened man's spiritual opportunities. Cities created new crises, but cities also brought forth the world religions through which humanity surmounted the crisis of the ancient cultures. Today's global city is threatening to suffocate itself, and we are still waiting for the spiritual change which will give us the strength to overcome the crisis. We can sign agreements to stop growth. But what can we do with people who are unable to break the fascination of the rat-race, how can their thoughts turn from economic and information growth to spiritual growth?

Postmodernism is often compared with the Alexandrian period in the ancient world (the last centuries BC). Contemporary civilisation could be compared with the last centuries of ancient Rome, when the enthusiasm for imperial expansion had been lost. A new meaning for life was needed, and this was finally found in consciousness of sin, in repentance and in turning to personal spiritual growth. Instead of temples with colonnades which one walked around without entering, people started to build churches where the prayerful were drawn into the interior. Even if inner growth and the deeper path only involved the elite, this creative minority gave civilisation its direction. It kept the barbarians under control for some thousand years and left us a spiritual heritage which to this day has inspired endeavours to combine contemplation with action, spiritual depth with social activism. The movement initiated by Buchman is one such endeavour. Today however it cannot continue without change. It is time to shift a few accents.

The mood of the modern age was to thrust floorward and outward, to develop the far corners of the earth, to grow in technological power. Spiritual growth stayed in the background. At the same time, the moral challenges are greater in a complex, dynamic society than they are in a small, stable collective where children simply copy their parents. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century's moral disasters have been a result of the disproportion between moral and technological growth. The earth's population has increased fourfold in 100 years and there has been a sharp growth in the mass of the semi-educated who have broken away from the culture of rigid prescriptions but not reached the point of an educated moral intuition, the ability to find ethically correct answers to unexpected problems. (In his speech in Oslo in May 2000, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama called this the most important issue for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.) A Biblical image of semi-education is Ham. Montaigne wrote in his 'Essays' that good people may be either philosophers or peasants; all evil comes from semi-education. We have seen this evil in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as well, in the masses who rapturously supported Lenin, Hitler and Mao, or who today applaud bin Laden.

Today's problem is certainly not specific to Islam; it is a world problem. Ecology demands that we turn from the unlimited expansion of a technological world which destroys both nature and spirit, and seek a civilisation of spiritual growth and harmonious balance with nature. Not economic, but educational, philosophical and religious questions are in the forefront here. Our need has become not the logical organisation of thought, not the programs which a computer can understand, but a way to get outside the framework of such programs. Thomas Merton found an image of the new thinking in Heraclitus' 'ever-living fire'. Merton speaks of this fire not as an element in nature but as a spiritual fire, a fire of deep love in which things that superficially appear separate and hostile turn out to be in unity – and the hostility is burnt up. Somewhat similarly, the branches of a tree jutting in different directions can appear at odds with each other, but they grow out of one trunk and are fed by one root.

In Merton's view Heraclitus had the advantage of living before Aristotle and thus not having to subject his thought to the law of noncontradiction: 'A equals A but not B'. For him everything is both the same and different. This makes it both needless and impossible to chop up contradictions on a

Procrustean bed of logic (Procrustes, a robber in Greek legend, used to place his victims on an iron bed. Those who were too long were cut to fit, those who were too short were stretched on a rack).

How to achieve the turnaround to something more stable and more spiritual is clear to nobody. There are thousands of issues, thousands of institutes and hundreds of thousands of intellectuals racking their brains, but the theories, plans and concepts for getting us out of the current impasse become new dangers themselves.

