Frank Buchman found a new society when he returned to the United States in the spring of 1919. The social upheavals of the Great War had changed the country’s economy, politics, religion, and social relations. The Victorian culture he left behind had become modern America. Flappers and philosophers had replaced the temperance advocates and evangelical preachers he knew in 1914.

In the evangelist’s eyes, this social change created a spiritual crisis. One follower wrote that Buchman was overwhelmed by “all the irreligion, sensualism and reckless abandon of the post-war years.” He saw the worst results of this crisis on the college campuses of American and Britain. Students were “for the most part bewildered and nauseated with things as they were, tumbling over one another to get a new sensation, tolerating conventional religion or despising it outright.”

Samuel Shoemaker, Buchman’s right hand, said his generation was “feverishly trying to find its way to fullness of life,” and concluded that “we have found ourselves pretty dishonest, pretty raw, pretty animal about a good many things.”

Buchman and his colleagues believed that they had the answer to this social disorder and spiritual upheaval. Drawing on his experiences in Asia and State College, they built a network of cells on college campuses on both sides of the Atlantic. They attracted and converted students using creative methods of personal evangelism, such as the house party. Buchman helped these young men deal with their shame and find spiritual excitement through a more intense and rigorous Christian faith. The groups created a welcoming and friendly community for students, but challenged modern education with a sectarian style that often led to conflict.
It was an American movement, attracting students from colleges along the Eastern seaboard and from British universities. Buchman targeted the brightest and most popular men on those campuses, men who would be society’s future leaders. With those men, he could build an army to change the world.

**Fun and Faith after the Great War**

Religious life on America’s campuses reflected the postwar social upheaval. While most students identified themselves as Christian, few were active in the faith. After the rigors of the Progressive Era and the crusade—and carnage—of the Great War, American college students instead wanted to have fun. The postwar years saw the birth of a rich and vibrant youth culture; in the 1920s, writes historian Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, “the deeds of flaming college youth, seemingly squandering their opportunities, alternately frightened and titillated an older generation and led to a minor genre of college fiction.”

For many Americans the best expression of this youth culture was F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise* (1920). The story was set at Princeton University, where the young men were more concerned with parties and poetry than with class work. The students are charming and clever, the dances are exciting, the campus is lush and romantic, and the faculty is almost invisible. Although it was set in prewar Princeton, *Paradise* nonetheless became the definitive image of Jazz Age campus life, defining the decade and making Fitzgerald’s reputation.

Fitzgerald’s Princeton was far different from the evangelical college established by Presbyterians in 1746. Like most American universities, it had been influenced by the German university model of the late nineteenth century, becoming more focused on research and science and less on Christian character formation. This shift had an impact on American students. One survey of undergraduates in the 1920s found that university life had led some students to be indifferent or hostile to religion. The researchers wrote that many students “made a definite statement that their study of science had caused them to revise their ideas as to the literal truth of the Bible.” Almost a third of the surveyed students said that they had moved from a literal to an allegorical or ethical view of the Bible.

But many more students were indifferent to religion simply because it was not socially acceptable, especially at elite institutions like Princeton. The complaints of one Princeton student—an outsider because of his