

**A Cape Town minister *contra* orthodoxy:
Ramsden Balmforth's evolution as a religious liberal**

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Abstract

South African Unitarianism remains a minimally explored topic in church history. Beginning as the Free Protestant Church in Cape Town, it traced its primary roots to liberal theology, especially historical criticism of the Bible, in the Netherlands, which was brought to the Cape of Good Hope by David P Faure and other young Afrikaners in the 1860s. However, by the end of the nineteenth century the movement in South Africa had become linked to the tradition of British Unitarianism. The present article traces the theological development of Ramsden Balmforth (1861-1941), who served as the minister of the Free Protestant, or Unitarian, Church in Cape Town for forty years beginning in 1897. It is demonstrated that until in his twenties Balmforth was an irreligious sceptic, but his exposure to the study of social Christianity and comparative religion while still in Yorkshire made him amenable to certain strands of liberal Protestantism. He consequently studied theology in Oxford and brought his convictions, many of which were anchored in historical criticism of the Bible, social Darwinism, and optimistic assumptions about human perfectibility, to South Africa, where he propagated them and linked the fledgling Unitarian movement there to that of the United Kingdom.

Introduction

That the ecclesiastical landscape of the Cape Colony was a battleground for religious strife during the latter half of the nineteenth century is adequately attested to in the standard ecclesiastical historiography of South Africa. Much of the scholarly attention has understandably focused on theological controversies in the Dutch Reformed Church. While in Cape Town George Grey (1812-1898) was attempting to depose the allegedly heterodox bishop in Natal, John Colenso (1814-1883), conservative Dutch Reformed Calvinists were grappling with men of more liberal bent, most notably Thomas François Burgers (1834-1881) and Johannes Jacobus Kotzé (1832-1902), both of whom were suspended from the ministry but succeeded in having their suspensions overturned by civil courts. These and other disputes have been the subject of numerous studies with varying degrees of scholarly acumen and objectivity.¹

Almost completely ignored, however, has been a related current involving a denomination that has always been minuscule in South Africa but was a noteworthy player in the religious history of the United Kingdom, the United States of America and other countries during the nineteenth century, namely Unitarianism, which in Cape Town has from the beginning been known as the Free Protestant Church. No detailed chronicle of this denomination in South Africa has ever been written, but its history is nevertheless significant, not least in international contexts, because it demonstrates the transmission of different kinds of liberal theology from Dutch, North American and British shores to the tip of Africa. In the present article, I shall take steps towards redressing this lacuna in the relevant historiographical literature by tracing the theological development of the second Unitarian minister in Cape Town, Ramsden Balmforth, who succeeded David P Faure (1842-1916) in 1897 and guided the Free Protestant Church almost without interruption for forty years. A prolific writer about both religious and secular topics, Balmforth became a remarkable conduit for liberal religious views from the United Kingdom to the Cape. He followed a different path to a post-orthodox form of Christianity from that which his Afrikaans predecessor had trodden. Raised in a staunchly Calvinist home in Stellenbosch and Cape Town, he began to wander far from Reformed orthodoxy during his years as a theology student at the University of Leiden. This treatment of Balmforth will trace stages of his pilgrimage from unabashed hostility to Christianity in the 1880s through a grudging acknowledgement of the possibility of the social relevance of what he regarded as the moral core of that religion during the early 1890s to his initial proclamation of a liberal, ethically defined faith during the first year of his ministry in Cape Town. Subsequent articles will deal with his public prophetic ministry during the first four decades of the twentieth century.

Balmforth's secular years

In sharp contrast to Faure, Balmforth was not raised in a Christian family, and his hostility to anything that smacked of theological orthodoxy was engraved in stone before he had a remarkable volte-face and began to prepare for the ministry. Born at Huddersfield in West Yorkshire in 1861, he was the son of a mechanic who had turned his back on Christianity and joined the National Secular Society, which incorporated many smaller freethought organisations which had proliferated in the middle of the nineteenth century and had much of its geographical strength in Lancashire and Yorkshire. Presiding over the National Secular Society since its inception was Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891), one of Victorian England's most renowned atheists, who was elected to Parliament for Northampton in 1880 but, because he refused to take the religious oath required for membership, was not allowed to take his seat until six years later. By then Bradlaugh had become an outspoken advocate of the trade union movement, republicanism, women's suffrage, and other causes while opposing imperialism and, *nota bene*, socialism. Secularism, which was closely linked to numerous radical working-class movements, opposed organised religion in general.ⁱⁱ As a movement, it rode a crescendo of popularity during the 1870s and 1880s but declined rapidly after Bradlaugh's death. Hugh McLeod has noted that the official membership of the National Secular Society did not exceed a few thousand and estimated its sympathisers in the early 1880s at 60 000.ⁱⁱⁱ

As a consequence of his father's hostility to organised religion, Ramsden Balmforth was sent to a Secularist Sunday school rather than a Christian one. The precise aetiology of his radical views is probably impossible to ascertain because the extant sources, including his unpublished memoirs, shed very little direct light on his childhood. However, their coincidence with those of Bradlaugh and his movement – apart from Balmforth's advocacy of socialism – cannot be overlooked. At any rate, Balmforth's formal education temporarily ended before he became a teenager, though as an adolescent he read voraciously. During his early adult years he continued to drink deeply at the intellectual well of the Secular Society's educational programmes. Balmforth joined the Fabian Society not long after that middle-class socialist organisation was established in 1884, and became acquainted with such other Britons of similar socioeconomic persuasion as George Bernard Shaw and Sidney and Beatrice Webb. At that time non-Marxist socialism was on the ascendancy in Victorian England and would exercise increasing influence on the nascent Independent Labour Party during the 1890s.