The old civilisations were lacking in intellect, The intellect shone in philosophy, but practical life was still governed by traditions and prejudices. For a long time conservative people tolerated this, but the pace of change increased and tradition no longer gave answers to pressing questions. When the free and rational mind began to provide the answers, people at first were fascinated and inspired. Hegel wrote of a majestic sunrise. But then the victory of reason turned out to be Pyrrhic. I am not talking of particular conclusions but of the deeper consequences of rationalism. Dostoyevsky wrote a parable about this in his novel *Crime and Punishment*. 'Do you think I acted headlong, like a fool?' Raskolnikov asks Sonya. 'I acted like a clever man and that was my ruin.' The point is not the particular false idea, not Raskolnikov's mistake, but the limitations of any set of guiding ideas ('ideynost'). 'It's just as well that you only killed the old girl,' says Porfiry Petrovich (the police investigator in the novel). 'If you had thought up another theory you might have done something a hundred million times more hideous.'

Porfiry Petrovich has been proved right. The experience of the last few centuries has shown how dangerous it is to trust logic without testing it in our hearts and against our spiritual experience. The intellect is dangerous when it becomes a practical force. The scientific intellect is dangerous with its discoveries and inventions. The political intellect is dangerous with its reforms. Safety systems are needed against the destructive power of the intellect, like the safety systems in a nuclear power plant. No villain, robber, or sadist has done as much evil as people enthused by noble ideas, progressive ideas, or good purposes (I have summed up in one phrase thoughts expressed by several of my contemporaries: Vasily Grossman, Yury Aikhenvald, Naum Kozhavin, Alexander Galich; late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russian intellectuals: Grossman, a novelist; Aikhenvald, a literary critic; Kozhavin, dissident intellectual; Galich, dissident singer and song writer). Millions of people have been killed thanks to the idea of a *Final Solution*, the final resolution of every crisis, the idea of a leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom (or another utopia). The schemes differ, but all final solutions and liquidations of noxious classes add up to the same thing: Shigalevism (Shigalev, a character in Dostoyevsky's novel *The Devils*, advocates despotism as the way to human happiness). People become like model North Korean communists studying the thoughts of Kim Il Sung.

The ideas of the totalitarian movements originated deep within the great epochs – for the Communists, in the Enlightenment; for the Nazis, in Romanticism. Big Brother promises to put an end to intolerable suffering. 'Revolution is the most painless road from the point of view of the toiling masses,' wrote Lenin. Experience would seem to tell us that the machine of terror kills its own creators and leaves ruins behind it. But as Hegel says, the lessons of history never help anyone. Every age considers itself unique. Every new movement is confident that it has taken the mistakes of its predecessors into account. New versions of totalitarianism are always confident of their own creativity.

Alastair Hulbert who worked for many years for the European churches in Brussels has written that western statesmen only give the impression that they understand where events (which are more like a ship on autopilot) are taking us (from illustrated lecture 'Europe in search of meaning', presented at the 1996 Caux conference and subsequently). The point is not only the limitations of particular presidents or prime ministers. Amongst them we find people of great intelligence, even capable of contemplation. I am told that Konrad Adenauer when he came to Moscow to secure the release of German prisoners of war sat for one and a half hours in the Tretyakov Gallery by his favourite icon – a rare case but others could be recalled. The trouble is that even people with excellent minds stand helpless on the bank of the torrent of change. They are in no position to comprehend what is endlessly complex today and becoming more so. The development of civilisation is the development of people's

*incapacity* to cope in the life of society. Wise men in ancient times coped better with the whole of human life than today's scholars. A very few capture the bird's eye view of the gigantic current of time, split off from eternity and even these few perceive the whole as if in a mist without distinguishing the details. Then when the mist disperses, and something stands out clearly and sharply, no one believes the Cassandra (Cassandra was a princess of Troy and prophetess in Greek legend whose prophecies were fated not to be believed).

