

The Three Troubadours

by A.J. Russell

A.J. Russell explores the transformative impact of the Oxford Group and its leaders, emphasizing the importance of community, confession, and divine guidance in spiritual growth.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5, Matthew 28:19, James 5:16, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Christian Revival", "Spiritual Renewal"

Description

A.J. Russell preaches about his encounter with the Oxford Group, a new religious movement spreading from Oxford University, and his skepticism turning into intrigue as he learns about their teachings and practices. The Oxford Group emphasizes complete surrender to God, two-way prayer for guidance, and the importance of confession, sharing, and witnessing as ways to experience God's forgiveness and guidance. They challenge both Christians and non-Christians to change their lives, become 'Life-Changers,' and embrace a fresh, challenging, and uncompromising approach to Christianity in modern times.

Transcript

It was January 1931. Seven years had passed since the "My Religion" feature was released on a surprised public. For nearly five years I had held the managerial chair of our Sunday newspaper, to which I had been promoted possibly as a cynical reward for success in religion.

In January 1930 the newspaper was doing magnificently. Good features, bright news stood, bold, original publicity, and the developing momentum of past efforts had combined to double our sales, although the depression had descended upon Britain.

Only once during that seven years did I experience a repetition of the supernatural guidance which preceded "My Religion." But lest it be assumed that we expanded our sales only by supernatural suggestion, I should say here that afterwards an idea came to me without supernatural accompaniments which gave us a jump of over four hundred thousand in circulation, settling down into a permanent increase of more than one hundred thousand.

But the theme in this book is not the "scoops" that certain newspapers have secured, but the "scoop" that every newspaper missed.

I was still hankering after another series of the "My Religion" order to give the circulation of one of our newspapers a spring flare-up. One Sunday morning I was sitting in a Presbyterian church in Orpington, Kent, when the minister, the Rev. J. M. Fergusson, M. A., subsequently Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of England, dropped a few complementary words about a new religious movement emanating from Oxford University known as the Oxford Group, that he said was spreading rapidly through various countries, including South Africa.

A new religious movement spreading out from Oxford University! That was the only point in the minister's sermon I remember. Here was a fresh trail of thought. Several flourishing religious movements had started in this intellectual centre the England, as everyone knew. It was about time for another religious revival of sorts in Britain. The last had come from Wales. That the new ones should emanate from Oxford was befitting. Oxford would contribute the dignity so essential to a revival of religion. There was only one Institution in England more suitable as a starting-point when regarded as news, for Cambridge had never yet produced a real live revival. One had pleasant memories of visits to both Oxford and Cambridge, notably as a member of ex-President Roosevelt's party when "Teddy" was on his world tour, but mostly I thought of Cambridge as the sports University, and of Oxford as the home of new religions. A reversal of that order would be interesting news.

I've visualized "Oxford's New Religious Movement" with our columns thrown wide open for the views of every Tom, Dick and Harry in the land; yet a wisely-guided feature inculcating much sound and helpful religious teaching. Vaguely I was aware I should again be skimming the cream from both worlds.

But why wait until Monday for the start? That Sunday evening I telephoned the minister and asked for more particulars. He told me all he knew on the subject. Not much, but he believed that the leader, known to his intimates as "Frank," lived very close to God.

Next day a disappointment. Having sent to our newspaper library, cynically known as "the Cemetery," for "clippings" about Frank and his movement, I discovered the Oxford Group had existed for several years; that it was vaguely known in Fleet Street, and had been casually referred to in our own daily newspaper. Then I remembered reading about the beginnings of the Group in Oxford in newspaper reports distinctly unfriendly which had repelled me at the time. But it had escaped my notice that a number of distinguished Oxford dons had joined in a letter to the Press protesting against the unfairness of these criticisms. Speaking from observation of the results, they said newspaper criticisms distorted the spirit of the work through the misunderstanding and unfounded rumour.

This was a blow! Not much hope of turning this old stuff into a successful religious series to awaken England. The news had already broken, strictures had been passed on the informality of procedure and the emphasis on sin. Now I understood why several years had a lapse and no journalist had been enterprising enough to advise his newspaper to espouse the Oxford Group. Still, I was unwilling to be put off. There could not be much wrong with teaching, or it would not be permitted in Oxford University. They professed to test all they said and did by the standards of absolute love to all, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, absolute honesty. Surely there was not much wrong with a movement squaring up to those ideals. Old news though it was, when judged by Fleet Streets up-to-dateness, I felt there was a good story somewhere in ancient and is unusual and growing movement -- spreading worldwide from Oxford. And good circulation as well.