Balmforth's career, however, began not in politics or writing, but in commerce. Before completing his twelfth year, he went to work at the Huddersfield Industrial Society, a cooperative department store. During the next two decades Balmforth rose to become its deputy secretary. During these years he married and pursued his interlinked interests in politics, economics, literature and, increasingly, religion. He was elected to the Huddersfield School Board, apparently the only public office he ever held.^{iv}

Balmforth as a Victorian antireligious novelist

Under the pseudonym Laon Ramsey, Balmforth published in 1886 his first book and only known work of fiction, *Landon Deecroft: a socialistic novel*. This *roman à thèse* is subtitled: *containing an exposition and a defence of the principles of socialism*, and its vapid plot consists of little more than a protracted dialogue between an agnostic socialist, whose name gives the book its title and who serves as the author's spokesman, and a theologically liberal Anglican cleric. The former clearly has the upper hand in the colloquy; his Christian interlocutor is portrayed as sympathetic but essentially unenlightened. In a Preface, Balmforth assured readers that although "*laissez-faire* politicians" critical of socialism had long crowed that the English public had rejected socialism, public opinion had recently undergone a fundamental metamorphosis, and that general school of economic thought was on the ascendancy. It was a natural product of the history of industrial society, he averred, because "the stern logic of events and circumstances has caused an unsettlement of old theories and beliefs, and compelled a consideration of the new".^v

Yet *Landon Deecroft* also contains the seeds of Balmforth's incipient Unitarianism and particularly shows something of his understanding of the linkage between liberal religion and social criticism which would later germinate in both England and the Cape. One utterly pedantic section of the dialogue merits quotation *in extenso* because it betrays lucidly a quintessentially radical Unitarian attitude towards Jesus of Nazareth as a prophet of pacifism and human brotherhood:

“My dear Mr. Mildmay” Landon returned, “though not calling myself a Christian, I have as great respect and reverence for Jesus Christ as have many of those who profess to worship his name; nay, far more, for my respect is based upon a thoughtful and earnest study of his recorded life and character, and my reverence seeks not to degrade him to the level of a fetich [*sic*] or idol. I recognise his virtues and his failings, and I place him in the midst of the world’s martyrs, amongst those high-souled, large-hearted, and preternaturally sympathetic natures who have hotly striven to hand on from one generation to another the priceless heritage of Truth; who have been ever ready to denounce the shams and hypocrisy of their time; who, in spite of calumny and persecution, have remained unblenched in purpose and in spirit until a martyr’s death has terminated their career. It was Christ’s misfortune, rather than his fault, that his name was destined to become the shibboleth of a sect more pharisaical than the Pharisaism which he so witheringly denounced; that his cross was fated to become the oriflamme which was to surge over a thousand bloody conflicts, in bitter satire on ‘Peace on earth, goodwill to men’. I am willing, I say, to give my meed of praise to Jesus Christ, and I do so by placing him amid the throng of those who have died in the cause of Humanity, and by aiding, in my humble way, the cause for which he laboured – the brotherhood of man; but, having done this, I do not debase myself and insult his memory by placing his image on a pedestal, and then falling down to worship at the shrine. I accept many of his teachings, just as I accept the teachings of other noble men and women; but I also find, that, like ordinary men, he had his faults and failings, and I am therefore compelled to reject the doctrines of his divinity”.^{vi}

Balmforth on post-Christian religion

The first known nonfictional piece Balmforth is known to have written about religion was a two-part essay he contributed to *The Westminster Review* in 1889. He was then twenty-eight years old, still employed at the Huddersfield Industrial Society, and in the autodidactic phase of his education. In his treatise, ambitiously titled “The future development of religious life”, Balmforth, again writing as “Laon Ramsey”, evinced both his autonomy from traditional theological conventions and his indebtedness to certain nineteenth-century intellectual currents.

