

## **Frank Buchman and his philosophy of reconciliation**

by Pierre Spoerri

There is one man without whom we all would not be here in Caux (1) today. His name is Frank Buchman. He lived from 1878 to 1961. I had the privilege of working with him during the last part of his life, from 1947 to 1961. But my father, a professor of history and literature from Zurich University (2), already had a close relationship with him following Buchman's first visits to Switzerland in the early thirties.

Neither Buchman's speeches, published under the title "Remaking the World" (3), nor the films of him, nor even the books about him, ever quite encompassed his whole personality. My father, who accompanied him to many countries, worked for twenty years on a biography of Buchman which he called "Dynamic out of Silence" (4). He re-wrote it seven times. I remember him saying several times in the evening after having been writing all day: "This is the best thing I have ever written." And next morning, after re-reading his manuscript he would just shake his head and start all over again, as he found it so difficult to capture the essence of Buchman's life and thinking.

Buchman never wrote an essay or a study on reconciliation or conflict resolution. The one and only book written in his name never made the bestseller list or earned him scientific awards. In his speeches, the word reconciliation seldom appears. Yet he was one of the great reconcilers of this century. And it was he who the very down-to-earth French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman asked to go to North Africa when some of the former French colonies were going through their fight for independence. And for his bridge-building and reconciliation work Buchman was decorated by the German, French, Japanese and Philippine governments.

So what was his secret, his basic philosophy, his method, especially in the field of reconciliation? How did this philosophy evolve in the course of his life?

There is no doubt that during his early years Buchman was more interested in personal salvation than in political issues. His first and foremost aim then was to help the individual to face his past, make restitution where needed and be reconciled with God. After working in North America and Europe he was sent to Asia and visited India, China, Japan and Korea. It was during this time that his interest grew beyond the strictly personal to the national and international. These nations became then for him a "proving ground of the power to turn nations Godwards." (5)

In the thirties, the challenge of a re-arming and aggressive Germany, brought him face to face with the need of the democracies surrounding Germany to be united inside and reconciled with each other. At the time of his first visit to Norway, a dispute over Greenland fishing rights was poisoning relations between Denmark and Norway and had just come before the Permanent Court of International Justice in The Hague. The Court decided in favour of Denmark. This decision angered one of Norway's leading journalists, Frederick Ramm, whose intense hatred of the Danes was daily reflected in his columns. Ramm came to Buchman's first conference in Norway in 1934. Buchman's concept of personal change leading to national change caused him to review his whole life. A few days after the end of the conference he said: "The ice melted in my heart, and a new unknown feeling began to grow, a love of people unfettered by what they could give me." Shortly afterwards he was addressing a mass meeting in Odense in Denmark. He simply described what had happened to him and ended by asking the audience to stand and join him in singing the Danish national anthem. The audience rose and spontaneously started singing the Norwegian national anthem. Hearing this story, one can ask the question: Did Buchman know of the conflict between Denmark and Norway and did he encourage Ramm to do what he did? Or was he just deeply convinced that men and women who put their life in order would become natural reconcilers between individuals and nations? We shall never know the answer to this question. (6)

A little later a similar, what I would call miracle of reconciliation happened a bit further South of Scandinavia between the Netherlands and Belgium. In this case, there had been a seventy-year-old river conflict between the ports of Antwerp in Belgium and Rotterdam in Holland. The World Court decided in favour of Belgium. The delight of Belgian leaders and the Belgian press got understandably on the nerves of the Dutch, not least of the Dutch ambassador to Brussels, J. A. E. Patijn. He was slated to speak at a banquet in Brussels and had prepared some bitter retort to the statements in the press. As he was dressing for dinner, some inner conviction grew in him saying: "Forget your pride. This is your chance. Seize it." To everyone's astonishment he complimented his host country on the court decision, which, he said, paved the way for better friendship in the future. The next day, the Belgian press had changed its tune, and the Dutch press followed suit. (7) The following year, Patijn was made foreign minister.