The Journal's thought in a situation in this kind may be, "If you can't praise, punch." A lady novelist strongly advised me to attack. But how good one attack a religious movement which had the tacit approval of Oxford University? More than one reckless journalist has attacked this movement without understanding its genius, for the attack is always more interesting copy than the eulogy. There are so many opportunities for the latter and so few to attack in safety. For the English libel law is an inter-presence menace. Merely to ridicule a person in print is to invite an expensive law-suit involving big damages. Rarely do newspapers say all they think, for they may have to pay more than a penny for their thoughts. An occasional target like the Oxford Group, that does not shoot back is sometimes a most welcome discovery.

I had no wish to attack the Oxford Group, for I believed in Christianity, and a closer study of the "clippings" showed definitely that the leaders did too, even if they had a new and perhaps uncomfortable way of putting it over. Moreover, I believed it necessary and possible to modernise the Christian appeal, and perhaps "Frank's" unusual methods and teaching, already making a great headway in Oxford, might be just the way to do it. One is the been blinded by a little hostility and some ridicule; they were necessary to any new movement, religious or secular with a chance of winning through. Luther had lots of it. So had St. Frances. Wesley had his full share. Booth was ridiculed and pelted. This Group was in the right tradition of successful religious movements. And -- one could not dodge the fact -- it had a foothold in Oxford, the intellectual and cultural centre of England.

I determined to interview "Frank" without delay. Where did he live? No one seemed to know. After some difficulty, I located his quarters at Brown's Hotel, Dover Street, London.

The last time I was at Brown's Hotel I was the guest of a gentleman racehorse trainer with whom I collaborated in the writing of some exciting Turf reminiscences. Judging by the remark of "The Unknown Man" in the "My Religion" series that faith is natural to the born gambler, my return to Brown's Hotel to see a man of God instead of a racehorse trainer was the natural step forward in spiritual growth.

Frank's address at Brown's Hotel puzzled me, for it is a good hotel, much used by the aristocracy: the best county families were often to be found there when in town. But hardly the location, I felt, for a modern Elijah. Yet every man of God has to be house somewhere if he up if he elects to live in the English climate. He cannot deliver his message under a country hedge to the cows, or spend his energy preaching to the birds, like St. Francis. No one doubted that the Piccadilly area around Brown's Hotel needed more of a spiritual shake-up than a country village. Moreover, Frank was a Bishop of Souls, but had no bishop's palace, not even a vicarage, only a hotel point of contact with those people described as "the up outs," so often overlooked in the life-changing process, and so useful when changed, whether they be twentieth-century English noblemen or the Roman Emperor Constantine. End Frank was quartered in Brown's Hotel at specially reasonable terms. Some time afterwards I discovered that he had often worked day and night among the unprivileged and "down and out," and was ever at home to all men and with all men, in palace or tenement.

At Brown's Hotel I was told that "Frank" was in South America, though three other leaders of the Group were in London. They accepted my invitation to tea in my office the next afternoon. I was anxious to look them over and take their measurements, and instructed my secretary to use her feminine powers of quick observation and to make notes about them in their presence, for they would not suspect her of doing it. She did.

I have lost her notes, but remember a good point she made -- their strangely natural way of mentioning God and Christ, without that apologetic halting so noticeable with most of us. My three callers were Garrett the I am, John Roots (both clergymen of the Anglican Communion and sons of bishops), and Charles Haines, a bronzed and athletic young Quaker; all in mufti.

Three exceedingly likable young men, smartly dressed and radiating good feeling, kindness and self-possession.

Evidently "Frank" knew how to choose men.

We talked for two hours, or perhaps three, and they explained what their movement stood for. Their talk intrigued me. They had Intelligence, zeal, culture and good looks. I like to their radiant appearance, their frankness and the way Garrett Stearly beamed at me through his horn-rimmed spectacles. I liked the well-groomed strength of Charles Haines and the boyish enthusiasm of John Roots, son of the Bishop of Hankow. Later I learned that John Roots was a capable journalist and a brilliant writer. Already their coming had brought an unusual feeling, a freshness and tranquility, into the rather soiled and sometimes sordid atmosphere of Fleet Street.

Out to of that strange first meeting came the impression that these men had voluntarily lost the world in order thereby to change the world. They are the exact opposite of the "go-getter" type one habitually encountered in business. Though they were no longer masters of their fate or captains of their souls, they had a quiet strength, a relentless purpose which were already bringing astounding results.