The swiftest of the latter was, apparently, contemporary evolutionary thought. Balmforth agreed wholeheartedly with a recently expressed view of the German philologist and Orientalist Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) that every religion is susceptible to “inevitable decay”. One of the principal founders of comparative religion as an academic discipline, and the man who introduced it to the British public during his many years as a professor at the University of Oxford during the 1860s and 1870s (not least through his four-volume *Chips from a German workshop* [1867-1875]), Müller was clearly a scholar from whom Balmforth took many of his cues. To the young socialist, this German’s generalisation about the impermanence of religions harmonised with his observation that all matter was in a state of “perpetual transformation”, and it also resonated with his own observations of variegated Christianity in England, where “religious life, in all its forms and aspects, is subject to the law of evolution”. Rejecting the prejudice of orthodox Christians that their religion was immutable and everlasting, he pointed out that since the time of Jesus Christianity had evolved through numerous stages, including “the Galilean era”, the apostolic church, the time of Gnosticism, “Ecclesiasticism” or Roman Catholicism, and the post-Reformation centuries of “Protestantism and its offshoots”. In his own time, Balmforth could point to “a tendency to broaden theological doctrine”, and illustrated this with liberal fruits of biblical and theological scholarship, especially a wide rejection of literalistic hermeneutics which apparently was making Christianity more palatable to his sceptical mind. He was clearly relieved that “the doctrine of eternal torment, once vehemently upheld as a restraint on evil-doing, is now generally discredited”.^{vii}

In Balmforth’s progressive view of the history of Christianity, however, inherited a fundamental contradiction when viewed in the context of his own subsequent theological development. He insisted that there was “a progressive continuity in the religious instinct and the religious life” and believed that Christianity was no exception to this general evolutionary law. Yet he had to concede that while the human spirit tended to strive ever higher for greater freedom and insight in spiritual matters, during the Middle Ages Roman Catholicism had represented a retrogressive phenomenon in this regard. Balmforth sought to explain this as an aberration, a temporary setback in a longer, generally upward movement. “Development is an absolute necessity”, he postulated. “If then, there is a progressive continuity in religious instinct and religious life, it necessarily follows that on the decline of

Christianity the religious life would still continue to manifest itself in other and superior forms.” However naïve and myopic this perception and reasoning are, and however obviously large numbers of post-Reformation and nineteenth-century religious developments flew in the face of Balmforth’s socialist views of egalitarianism and social ethics, especially when one considers the phenomenon of religion globally, it fails to account for what he would subsequently argue in numerous publications was the essential, moral core of Christianity being eclipsed by layers of theology which to his own mind implied the wholesale corruption and virtual destruction of that original faith.

In any case, Balmforth was not in doubt that what he termed “orthodox Christianity” (though he did not define this) was in a state of “decadence” hastened by “the disintegrating tendencies of modern thought on orthodox beliefs”. But the inevitable mortality of the Christian religion was no reason for hopelessness, he explained. Following what had become axiomatic among scholars of comparative religion during the late nineteenth century, Balmforth, operating on the assumption that at its best religion was essentially a matter of “striving after something higher” and of bestowing principles of moral conduct (rather than, for example, salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ), assured readers that other spiritual traditions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and “Mohammedanism”, offered much the same fare as Christianity. He quoted passages from the Koran, the Rig-veda, and other holy books of Asian religions to bolster this affirmation. Furthermore, their ethical fruits were incontrovertible and this seemed to prove his point. “This similarity, which is so apparent in a general view of the religions of the world, also manifests itself in the lives of the best of the adherents of each religion”, he generalised. “Sakya-Muni, in the purity, devotion, and renunciation of his life, is, like Jesus, typical of sublime saintliness ...”^{viii}

Furthermore, foreshadowing his subsequent spiritual development, Balmforth posited that religion, as “a striving after something higher” (“God”, ‘Nature’, ‘The Unknowable’, ‘The beyond’, ‘The eternal, not ourselves, which makes for Righteousness’’) was a virtually universal phenomenon, one “recognized by all civilized beings”. In this Yorkshireman’s anthropological hierarchy, “even amongst the uncivilized there is a similar though narrower conception”. He alluded to Alexander Pope’s eighteenth-century “An Essay on Man” in underscoring the ubiquitous character of the quest:

Lo, the poor Indian, whose untutored mind
Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind.

After conceding the essential legitimacy of the search for higher reality, Balmforth immediately turned again on the orthodox Christian portrayal of God as a transcendent, theistic being “with human sensibilities and powers largely magnified”. Echoing a critique made by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) and numerous other commentators in the nineteenth century, he thought the anthropomorphic presentation of God, or projection of human attributes to the divine, was the “cardinal defect” of Christianity and that from that infirm foundation had sprung other faults of Christian orthodoxy, such as the doctrines of the Trinity, the Atonement, the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, and the inspiration of Scripture. Balmforth allowed that all conceptions of a Supreme Being in the human mind are perforce anthropomorphic, but he distinguished the anthropomorphism of orthodox theologians, who regarded it as essential, from that of “the adherent of the Church of the future”, for whom it was “accidental” and employed because of an awareness of the “inadequacy of language” in describing something eternal. On the basis of his evolutionary optimism, he confidently predicted that with the ongoing development of the human intellect these “ruder presentments” of the divine were “bound to pass away”, as had “the barbarous conceptions of savage tribes” and other notions of it. Linking this supposed historical truth to what he knew of Unitarianism in Huddersfield, while ignoring the persistence of conventional theism elsewhere, Balmforth professed that “the ‘masses’” had already turned their backs on the God of the Bible and predicted that such a perception of the divine would soon be replaced by a “wave of purified Theism” and consequently “the Unitarian body may look for a great accession of strength”. Hedging his forecast, however, he granted that of such a development “there are at present no great signs”.^{ix}