For consumer civilisation to make a sharp turn and soar 'upward', as proposed by Czeslaw Milosz (Polish poet and Nobel laureate who proposed the idea of changing the motto 'forward' to 'upward') would be impossible even given the insulation of Western thinking from non-Western problems; it is even less possible in a social mosaic made more heterogeneous by an explosive growth of immigration to the West, and a disproportionately slow rate of assimilation. Ethnic conflicts and global terrorism constantly put the upward flight path in doubt. Yet I do see the possibility of gradually introducing a pause for contemplation, a pause for silence, into the bustle of business and amusement. This can be taught starting from kindergarten and the first classes of school (experiments have already been made). It can reach into the daily life of every thinking person. Withdrawal ('otreshennost') and contemplation cannot remain the occupation of a special class of monks as they were in the middle ages. Society has long since ceased to be class-based. Today withdrawal and contemplation are becoming part of the general rhythm of life. The movement in this direction has only just begun, but it has begun at the most diverse levels, in both grotesque and entirely serious forms. It is worth studying Merton's correspondence with Rosemary Ruether (Catholic theologian. Their correspondence is quoted in Monica Furlong: *Merton: A Biography*, Bantam 1981, pp 317-2).

Contemplation in a world of action is one of Merton's fundamental themes. While he still has the characteristic dynamic of a western man, it has found a new direction and seeks a new balance. He is convinced that we start to see life in its depth and wholeness only in contemplative silence, and that we must become accustomed to the paradoxes of silence if we are to stop getting bogged down in details and find answers to conflicts which are insoluble on the basis of clashing logical approaches.

'Fundamentally,' as Max Picard (Swiss philosopher) points out, 'it probably comes to this: living in a silence which so reconciles the contradictions within us that, although they remain within us, they cease to be a problem,' writes Merton. 'Contradictions have always existed in the soul of man. But it is only when we prefer analysis to silence that they become a constant and insoluble problem. We are not meant to resolve all contradictions but to live with them and rise above them and see them in the light of exterior and objective values which make them trivial by comparison,' (Thomas Merton: *Thoughts in Solitude*, NY 1993 pp84-5; he is referring to Max Picard: *The World of Silence*, Preface by Gabriel Marcel, Harvill Press, London 1948, pp66-7). While this refers to inner conflicts, the same could be said about conflicts which invade the mind from outside – social, economic and so on.

In contemplative silence it becomes clear that fanaticism, of which we have been so painfully aware in recent years, is not an essential part of any particular ideology or religion but attaches itself to all of them. Russia's Socialist Democrats all read the same Marx, but the Bolsheviks shot people while the Mensheviks protested against the terror. Islam in the middle ages was less fanatical than Christianity. The origins of fanaticism are not in conscious ideas but in the dark corners of the subconscious; it can camouflage itself behind any idea. 'The most dangerous spiritual violence is that which carries our will away with false enthusiasm which seems to come from God but which is in reality inspired by passion. Many of our most cherished plans for the glory of God are only inordinate passion in disguise. And the proof of this is found in the excitement which they produce. The God of peace is never glorified by violence,' (ibid, p 112).

It is tempting to suppose that the continuing vitality of the cultures of India and China is linked to the fact that they have retained the pause for contemplation which the West has lost, its revival is vitally necessary.

When barely compatible groups have to coexist in one space it causes some people to discover the spirit of unity, but others to live in mutual hatred (as we have seen in Yugoslavia). Alienation and hatred grow faster than our understanding of each other. Will we be able to understand people filled with the feelings of Catholics and Protestants on the night of St Bartholomew? Will we be able to understand the protest provoked when the electronic mass media invade other people's cultures?

A father who had lost his only son came to Ramakrishna. Together with the unhappy man, Ramakrishna burst into tears and sobbed with him for three days and nights, Then he began singing a hymn, and the father who had lost his son joined in. I have this picture constantly in my mind, In order to help people move from the one-sidedness of passion to the passionlessness of the spirit we have to enter their one-sidedness, understand its necessity, understand the rationality of the irrational (of fundamentalism, for instance – as a reaction to anomie or the shattering of scales of values when different scales clash). Will the West be able to understand that its mass media provoke Muslim extremism? Is it possible to carry out constructive policies without understanding certain still unwritten rules of intercultural dialogue?