For them nothing was casual God had a plan. They were trying to fit in with It. Knowledge of that plan, God's guidance and God's power were available for all who chose to work in with that plan. This guidance is an eye and in every form of self-determination. God-guidance in God's strength could be the normal experience of everybody at all times, they asserted. When three B.A.'s arrive with the remark that they were specially guided to accept the invitation one must take the visit as complementary, even though doubting their contention.

Many extraordinary callers had come my way in journalism: a man sentenced to death for the most sensational murder in England and reprieved by Winston Churchill; another, afterwards hanged for a "good murder" -- as Fleet Street would express it; detectives who caught most of the notorious murderers of my time; famous statesmen; the "Man Who Won the War"; boxing champions and best-selling novelists; singers and famous players; the World's Fastest Motorist; film stars, sporting men, racing men and a galaxy of forgotten celebrities. Once the Prince of Whales walked up the stairs and interrogated that the commissioner on the landing outside my room and was half-laid down the street before he was recognized.

But the radiant Three were the first callers at my office to claim they had been guided my way by God.

When I asked one of the leaders of the Oxford Group who was the founder of the movement, he replied with simple conviction:

"The Holy Spirit."

So that was the amazing claim which had escaped Fleet Street's attention. Not a man, but the Holy Spirit, had founded a new religious movement in Oxford University, and here were three of His representatives.

Either the most blatant piece of post-war blasphemy, or a movement that might accomplish anything. And worth investigating, even though it was somewhat late in the day. Moreover, I had unearthed a fresh point. And that was NEWS.

There was nothing fanatical about the way the Three Troubadours stated their case, which they claimed to be strictly Orthodox. True, point for point, and to the New Testament, though for me a new way of looking at the New Testament. They regarded it as not so much a set of rulings as arguments by the careful observance of which one acquired a safe seat in Heaven, but pictures -- "movies" if you will -- or revelations of what was bound to take place in any age, in any life entirely surrendered to the will of God.

If they were completely surrendered, as the Apostles were surrendered -- with Jesus Christ the Master in every area of their life -- and inspired others to be likewise surrendered, there must be kindred results. In Coleridge's illuminating words quoted by John Roots, they were out to restore commonplace truths to their first uncommon luster by translating them into action. They were making a film of first-century Christianity by leaving it. Consequently they are impatient of preaching without practice. Also they stressed witness before argument, my own method of putting over "My Religion" with the help of ten novelists.

Nothing new, but a view which should give them in favour with the great army of non-Christians who defend their pagan living with the time-worn excuse that Christians do not practice their own preaching (as though confessing another's sin ever excuse one's own).

But their point about Witness -- which they happily called SHARING -- was new to me, in so far as it concerned University men. True I once inveigled novelists into the witness-ring, but not necessarily a company of University graduates. They defined Sharing as meaning two distinct things -- further definable as Confession and Witness, one readily passing through the other. The former meant the confession to God and also to any person if guided to do so by the Holy Spirit for one's own release. It might mean talking freely to some Christian man or woman who could be trusted to keep secrets and to give wise counsel as well. Confession to one another was advocated by St. James and practiced by the Ephesians during Paul's visit to Ephesus. It was practiced by John Wesley's Holy Club and "love feasts." Frankness about one's faults was also good witness to the world, for when Christians confess, Pagans believe.

The ultimate aim of this Sharing was a right relationship with God. According to my three visitors, we are in desperate need of forgiveness; and in the last resort, whatever aids we may use to help us to reach it, we must come to the one place where we stand before God face to face, confessed to Him our sins, and receive the forgiveness which He so freely gives. There is no other way to fullness of life, and in our hearts we know it. Now ideally such confession as this should be made direct to God without the need of any human assistance, receiving God's forgiveness then and there; obviously, in fact, this happens time and time again.

But in practical experience, and just because we are not ideal, instance after instance could be quoted to show that there are very many who need the help of Sharing with another, so that they may come directly face to face with God. For them Sharing is a practical necessity. Only so do they grasp that reality of their confession, of the God to whom they confess, and of the forgiveness which He bestows. The forgiveness itself does not depend upon the Sharing; its appropriation by the individual constantly does.

In practice it was found that confession one to another in the Scriptural sense was mutually helpful and the only way to true fellowship. It was one of those fundamental truths of life, like Christianity itself, never fully grasped until it was practiced. From its earliest days the Christian Church had been well aware of the

value of such confession. Wesley and the modern Anglo-Catholic were at one in this, and in one sense the psycho-analyst, with his splendid technique with based upon exhaustive experiment, was simply bringing scientific proof to what the Church learned long ago under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, though she has often forgotten to practice the lesson.