Although Balmforth’s lengthy essay evinced a lack of maturity in his thought, it is nevertheless a remarkably revealing piece. It testifies not only to considerable self-acquired erudition but also to the profundity of his curiosity about religion at least four years before he undertook formal theological studies. One also finds in this piece from 1889 the germ of what he would proclaim in Cape Town beginning eight years later.

Balmforth on the evolution of moral standards

In another of his essays published before his years in Oxford, Balmforth commented at length on what he perceived as the moral advance of the time. This piece, published under the pseudonym “Laon Ramsey” in *The Westminster Review* in 1892, evinced no less erudition than Balmforth’s earlier treatise in that periodical. At the same time, it testified to his grounding in socialism and to his captivity to certain recent and contemporary intellectual currents. New, however, was evidence of his palpably growing interest in (but not adherence to) formal religion, coupled with a critical attitude towards traditional Christian forms of it.

The primary thrust of this essay was possibility of a posttheistic, postorthodox foundation for social ethics. Ambitiously titled “The sanctions of morality in their relation to religious life”, it began on a typical note of Victorian optimism. “One of the most hopeful of the signs which are now manifesting themselves amid the doubts and questionings which characterise the moral and religious life of the latter half of the nineteenth century is the intense purpose with which the moral spirit – the power of conscience – is animating human endeavour”, Balmforth declared categorically. “We see it on every hand – in literature, in politics, in every movement of social reform.” Without providing specific examples, he pointed to such broad fields as “human relationships” and “our industrial and business life” as areas where this progress seemed evident. In all of them, he perceived a waning of selfishness. He quoted approvingly Professor William Kingdon Clifford (1845-1879), who had written in his essay of 1877, “The ethics of religion”, that “conscience – the sense of right and wrong – springs out of the habit of judging things from the point of view of all and not of one”.^x And precisely that, Balmforth contended, “is daily becoming of stronger force in the moral life of humanity”.^{xi} In an essay published in 1875, moreover, Clifford had linked this notion of moral consciousness to ethnic group, or tribal, identity. When someone performed an act harmful to the interests of his tribe but perhaps favourable to himself, and subsequently understood the wider consequences of his action, he would tell himself, “In the name of the tribe, I do not like this thing that I, as an individual, have done”, posited Clifford. “This self-judgment in the name of the tribe is called Conscience.”^{xii}

The ghost of the late Clifford looms large in this essay. A former High Church Anglican who had received a professorship at University College London in 1871 and written fairly extensively as an amateur philosopher, not least in the area of social ethics, while an active member of the Metaphysical Society in the capital, he became a strong secularist who by the 1870s had left behind whatever Christian beliefs he had previously held. Clifford also adopted an evolutionary theory of society and saw in it the firmest foundation for ethics. The survival of the community, he thought, was contingent on how well it treated its members. Morality was therefore primarily a social and not an individual matter.^{xiii}

After citing Clifford, Balmforth immediately revealed his conviction that this moral progress was not merely an ephemeral or coincidental phenomenon, but one dictated by historical law. It seemed self-evident (“after a moment’s consideration”) that it was a “necessary” consequence of shifts in human thought. Calling attention to the “break-up of old faiths and beliefs”, Balmforth believed that “rebellion against traditional authority in matters of faith and belief must of necessity create the need for the establishment of superior standards” to fill the void. Why the replacement would necessarily be better he did not say. Instead, Balmforth cited a historical precedent by pointing to the Reformation inspired in part and led by Wycliff, Luther and Calvin to demonstrate how an “intellectual and moral awakening” could replace an “authoritative and traditional interpretation of the inspired records” to provide “new interpretations, new doctrines, new modes of faith, [and] new sanctions of morality”. As in the sixteenth century, so too in the Victorian era with its challenges to theological orthodoxy, “through the active or tacit rejection of the received interpretation, men are driven to find a surer basis for religious faith, a higher sanction for moral endeavour”. At this point, Balmforth gave a key clue to the secret of his unqualified optimism in this regard: “That the search will ultimately prove successful no one can doubt who has faith in the potentialities of human nature.” He allowed that there would be setbacks in the general march of progress but stressed that he and his like-minded fellows had “not only Time on our side, we have the primordial instincts of our being”.^{xiv}

