

THE OXFORD  
GROUP

Times  
19.9.33

BISHOP OF DURHAM'S  
COMMENTS

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir,—Professor Grensted holds a position of unique importance in the movement, which he has described with so much assurance and enthusiasm, for his patronage has seemed to provide some support for the baseless but pardonable popular assumption (which did yeoman's duty in South Africa and America) that the University of Oxford gave some kind of sanction to the latest Oxford Movement. Readers of the chapter headed "An Oxford Psychologist Speaks," in Mr. Russell's "best seller," "For Sinners Only," will be able to appreciate both the authority which the Professor wields among his fellow Groupists, and the weight which ought to attach to his statements in the judgment of those, among whom I must include myself, who, while quite unable to accept or approve the movement, are genuinely anxious to understand it.

Professor Grensted is indeed a thorough-going Groupist. From the first he was attracted to the movement, for, as its founder observed, he "was already a prepared instrument when they met." Accordingly, it is not surprising that he should exhibit one of the most conspicuous, and certainly one of the least commendable, features of the movement—namely, its complete disregard of criticisms, however weighty and damaging. No one would gather from the Professor's letter that, both in England and in America, "the Oxford Group" has aroused against itself a formidable volume of hostile criticism, that its distinctive methods have been heavily challenged, that its teaching is gravely suspected, and that its much-vaunted achievements have been openly denied. Criticisms are disregarded; remonstrances are ignored; scandals are hushed up. The movement, organized with typical American business skill and advertised with unparalleled audacity, goes on its way, waxing like Jonah's gourd.

I have been at great pains to understand the movement, and have collected much information about it. The house parties did not interest me, and I abstained from them for two sufficient reasons. On the one hand, my temperamental dislike of "spiritual-exhibitionism" is so strong that I could not trust myself to be impartial towards proceedings in which it held so large a place; and, on the other hand, I felt no inclination to question the kind of success which the Groupists attribute to these meetings. So far the movement, in my judgment, merely added one more illustration of a religious phenomenon which has been intermittent throughout Christian history. I was content to collect the evidence of trustworthy eye-witnesses, as well sympathizers as critics, and to apply myself to an examination of the Group's principles and distinctive teachings, and to an inquiry into the actual results of its activity, so far as these could be perceived. Last December I delivered a Charge to my Diocese, in which the conclusions to which I had been led were shortly set forth. Since the publication of that Charge I have been the recipient of many illuminating communications, the broad effect of which is to confirm the opinions which I had expressed and to deepen the misgivings which Mr. Buchman's movement has created in my mind.

Professor Grensted describes the recent campaign of the Oxford Group in Canada and the United States as a triumphant success. A very different impression was made on less admiring observers: Against the Professor's description let me set another account, nearer the time, and more detached in interest. I quote from an Editorial in the *New Outlook* (December 21, 1932), a newspaper issued in Toronto, and stated to be "published under the authority of the United Church of Canada":—

But now it (*sic.* the Oxford Group) has come, we have exposed ourselves to every phase of its work, attended all its meetings as far as that was possible, and attempted in every way open to us to understand and appreciate its methods and its significance. And if it was impossible to say much in its favour before, we saw it work in a doubly and trebly impossible now. The

gave their testimonies, each one without exception reflecting upon the Church and the service which organized religion is supposed to render and glorifying the Group Movement, was the most unblushing piece of exhibitionism we had ever seen. What is happening in the inner consciousness of the younger members of the Group, manifestly sincere and compelled to go through such performances night after night, we shudder to think. But that first night, objectionable as it was, had some fresh feature to complain of added to it at nearly every other service. A meeting for ministers at which matters of sex were discussed will abide as one of the hideous memories of a lifetime.

In the same issue of the *New Outlook* there is a very able and important letter written from Oxford by the Principal of St. Hugh's College, Miss Barbara E. Gwyer. She dwells on the "almost pathetically trivial and childish" character of the "sharings," which she had listened to at Group meetings: on "the colossal amount of money which is being raised and spent every year in the interest of the movement, without published accounts of any kind"; on the inevitable tendency to fanaticism which cannot but follow from the Groupist leaders' "conviction of infallible guidance from above." She concludes with some observations which, with all due respect, I would specially commend to the consideration of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London, whom the Professor seems to claim as patrons and allies of the Oxford Group:—

The disappointing thing is that men and women to whom its tone and teaching must be abhorrent have yet so far identified themselves with its begetters as (apparently) to be unable to bring any effective influence to bear against the tendencies and practices it exalts. If these, in fact, embody the ideal now being held up to vast numbers of young and undeveloped characters; yet one more addition to the lamentable roll of religious scandals would seem to be only a question of time.

I could quote much, but I must draw rein. My correspondents express disgust at the toadying of rich and prominent individuals, at the unscrupulous and even unwarrantable use made of well-known names, at the grotesque exaggeration of the advertisements, at the unseemly luxury and extravagance of the travelling teams, at the artificiality of the "sharing," at the mystery of the finance, at the oracular despotism of "Frank." Almost all dwell on the rapidity with which the religious excitement dies down, and on the slightness of the effects which are permanent. The concluding words of the careful and discriminating report which was made by a committee of 30 religious leaders in Toronto, and published in February, 1933, may well give pause to those who are disposed to endorse the pretensions of the Oxford Group:—

Movements of this kind have their value, but they very frequently leave the church with more problems than they solve. They make few converts outside of the regular church membership and in many cases divert their allegiance to faith missions and other forms of pentecostalism.

I refrain from dwelling on the darkest shadow on the movement—I mean the trail of moral and intellectual wrecks which its progress leaves behind.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,  
HERBERT DUNELM.

Auckland Castle, Sept. 17.