The other aspect of this teaching was Sharing as Witness. Those who had been spiritually healed themselves had the necessity laid upon them to hand on the good news to others, for it was every Christian's obligation -- "By all means to save some." The Bishop of Leicester said a propagating Christian was a normal Christian; unfortunately to-day the propagating Christian was the abnormal.

Again I was skeptical. Perhaps because there were some persons I had no particular desire to see in Heaven.

That telling phrase of the Three Troubadours, "God has a plan for every man's life, " came up continually that afternoon. Somewhere I had seen it stated that when each human being was born, the plan of what he could become was made for him in the next world, and one of his joys or sorrows when he went there would come from a comparison of his past with the original plan of his possibilities.

"Not only has God a plan for every life," said one of the trio, "but when through sin we spoil the plan, God is always ready with another." This, too, was a new way of looking at things for me. Unfortunately, most of us refused to follow the plan when we saw its, or, if unaware of it, to pray for the plan to be revealed. Our sin of sins, embodying all other sins, was independence towards God; doubting God's interests in us, that He had a plan for us, that He would show us the plan, and that He would help us to carry out the plan which was the only satisfactory plan for our lives.

Here was strong teaching. There was much that attracted in the argument. But what about those people for whom there seemed no clear plan, or one that miscarried before the person had the chance to ascertain it? What of the unlucky child who had not even learned the plan of the street-crossing near his house and was killed in his happy youth? Was that part of God's plan for the child? The answer was: It must be left with God. Who could see more than we.

The New Testament answer, as put positively in the case of Peter and John, was, "What is that do thee? Follow thou me." Nobody could tell what was in God's plan for that child or if it was thwarted by the human will of child or driver. But death was only an incident, through a terrible accident, in a life which merely began hear and continued "there."

The Three Troubadours positively asserted that those who attempted to live without God's plan, as revealed by the Holy Spirit, were as certain to encounter disaster as those living under God's daily direction were certain of success. Though this success must not be measured by the purely material results of their activities.

My objection to this argument was human nature's chronic inability to know when it was being guided. To that the Three offered the answer of two-way prayer: petitions and quiet listening for the reply, especially in the morning when preparing for the day's work.

They call this early morning listening to God "Quiet Time." The Oxford Group believes God spoke to them when they needed His guidance. I believe it to be possible that nowadays, as in the days of old, there are men to whom the Lord still speaks.

But I felt to such persons were rare, and to that for a group of men and women to listen-in each morning hoping for a clear message from God on how to run their day was to expect a lot more than they would get. My views on this practice modified considerably as knowledge of the Group increased.

They emphasized to that the condition of clear guidance was complete surrender of everything -- will, time, possessions, family, ambitions -- all to God. Christ had said that if we were unwilling to surrender anything wait most valued we could not be His disciples. Not that Kingdom really took away everything we both light, or ask us to do anything most distasteful; often the things we were asked to do were those from whom they were most fitted to do. Nor was surrender always a humiliating leading thing. It meant a handing over of our little in return for God's All-Sufficiency. Each morning we lost our petty, disordered life to God and found the Real Co-ordinated Life all through the day. Accepting completely the discipline of God brought not bondage, but the fullest freedom to do what we wished -- and that was always the Will love God.

I learned that it was a practice of the Group to keep a guidance-book and record in it those thoughts which came in periods of quiet listening to God. And Angelic bishop had quoted a Chinese proverb in this connection: "The strongest memory is weaker than the palest ink." The idea was novel, introducing the technique of the lecture-room into practical Christianity; interesting as news, but not convincing unless confirmed by definite results. Otherwise the practice bordered on the comic. Yet bishops were actually keeping guidance-books, and I, too, had received from supernatural sources (as I suppose) a remarkably successful religious series. "Through guidance," said the Three.

As our interview developed I elicited news of more interesting aspects of the movement -- just those unusual human things a journalist is always seeking, even when investigating a spiritual subject. Reaching back into the first century for their standards of Christian fellowship, they were ready to scrap any later practices they believe redundant or old-fashioned, and to substitute the earliest customs or something that met modern needs. They did that much of their work through house-parties, where the visitors shared their religious experiences and drew close to God.

HOUSE-PARTY RELIGION

was a good head-line, I thought!

Whether intentionally or not, I quickly saw they were working on the lines of true journalism; for one thing, they unerringly sensed the value of the very oldest and the very newest. Yet they are amazingly orthodox, holding sometimes by paradox even the interest of the heterodox. And the so far no journalist had completely uncovered and they real genius. I wondered why.