That traditional Christian belief as the foundation of ethics had had its day seemed obvious to Balmforth, who continued to think in terms of a post-Christian public mind. “Even if Christ were to descend among us to-day and show us the nail-marks in his hands and feet, and the spear-wound in his side, there would still be more than one doubting Thomas who would demand a certificate of birth and parentage”, he professed. But this was of relatively little import to him, because he believed that even without the challenges brought by the post-Enlightenment era, morality was not contingent on the maintenance of orthodox religion. That religion and ethics were intimately related Balmforth understood, but he thought that the former was primarily “the yearning of the individual soul for communion with the supreme” and “not merely ‘morality touched with emotion’”. Furthermore, Balmforth reminded readers that “we see men of various creeds living useful, honest, truthful, and even

noble lives – a fact which seems to point to the conclusion that theological belief has not necessarily any influence on conduct”. He pointed to the Old Testament and Plato as evidence that an emphasis on public morality had antedated Christianity.^{xv} Balmforth therefore concluded that “the moral progress of the individual depends, not on the adoption of any special theological or metaphysical belief, but on that natural expansion and development of the faculties which, gradually freeing the mind from error, gives clearer vision and deeper insight into the difficulties which burden our human life”.^{xvi}

All of this harmonised well with the more radical forms of late Victorian Unitarian social thinking, and it also reflected Balmforth’s progressive, optimistic view of humankind as perfectible rather than inherently sinful and therefore naturally inclined to self-centredness of the kind he thought was being gradually overcome. He ended his essay with an assertion of postorthodox certitude which revealed an ignorance of the perseverance of Trinitarian Christianity and its sometimes strong support of social reform, a naïveté with which no Briton who was cognisant of the evangelical impetus in numerous reforms in his land could have endorsed.^{xvii} Balmforth asserted that “our old beliefs have proved to be but the baseless fabric of a vision” which, when called upon for help “give us none”; we could be certain that “so long as there arises the cry of human sorrow or the need of human sympathy, morality, founded on an impregnable basis, shall withstand the shocks of time and circumstance, and slowly but surely rise above the shifting impulses of changing and decaying creeds”.^{xviii}

In the second half of his essay, Balmforth disclosed what the basis of “humanitarian ethics” could be in a post-Christian civilisation. Acknowledging that ethical theories tended to alternate in a dialectic “from individualism to socialism, and back from socialism to individualism”, he limited his remarks largely to the morality of the individual. Never having adopted the doctrine of Original Sin, and perceiving social improvement all around him, Balmforth could regard “instances which seem to illustrate the depravity of human nature”, such as cruelty to innocent children, as “exceptions which prove the rule”, actions which by definition were “unnatural and inhuman”. Surely the greater tendency of the human species, he reasoned, was “to right and noble conduct”; it was “this upward tendency of human nature which is its distinctive characteristic”. The overarching task of “humanitarian ethics is to implant the same motives in every human heart”. Morally upright conduct would thus become intrinsic rather than reactive to rewards and punishments. Balmforth thought that most people did ethically acceptable deeds “merely because public opinion or custom, requires their performance”, while they tended to avoid doing evil “because the fear of social ostracism, or of losing caste with one’s neighbours, acts as a deterrent”. To replace the stick and the carrot with “love of the Ideal Good manifested, as of necessity it must be manifested, towards those with whom the word ‘good’ implies relation – namely our fellow-men” was the objective of humanitarian ethics. At this point Balmforth made one of his few recorded positive comments about Christianity prior to beginning his theological studies. He found in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46 a lucid illustration of the aim of humanitarian – as opposed to divinely imposed or supernatural – ethics. Balmforth pontificated boldly: “In this sense alone does the true meaning of Christ’s words flash on our minds: ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me’.”^{xix} This reflected the spirit of radical, late nineteenth-century Unitarianism, and it certainly foreshadowed what Balmforth would write and preach during the early phase of his ministerial career in Cape Town about a human Jesus of Nazareth as a moral teacher denuded of subsequent accretions of interpretation which gave him supernatural characteristics.

At the same time, this future Unitarian minister made it clear that in the early 1890s he was still far from anything that smacked of orthodox Christianity or indeed a belief in the enduring value of belief in the supernatural or even the possibility of such belief. He was convinced that “an infallible authority fallible man cannot possess ... The first acceptance of any standard by the human mind must be, to a large extent, dependent on reason and observation” rather than on belief in the unknown. And yet, although he perceived doctrinal orthodoxy as essentially a dead letter, in some way which the evidence does not reveal, the germ of a belief in the divine had been planted in his secularist mind. He concluded his essay “saddened and oppressed by the silence of the Eternal” yet open to the possibility that the resulting “greater need for sympathy and communion with the human” could point the way to “communion with the Supreme”. And it was in the teachings of the man Jesus that Balmforth heard the way forward, namely in an immanent rather than a transcendent God: “Strange how some of the most beautiful sayings of Christ, read by the light of the doctrines of the New Reformation, become clear to our minds, fraught with a truer, a higher, a holier meaning! ‘Purity in heart’ – that is the spirit of God manifested in human life, and the Kingdom of Heaven is indeed ‘within’ us.”^{xx}