When I think about the future I recollect the past. People spoke then not of westernisation or modernisation – only of Europeanisation. This did not mean subordination to a single national standard because there was no such thing in Europe. Russia was faced with an unfamiliar culture – no Constantinople, no Golden Horde, a culture of dialogue (or 'concert') between national cultures. This dialogue had been devised by nobody apart from God and came about somehow unexpectedly, following the break-up of the Roman empire and the chaos of the middle ages. It guaranteed Europe a faster rate of development in comparison with Asia – a zone where new empires arose to replace those that had collapsed (strictly speaking, this is all that unites China, India and the Islamic world). Attempts to recreate an empire invariably failed in Europe and it turned out to be even better without one.

You could only join the European choir with your own personality, your own special voice. For Russia this meant solving a creative problem, fashioning a European-Russian national culture, a Russian participant in the European dialogue in place of closed-off Muscovy. This was achieved by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and recognised by the time the century ended. Russian culture wove together strands that only conversed at a distance in the West. In politics, the liberals took their bearings from England, the radicals from France, and the conservatives from Germany, and there was an internal political dialogue. In literature, European threads were used to weave unique Russian carpets. Thus in Dostoyevsky we can distinguish motifs adopted from Rousseau and Balzac, Schiller and Goethe, Shakespeare and Dickens, Cervantes and Calderon – but the whole could only have been created in Russia, and it exerted a powerful influence on the entire world.

This experience cannot be automatically re-applied to a dialogue of the great cultural worlds the West, Islam, India and the Far East. They lack enough of the common ground of Sacred Scripture (which Russia still shares with the West), and the common language and writing that goes with it. In one case there are Confucius and the ideograms of Chinese writing; in another there are the Vedas, Sanskrit and the Devanagari script; in a third there are the Koran, Arabic language and the Arabic script which has been adopted by the Persians, by the Turks and in the Urdu language. And yet dialogue is possible if we get to the point of understanding the *spirit* of the great religions, the spirit of love. Here the formulations of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and of D.T. Suzuki coincide with those of the Gospel, and we find the same thing in the poetry of the great Sufis, and the pioneers of the inter-confessional dialogue flowing from the Second Vatican Council aspire to it. They all have the one supreme aim.

At a level deeper than North-South or East-West conflicts there is the onslaught of the technological world with its capacity to subjugate and destroy all living things, And there are forces resisting this onslaught, scattered at present but capable of uniting and mastering the elemental power of technology. Their mutual understanding and cooperation is based on giving silent contemplation precedence over analysis – as has been achieved by the followers of F. Buchman in the quiet time, or by the participants of the John Main Seminar for Christian Meditation. According to Merton, the

dominance of analytical thought that began with Aristotle is ruinous for a person's inner integrity and for the integrity of a culture. Any conflict (domestic, social, national) becomes insoluble if each side is convinced of its own 'perfect rightness'. ('And till dawn do you not listen / To the running stream of arguments, proving / My perfect rightness?' A. Akhmatova, *Rupture*.) If civilised divorce is unthinkable spouses murder each other and national questions are decided by ethnic purges, or – if state power is not on your side – terrorism is let loose. I think of Mountain House (the international conference centre of Initiatives of Change, in Caux, Switzerland) as a meeting place for people of all viewpoints who are seeking the way from bulldozer-like globalisation, which obliterates peoples, to a dialogue of cultures not unlike the dialogue of nations which has come about in Europe. In spite of all the conflicts and wars this project can be made reality. There were wars in Europe too (the Thirty Years War, the Seven Years War) but they did not prevent the growth of a spiritual unity, and in the end the spirit of unity conquered the spirit of discord. The way taken by Europe can be an example for global development.

There are many obstacles and unanswered questions on this road. A correctly formulated question however is itself half of the answer. And the society created by Frank Buchman can become a place where the problems of humanity are considered more broadly, more deeply, from a more universal perspective than in the centres of specialised sciences – an example of analysis and research keeping touch with the spirit that comes in the morning silence.

Translation from the Russian by Peter Thwaites