They were even so orthodox as to believe that everyone, parson as well as prodigal, must at some time come to himself, must experience the forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ. In short, the Cross was central and teaching. At the Cross man reached a turning-point when he decided to live as God directed and guided instead of according to his own human standards. Old-fashioned evangelicals called it conversion, but through misuse that word had for many minds lost its original potency, and so they preferred the simpler word "Change." As Hugh Redwood has it: they were out to change lives on a colossal scale as the one solution of every world problem.

Those who sought to change others were called "Life-Changers" instead of evangelists. While they paid tribute to much that was done by the old-time evangelists, they felt the new age required different words

and perhaps less music to galvanize the religious interest. They believed that such phrases as "Are you saved?" were unintelligible to the average man. That the potency of such phrases vanished with a dead age. So did I. They also wished to break free from some of the mass efforts of old-fashioned revivalism. They had much evidence that men and women could be changed effectively without the emotionalism and the noise of a former day.

In fact, they believed in orthodoxy galvanized into new life in modern conditions. Just the same old Christianity, but one so intelligently phrased and sensibly though uncompromisingly presented that it became a fresh challenge to a Pagan world, still almost as far from God as in the days of the disciples.

As Christianity ones will again a minority movement, they believed there it was about time for the Church militant to show a bit of real militancy. My visiting trio made it clear that such a message as theirs must of necessity be both uncompromising and challenging, and so convincing that once more the agnostic would turn to God. They knew opposition would come, and were ready for it. You could never approved a challenge as you could approve the minutes of the last meeting. You had to accept the challenge to go all out for a maximum experience of Christ in the manner of the early Apostles, or you had to dodge it or put it out of the way. That was why a challenging Christ was crucified. The Oxford Group did not expect to be crucified, but they did expect to be strenuously opposed by those who were afraid are unwilling to respond to the challenge. It was inevitable. They challenged the world to turn back to God, to cut out sin, to make restitution for past sins, and to let God take full command of every area of life, just as the early disciples challenged the world.

Such a challenge must this being consciences. The stung conscience either surrendered are endeavored to sting back. Man under conviction of sin might do anything. This challenge stung Christians as well as Pagans, parsons as well as prodigals. Christians were challenged to be filled with the Spirit and overflowing in love towards their fellow-men so as to change them. Most Christians were unwilling to accompany Christ in His search for the lost lambs, the normal duty and privilege of every child of God. Christians mostly preferred social service to the saving of souls. It was less intimate, more snobbish, socially more correct. While the Group practiced social service, they felt man's deepest need was not money, but God, for those who truly sought first the Kingdom of Heaven had all other necessary things added unto them. That was their own experience. Men and women were keenly hungry for the true God, who was more ready to manifest Himself to them and they do seek Him.

The work of life-changing was never more necessary than now. Anyone who was pure in the sight of God could become a life-changer. There was no joy in life so great as leading a prodigal home to his Heavenly Father, always half-way down the road to meet him. Men who really had the indwelling presence of God did not need urging to become life-changers; they were naturally so joyous they had to express their joy in changing others.

Life-changing was contagious. And it was more effective nowadays than ever before. The greatest piece of social service a man could do in his generation was to change a man into a life-changer. But how? -- seeing that Christianity was again a minority movement. The Group had learned more of the How than a past generations seemed to know or had the necessity for knowing. In their Schools of Life they taught how to avoid saying and doing clumsy things, as Christ also taught His disciples. And always there was a guiding presence of the Holy Spirit to assist and overrule the teaching.

The best answer to the How of both sinner and potential Life-Changer was the Group custom of Sharing. Changed man might go wrong in trying to change others by arguments, but they were on safe ground in recounting their own experiences as the Apostles recounted theirs. Paul's method of founding a church was to start with this story of his own change. The Group did the same.

The extraordinary fact was that, in an age when, so far as I knew, converts to Christianity were practically nil in the churches, the Oxford Group were continually witnessing men and women being changed into a highly-vitalised Christians. Some of the changes were real modern miracles: big sinners, key-men, intellectuals, aristocrats and commoners alike. Not emotional decisions, as witnessed in some of the old-fashion mass-revivals, but decisions taken in quiet heart-to-heart talks as a result of tactful personal evangelism by educated men and women courageously accepting, as they did two thousand years ago, the high challenge to give themselves completely to the cause of Christ, and telling their own experience of their indwelling Master.

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