When Buchman tells this story in one of his speeches, he does not mention Patijn's name and of course does not speak about the various touches he had had with the man during his many visits to Holland. Again, one can ask oneself whether Buchman knew of the conflict and actively helped the Dutch statesman to follow the road of reconciliation, or whether he just encouraged him to listen to his inner voice. And in a way, that does not matter. To a Swiss professor who encouraged him to be more - what we would say today -

pro-active in trying to bring change to the German leadership, he wrote: "Our aim is never to mediate, but to change lives and unite them by making them life-changers.." (8) I shall return to this fundamental element of Buchman's thinking when I try to formulate his principles for reconciliation. In the speeches of these years, Buchman did not often use the word reconciliation, even if the preservation of peace was never far from his mind. When he visited Switzerland in 1935, he said: "I can see Switzerland a prophet among the nations and a peacemaker in the international family... Nationalism can unite a country. Supernationalism can unite a world. God-controlled supernationalism is the only sure foundation for world peace." (9)

And then, after World War II, when the doors to Mountain House were opened and representatives of the nations who had fought against each other met at the first meetings of this kind after the end of hostilities, the need for reconciliation was obvious to everybody. So during the years 1946 to 1950, the emphasis was clearly on the material and spiritual reconstruction of Europe and especially on German-French reconciliation. In one of his speeches of that period, Buchman said: "Ideas quick and powerful to reconcile nations, to conquer all hearts and wills, to inspire a world-wide renaissance, are instantly available, immediately applicable." (10) During that period, Robert Schuman, the French Foreign Minister and initiator of the Schuman Plan which led to the European Union, wrote in his foreword for the French edition of Buchman's speeches: "To provide teams of trained men, ready for the service of the state, apostles of reconciliation and builders of a new world, that is the beginning of a far-reaching transformation of society in which, during fifteen war-ravaged years, the first steps have already been made." (11)

Then, at the beginning of the fifties, Asia became the centre of Buchman's attention. And what had happened between Germany and her neighbours, started to happen in the relationship between Japan and her former enemies.

Now we need to come back to Buchman's thinking, motivation and vision: If we want to get the essence of his philosophy of reconciliation, what were his basic principles?

The first, without any doubt, was the **centrality of the individual**. Buchman was convinced that in every situation there was one person holding the key. Sometimes it was a leading politician, sometimes an ordinary person with extraordinary ideas. He said once looking from Caux to Geneva, on the other end of the lake: "Some of the real problems at the conferences down there are not on the table; they are sitting right around the table." The President of the Norwegian Parliament in the thirties, the Hon C. J. Hambro, when he introduced Buchman and his team to delegates of the League of Nations on 15 September 1938, said: " Where we have failed in changing politics, they have succeeded in changing

lives, and giving men and women a new way of living." (12) For Buchman, the material to work with, if peace was to be achieved, was human nature and the forces of hate, greed and fear which were dominating. And where human nature was concerned, he was the greatest realist I ever met.

The second principle - possibly a bit more controversial than the first - was that the peace-maker or reconciler had to **start the process of peace-making and reconciliation with himself**. In Geneva, in the middle of the crisis of 1938, he again addressed delegates to the League of Nations and said to them: " The great people of history are those who can articulate and translate into action the answer to war, the people who will confess their own shortcomings instead of spotlighting those of others." (13)

His own deeply-held conviction was that one's own experience was an essential element in helping people loaded down with hatred, resentment or traditional enmity to become free men and women. All his life he looked back to his own formative experience. At the beginning of the century, in his first job as head of a home for underprivileged boys, he had come up against the men on the Board of his institution who had tried to save money at the expense of food for the boys. Buchman's experience of being freed of his bitterness made him feel that this was something that could happen to every person everywhere. So in a way he preferred the word change to the word reconciliation. For him, reconciliation was more the fruit than the root.