The post-Orthodox lecture-sermons in Cape Town

Most details of Balmforth's spiritual journey during the 1880s and early 1890s are unknown. In his unpublished memoirs he stated obliquely that he began to attend the Unitarian church in Huddersfield during his twenties, that is, at some time between 1881 and 1890, and eventually became a member of it.^{xxi} What motivated him to take that step is not recorded. Apart from the articles in *The Westminster Review* cited above, he left virtually no written record of his religious thought during this period. What is known is that in 1893 Balmforth entered Manchester College, which had recently been relocated from London to Oxford and was temporarily known as the Free School of Theology. Its new buildings were completed on a site purchased from Merton College in Mansfield Road.^{xxii} His studies underwritten by bursaries, Balmforth would spend the next three years there. During that time he was taught by a handful of Unitarian scholars, the most renowned of whom was Joseph Estlin Carpenter (1844-1927), whose professional achievements were partly in the higher criticism of the Bible and the emerging field of comparative religion.^{xxiii}

In Cape Town, after shepherding the Free Protestant Church for nearly three decades, Faure tendered his resignation in February 1897. He informed his governing committee that he had run out of meaningful ideas for sermons and that his coincidental secular employment left him with too little time to perform "pastoral" tasks other than preaching. Faure was unaware of any likely successor in South Africa but stated that a recently arrived English immigrant, Joe Dyson, had informed him of a promising young Unitarian minister in Huddersfield who might be interested in serving the Free Protestant Church.^{xxiv} Balmforth corresponded with representatives of that body, revealing that for three years he had "worked one of the hardest Unitarian churches in Yorkshire", where he had to preach at three services every Sunday, lead its Sunday school on alternate weeks, lecture at various venues in England, and do a considerable amount of writing. He proposed coming to Cape Town for a limited period, during which he hoped to recover his health while serving as an interim minister.^{xxv} Enthusiastic recommendations by Dyson and H Rawlings, a Unitarian minister in London who had briefly served a church in Graaff-Reinet, were submitted to the committee.^{xxvi} Undoubtedly also spurred by Faure's health crisis, which left the Free Protestant Church without a minister for three months, the committee called Balmforth to its pulpit. Together with his wife and daughter, he sailed to Cape Town in June 1897.^{xxvii} The precise terms of his appointment are unknown, owing to lacunae in the archivalia. They arrived on the *Tartar* before the end of that month, and Balmforth assumed his ministerial duties in his new congregation, which encompassed both English and Afrikaans speakers, almost immediately.

Other details of Balmforth's voyage to and early ministry in the Cape need not concern us here. What is particularly germane to our analysis of his theological journey is a series of "lecture-sermons" he delivered at the Free Protestant Church on Sunday evenings not long after his arrival. Published the following year under the revealing title *The evolution of Christianity*, they shed indispensable light on where his religio-intellectual pilgrimage had led him at the outset of his forty-year ministry at the southern tip of Africa. The titles of Balmforth's nine presentations themselves point to how he regarded Christianity not as a divinely inspired and immutable doctrinal system imposed from above but as a religion profoundly shaped by the evolving historical context in which it has found itself: "The True View of the Bible, – The Scriptures as Viewed from the Outside", "The Religious Forces That Made the Bible", "The Beginnings of Christianity: (1) Was Jesus Man or God?", "The Beginnings of Christianity: (2) The Doctrine of the Atonement", "The Beginnings of the Christian Church: (1) Organisation", "The Beginnings of the Christian Church: (2) Doctrine", "The Middle Age and the Re-Awakening", "The Protestant Reformation and Its Implications", and "What Is True Religion?" He particularly singled out as an inspiration Edwin Hatch (1835-1889), the liberal Anglican theologian whose 1888 Hibbert Lectures on *The influence of Greek ideas and usages upon the Christian Church*^{xxviii} had gained international attention.^{xxix} Hatch had analysed in detail the contrast between Jesus as an uncomplicated Galilean whose teachings were largely encapsulated in the Sermon on the Mount and the divinised Christ of subsequent Christian theology in the Hellenistic world. Other influential theologians and religious thinkers whom Balmforth credited were the German biblical scholars Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860) and Otto Pfleiderer (1839-1908), Oxford Old Testament critic Samuel Rolles Driver (1846-1904), the French rationalist biographer of Jesus Ernest Renan (1823-1892), his mentor at Manchester College Joseph Estlin Carpenter, and Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), whose renowned poem "Dover Beach" had memorably described the ebbing of belief in conventional religious verities in England.^{xxx} Apparently these men, some of whose works he undoubtedly had encountered during his student years in Oxford, allowed Balmforth to see even more clearly that there was a great variety of thought in Christianity, and that much of that which

characterised nineteenth-century liberal theology was compatible with both his evolving understanding of a rationalistic spiritual life and his lifelong commitment to evolutionary social reform.

A comprehensive analysis of Balmforth's series of lecture-sermons lies outside the scope of the present article, but certain pivotal points in them illustrate the theologically liberal platform on which he launched his ministry in Cape Town and which formed a distinct bridge between Victorian religious thought and early South African Unitarianism. A cardinal one lay in what he magisterially titled "The True View of the Bible". In this initial lecture, Balmforth sought to dethrone it from its traditional place of authority. His assault reflected both his captivity to recent scholarship and his incognisance of the ongoing strength in many quarters of conventional commitment to biblical inerrancy. "Few thoughtful people, now-a-days, would say that every line of Scripture was inspired by God and that the books contain no error, no false statement of doctrine or of fact", he generalised. In its place as the supreme arbiter of religious truth and morals, Balmforth substituted human rationality:

We say that Reason and Conscience, though not infallible, are the natural, the ultimate, the only legitimate authority for man; that the Bible itself is the outcome of Reason and Conscience; that, though it may be a great help to our life, still, it is the result of human thought and work, just as the writings of Shakespeare and Milton are the result of human thought and work; and that every book in the Old and New Testaments bears marks of human weakness and imperfection as well as of human nobility, aspiration, and struggle after the higher ways of life.

No longer must humankind be cowed by the Holy Writ, Balmforth emphasised.

Instead of making the Bible the master of mind and soul, and so degenerating into superstition, we make the ever-growing mind and soul the master of the Bible and so draw from it lessons of utility and power.^{xxxix}

No less revealing in Balmforth's initial lecture about the Bible is his perception of the evolution of morality in it. Here one finds a crystal-clear vestige of his reliance on evolutionary thought which characterised his 1889 article on "The future development of religious life". Balmforth saw in the earliest Hebrew scriptures a depiction of man as "cruel, deceitful, [and] cunning", attributes which were divinely sanctioned as crucial to tribal or national survival. He also pointed to polygamy, slavery and the execution of witches and Sabbath violators as representative of the moral state of the early Old Testament period. Gradually, however, and especially because of the ministry of the prophets, ethical standards rose. In Balmforth's reading, they reached their culmination in the New Testament, especially "in the teaching that Love is the greatest thing in the world, and in the injunction to 'Bear one another's burdens, and do unto others as we would that others should do unto us'." He optimistically asked his congregation in Cape Town, "Is it not obvious, from the pages of the Bible itself, that there has been a progressive, an evolutionary movement from a low to a high state of morality, and that these pages are the simple, imperfect record of man's feelings, thoughts, and strivings, in this long upward struggle?"^{xxxix}

Balmforth's perception of the Reformation, conveyed in his eighth lecture, is no less revealing, because he placed the origins of Protestantism into an evolutionary historical framework that also included his own ministry. In broad strokes, he saw three main consequences of the Reformation. Firstly, after a millennium of Catholic ecclesiastical authoritarianism, the Reformers had reasserted "the supremacy of the individual conscience". Secondly, to this foe of dogma, it seemed that the Protestantism had "restored religion as an inward rule of life rather than an observance of outward forms and the repetition of formal creeds". In this regard, it had recaptured, after a dark age of heavyweight, imposed Catholic religiousness, the ways of Jesus: "His condemnation of the outward Law, the form, the ordinance, the ceremony, the Judaistic creed, was severe and even terrible". Thirdly, the Reformation had "brought back an open Bible and set it up as an infallible authority", a development which the anti-authoritarian Balmforth believed "ultimately brought both good and evil results".^{xxxix}

Predictably, Balmforth emphasised that the Reformation of the sixteenth century and pre-Enlightenment Protestantism had been a "half-Reformation" which had not bestowed full religious freedom. He implored his congregation in Cape Town to strive for the creation of an era marked by "the right of each human soul to formulate, reverently, its own faith, its own religion, leaving the rest to God". They should not worry about labels or accusations of irreligiosity, Balmforth declared, for many of his heroes had endured similar charges. "Imagine men and women like John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley, George Eliot, and many another standing at the bar

of judgment!” he thundered. “Would Eternal Justice condemn them, and cast them into eternal darkness, because they called themselves Agnostics? And if we cannot conceive Eternal justice doing that, neither must we, for the Supreme pattern of life should be our pattern too.”^{xxxiv}

Conclusion

Balmforth gained widespread respect and affection among a variety of people in Cape Town, where he associated with a broad spectrum of people who to varying degrees shared his postorthodox religious views, thereby allowing his influence to extend beyond the Free Protestant Church. His liberal religion and interpersonal relational skills appealed to a variety of Capetonians. Rabbi Israel Abrahams probably voiced a common sentiment in paying tribute to the man shortly after his death in 1941. “His scholarship, his eloquence, his broadminded humanity and, above all, his innate spiritual sincerity and idealism made his ministry a true service to mankind in the name of God the All-Highest”, wrote this eminent Jew. “He loved all races and peoples, and his teaching was undoubtedly a light and inspiration to countless men and women who may not have been, strictly speaking, members of his fold. But his greatest Sermon was his life. He was his Christian Ideal. The generation that has known him will never forget his saintliness.”^{xxxv} It is probably impossible to ascertain how influential Balmforth was beyond the perimeter of Unitarianism; the fact that he published fairly extensively is not in itself proof of a noteworthy impact. Nevertheless, his case stands out in bold relief as illustrating how a Victorian sceptic could become a devotee of liberal religious views in England and subsequently purvey them at the southern tip of Africa. The historiography of South African Unitarianism is in its infancy; subsequent studies can trace the contours of Balmforth's religious thought after his initial series of lectures as he applied his theological views to the analysis of literature and music and also addressed a range of domestic and international issues.