The third principle is that **those who have suffered most may have most to give**. In the immediate post-war years, when Buchman was invited to send his first teams to Germany, two Frenchmen were often asked to speak. Both were French of Jewish origin who had lost a great number of their relatives in Nazi extermination-camps. The fact that they had been able to free themselves of all hatred and that they had come especially to Germany to share their experience, had a profound effect on the traumatized post-war Germans.

As a contrast, as a Swiss I sometimes felt in the time after the Second World War, and still feel today, that prosperity and our having lived in peace for so long are certainly a gift but also a definite handicap when it comes to peace-making. The capacity for compassion does not grow easily on soil like ours. Also the fear of losing what one has - especially if one has acquired it with hard work - can make one hard and self-centred. So we Swiss, which as a small neutral people have been considered by many as "natural peace-makers", seem to have handicaps which are not always realized - by ourselves or by others.

The fourth principle was the one that got Buchman sometimes into trouble. He believed, and believed it deeply, that **no person should ever be written off**. The most hopeless case could be the biggest miracle, you must hate the sin but love the sinner. For him,

even dictators, terrorists or extremists of the left or the right had to be given the chance to change. In the thirties Buchman got into difficulties when he applied this principle to the German situation and tried to bring an experience of change to some of the leadership of the Nazi-Party. It is easy to say sixty years later: he failed. It is even easy to say that Buchman might have been naive. But he did make the attempt while so many others stood on the sidelines and did nothing.

An interesting test of the same principle came when the conference-centre of Caux was opened after the Second World War. Friends of Buchman suggested he invite a leading but somewhat controversial personality from a country which had been involved in the war to take part in one of the first international conferences organized in the new centre. The government in Berne refused to give this person a visa. Buchman turned to the legal adviser to the Swiss government, Professor Max Huber, who had been head of the International Red Cross and of the International Court of The Hague. Huber, who happened to be on holiday, wrote by hand a four-page memorandum describing it as a constitutional duty for Switzerland to receive people who might be capable of going through an experience of change in their lives and through it helping in the process of reconstruction of their countries. As a result of this move, the Swiss government reversed its decision and has ever since accepted to give visas to the people suggested for the Caux-conferences. Until recently, all those coming to Caux also received their Swiss visa free of charge.

The fifth point may not be so much a principle but a question of faith. Buchman saw in peace-making **not just a humanistic work** that could be planned with human intelligence and organizations. He believed deeply that God could and did intervene in the affairs of man and that all human planning could be superseded by extraordinary events. A person who was recognized later by many leaders in Europe as having been a decisive factor in French-German reconciliation was a French woman called Irène Laure. Her coming to Caux as a former resistance-leader and as a person with a deep hatred for Germany and the Germans was not planned by Buchman, as he probably did not know of her existence until she arrived in Mountain House. Buchman's genius may have been that he recognized in this woman what she could become if she were able to face her hatred and let it go. This is not the place to go into the details of her story, but I want to use it as an example to show how often Buchman, who believed in good and detailed human planning, put this aside when a new person through a deep experience of change in his or her life opened new doors and suggested new initiatives.

The sixth of Buchman's principles was his belief in the **centrality of the experience of forgiveness**. He saw in the process of repentance, apology, asking for forgiveness and accepting forgiveness a universal truth available to everybody everywhere. Of course as a

Christian he could - and often did - draw his inspiration from his study of Christ's life, but he knew from his friends of other faiths that for instance in the Muslim or Jewish faith the way to forgiveness was also something experienced and clearly defined. He also expressed gratitude for what he had learnt at various moments of his life from Hindu and Buddhist tradition. (14)

An integral step on the way to forgiveness was to face the past. If one did not face the past it would run you all your life. Often the door to a new future would open when a person would tell you something he or she had never told anybody before. So discretion was an essential element in such - what Buchman called - life-changing work. The aim was not just personal repentance, but for many there was a need for national repentance as well. At the same time Buchman often warned against being obsessed by the past. His experience was that those who had been in the wrong were often more helped by being given a vision of what they could become rather than by emphasizing their sins time and time again. One of his greatest qualities was his sense of expectancy. He expected the best from everyone and was often rewarded with a positive response. Of course sometimes he was also disappointed but he never let reverses stop him.