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Endnotes

- 1 Two of the most detailed and relevant studies are TN Hanekom's highly tendentious *Die liberale rigting in Suid-Afrika*. Stellenbosch: Die Christen-Studentevereniging-Maatskappy van Suid-Afrika, 1951, and Jeff Guy, *The heretic: a study of the life of John William Colenso 1814–1883*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1983.
- 2 Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the working class in nineteenth-century Britain*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 1984, 47.
- 3 Hugh McLeod, *Religion and society in England, 1850–1914*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996, 49.
- 4 Bridget Stoddart private archives, Fish Hoek, Ramsden Balmforth handwritten memoirs, pp 39–40; M Owen Balmforth, "Ramsden Balmforth – his life and work", *The Inquirer*, 25 October 1947, p 727. For the general history of this business written by his son, see Owen Balmforth, *The Huddersfield Industrial Society Limited. History of fifty years' progress. 1860–1910*. Manchester: Co-operative Wholesale Society's Printing Works, 1910.
- 5 Laon Ramsey, *Landon Deecroft: a socialistic novel*. London: William Reeves, The New Temple Press, 1885, v.
- 6 Ramsey, *Landon Deecroft: a socialistic novel*, 156–157.
- 7 Laon Ramsey, "The future development of religious life. Part I". *The Westminster Review*, CXXXI(6), (May 1889), 545–546.
- 8 Ramsey, "The future development of religious life. Part I", 547–550.
- 9 Ramsey, "The future development of religious life. Part I", 551–553.
- x WK Clifford, "The ethics of religion". *The Fortnightly Review*, XXII(127), (New Series), (1 July 1877), 50.
- xi Laon Ramsey, "The sanctions of morality in their relation to religious life". *The Westminster Review*, CXXXVIII(5), (November 1892), 506.
- xii WK Clifford, "On the scientific basis of morals". *The Contemporary Review*, XXVI, (September 1875), 655.
- xiii Albert C Lewis, "Clifford, William Kingdon", in HCG Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, XII. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 121–123.
- xiv Ramsey, "The sanctions of morality in their relation to religious life", 506–507.
- xv Ramsey, "The sanctions of morality in their relation to religious life", 507–510.
- xvi Ramsey, "The sanctions of morality in their relation to religious life", 511–512.
- xvii The literature analysing the impact of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British evangelicalism on social reform is extensive. See, for example, Boyd Hilton, *The age of atonement: the influence of evangelicalism on social and economic thought, 1795–1865*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.
- xviii Ramsey, "The sanctions of morality in their relation to religious life", 520.
- xix Laon Ramsey, "The sanctions of morality", *The Westminster Review*, CXXXIX(2), (February 1893), 169–170.
- xx Ramsey, "The sanctions of morality", 181, 183.
- xxi Bridget Stoddart private archives, Fish Hoek, Ramsden Balmforth handwritten memoirs, 38–39.
- xxii Barbara Smith (ed), *Truth, liberty, religion: essays celebrating two hundred years of Manchester College*. Oxford: Manchester College, 1986, xxiii.
- xxiii Arthur J Long, "The life and work of J. Estlin Carpenter", in Smith, *Truth, liberty, religion*, 265–289.
- xxiv National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, Special Collections, Free Protestant Church archives, MSC 34, box 1, folder 1, DP Faure (Cape Town) to the Committee of the Free Protestant Church, 8 February 1897.
- xxv National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, Special Collections, Free Protestant Church archives, MSC 34, box 1, folder 3, Ramsden Balmforth (Huddersfield) to DP Faure, 21 April 1897.
- xxvi National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, Special Collections, Free Protestant Church archives, MSC 34, box 1, folder 3, Joe Dyson (Durban) to DP Faure, 23 February 1897; H Rawlings (London) to L Marquard, 20 May 1897.
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- xxviii Edwin Hatch, *The influence of Greek ideas and usages upon the Christian Church*. London:

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- xxix Ramsden Balmforth, *The evolution of Christianity*. London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1898, Contents, Preface.
- xxx Balmforth, *The evolution of Christianity*, Preface.
- xxxi Balmforth, *The evolution of Christianity*, 1–2, 15.
- xxxii Balmforth, *The evolution of Christianity*, 13–14.
- xxxiii Balmforth, *The evolution of Christianity*, 127–128, 132.
- xxxiv Balmforth, *The evolution of Christianity*, 138.
- xxxv National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, Special Collections, MSC 34, Free Protestant Church archives, box 1, folder 3, Israel Abrahams (Cape Town) to JC Pick, 1 January 1941.