Finally, as a seventh principle I would mention **communication**. It is often rather easy to see who in a conflict situation ought to change and where he or she could become part of a reconciliation process. But how do you transmit the ability to recognize yourself and the will to change? If there is one single issue Buchman grappled with all his life it was this: how do you transmit a vision or an experience to another person and then to another country?

I had the privilege to be one of two hundred people who were invited to travel with Buchman when he accepted the invitation of a prominent group of Indian leaders to visit the Indian sub-continent relatively shortly after India and Pakistan had become independent. The wounds of partition were still fresh, as were the wounds left by colonialism. So it was obvious that a group of people coming from the West would not be received kindly if they just preached what the Indians and the Pakistanis were meant to do. One contentious issue dividing the two countries was the question of water. Was it a conscious decision or did it just happen that Buchman took with him a musical play dealing with two brothers in the Western United States who were quarrelling over water? In any case, the message came through to the leaders of the two countries and to thousands of ordinary people as well, and it came through in a way that newly independent nations could accept it.

I would like to end with a quote in which the essence of Buchman's philosophy is best summarized. In a speech with the title "The answer to any Ism - even Materialism" he said:

"Division is the mark of our age. Division in the heart. Division in the home. Division

in industry. Division in the nation. Division between nations.

Union is our instant need.

Division is the work of human pride, hate, lust, fear, greed.

Division is the trademark of materialism

Union is the grace of rebirth. We have lost the art of uniting because we have forgotten the secret of change and rebirth." (15)

Buchman would have been the last person to say that his experience and his principles were the final truth. If he were still living today, he would encourage all to continue their search to discover new truths about reconciliation and to walk on this road with courage and hope.

**Notes:**

(1) Caux, above the lake of Geneva, is the international conference centre of Moral Re-Armament.

(2) Theophil Spoerri, professor of French and Italian Literature at Zurich University, Rector of the University from 1948 to 1950.

(3) Frank Buchman, *Remaking the World* (Blandford Press, London 1947, 1958)

(4) Theophil Spoerri, *Dynamic out of Silence* (published first in German: *Dynamik aus der Stille*, Caux Verlag, Luzern 1971)

(5) see Michael Henderson, *The Forgiveness Factor - Stories of Hope in a World of Conflict* (Grosvenor Books, USA & London 1996), p. 260.

(6) Garth Lean, *Frank Buchman - a Life* (Collins Fount Paperbacks, London 1988) pp.224/5.

(7) Garth Lean, pp. 274/5.

(8) Letter from Frank Buchman to Emil Brunner, 23.12.33.

(9) Frank Buchman, p.18.

(10) Frank Buchman, p. 241.

(11) Robert Schuman, Foreword for the French edition of *Remaking the World*.

(12) Frank Buchman, p. 68.

(13) Frank Buchman, in his speech "One thing can swing the balance", 15.9.38, p.69.

(14) Frank Buchman, p. 166/7.

(15) Frank Buchman, p. 166.

Pierre Spoerri is Swiss. Born in 1926, he studied at the universities of Geneva and Zurich. He has made extensive visits to the Middle East, Africa and Asia, writing, reporting for European newspapers and working with Moral Re-Armament. He and his wife have been involved in preparing and taking responsibility for the international conferences in Caux, Switzerland, and in developing friendships in Germany and Eastern Europe. His writings include "Keine Zeit für Stille Zeit", "Dynamik der Vergebung", "Die Kunst mit dem andern zu leben" and "Re-Discovering Freedom" (with Dr. John Lester).