

**Public issues perceived from the theological left flank:
The social ethics of Ramsden Balmforth
in the Union of South Africa**

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Abstract

For decades research into the history of Christian social ethics in South Africa has illuminated responses within a broad spectrum of major denominations to public issues, but has thus far shed considerably less light on how believers outside these denominations reacted to various questions. Unitarians are in the latter camp. Although few in number, they offered opinions and engaged in activities from a noteworthy intellectual perspective which was largely an extension of nineteenth-century developments in European theology, philosophy, and political thought amalgamated with a focus on the ethical teachings of Jesus. For forty years beginning in 1897 while he ministered to the Free Protestant Church in Cape Town, English-born Ramsden Balmforth commented prolifically on a variety of important issues and in some instances participated in movements to redress grievances voiced by disadvantaged groups within the ethnic amalgam of the Union of South Africa. The present study examines several of this Christian socialist's positions against the backdrop of his meta-ethical precepts.

Introduction

In the annals of South African Christianity, few ministers have responded with greater vigour to a broad spectrum of public issues than Ramsden Balmforth, who served the Free Protestant (or Unitarian) Church in Cape Town from his arrival in 1897 until his retirement forty years later. This scholarly Yorkshireman was not only a minister who proclaimed his post-orthodox faith to a combined English and Afrikaans congregation in Hout Street but also a civic-minded immigrant who wore numerous hats. At one

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time he served as a member of *inter alia* the Cape Division School Board, the Cape Town Juvenile Affairs Board, and the Cape Town League of Nations Union as well as serving as Vice-President of the South African Peace Society. Balmforth's homiletics extended beyond the pews of his own church; he was one of the first clergymen in South Africa to preach on radio.² A prolific writer, Balmforth penned several books about theological, literary, scientific, and political topics which were published in South Africa and the United Kingdom. He also contributed articles to scholarly journals as well as a large number of pieces to the Cape Town and London daily press and to the British Unitarian weekly, *The Inquirer*. Collectively, these sources shed much light on the unfolding of his secular thought, his Christian ethical principles, and how he applied both to public issues in South Africa.

In the historiography of South African Christianity, the involvement of individual churchmen and their denominations in debates over secular questions has long occupied a central but broad place. Historians and other scholars have examined, for example, their various responses to such matters as the Second Anglo-Boer War, conscientious objection to military service, the implementation of racial segregation in an urban milieu during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the establishment and maintenance of apartheid as well as movements to end that system of social engineering, and the control of alcoholic beverages and gambling. One need not search relevant bibliographies with excessive vigour to find how, for instance, various Dutch Reformed, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, Baptist, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian Christians voiced their opinions about these matters and related them to their faith. Largely ignored, however, is the diminutive Unitarian denomination of which Balmforth was long the chief spokesman. A consideration of his positions on a variety of noteworthy issues is thus overdue. In a previous study, I considered Balmforth's efforts to forestall the coming of war in 1899.³ In the present article I shall discuss his responses to a representative sample of pivotal public matters in the first, second, and third decades of the twentieth century. It will be argued that to a considerable extent Balmforth's stances on public issues can be directly linked to his liberal theology but that in some cases there is no significant relationship thereto. Further, despite his urgent and repeated pleas for more equitable treatment of other-than-European peoples in the Union of South Africa, he brought with him certain Victorian attitudes of European cultural supremacy which dovetailed neatly with contemporary strategies for ensuring white political and economic hegemony.

² "Cape Town Jubilee", *The Inquirer*, no 4435 (2 July 1927), Supplement, p ii.

³ Frederick Hale, "A Nonconformist Waging Peace: The Foundations of Ramsden Balmforth's Initiatives in the Second Anglo-Boer War," *Studia Historiae Ecclesasticae*, XXVII, no. 1 (June 2001), pp. 97-112.

A consideration of this eminent Unitarian's thought and its application to contemporary disputes also relates to recent scholarship about the unfolding of intellectual life in South Africa. In his recent study *A commonwealth of knowledge: science, sensibility, and white South Africa 1820-2000*, Saul Dubow analysed the development of intellectual institutions in the region, paying particular attention to those in Cape Town, such as the South African Library, the South African Museum, the University of Cape Town, and various scientific and cultural societies. He argued that from the 1820s onward, knowledge and knowledge-centred institutions "served to underpin white political ascendancy and claims to nationhood".⁴ The countless noteworthy contributions by religious leaders to this phenomenon are almost entirely overlooked in Dubow's impressive work. He argued that while the individuals, movements, and institutions which he considered were diverse, in effect many of them long served the interests of Caucasian cultural and political hegemony. An examination of Balmforth's writing on various issues early in the twentieth century suggests the need for a carefully nuanced view of the relationship between transplanted British intellectualism and public matters in the multicultural cauldron of the Union of South Africa. This seems particularly appropriate because many of the headaches in the early years of the new state stemmed from conflicts between its amalgamated but by no means fully reconciled Anglophone and Afrikaans-speaking populations. To be sure, Balmforth was an incarnation of Gilbert and Sullivan's celebrated character who "in spite of all temptations to belong to other nations remain[ed] an Englishman". At the same time, however, he was a self-styled peacemaker for whom the question of reconciliation between the two major European ethnic groups directly affected his flock in Cape Town.

Pivotal meta-ethical and cultural determinants in Balmforth's social ethics

One can hardly probe Balmforth's application of his Christian social ethics to contemporary issues without an awareness of key religious and secular elements in his thought. After a brief career in small business, he studied at Manchester College, Oxford, under the tutelage of such Unitarians as the Biblical scholar Joseph Estlin Carpenter, who in the early twentieth century devoted much of his scholarly attention to the study of comparative religions.⁵ Balmforth's theology incorporated an unswerving faith in reason

⁴ Saul Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility, and White South Africa 1820-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. v.

⁵ Arthur Long, "The Life and Work of J. Estlin Carpenter", in Barbara Smith (ed.), *Truth, Liberty, Religion. Essays Celebrating Two Hundred Years of Manchester College* (Oxford: Manchester College, 1986), pp. 265-289; "Memorial Notice. Dr. Estlin Carpenter", *The Inquirer*, no. 4432 (11 June 1927), pp. 376-377.

which stemmed from the Enlightenment as from being an arbiter of religious truth. That which he did not find rational, whether in the Bible or elsewhere in Christian tradition, Balmforth did not hesitate to reject. Moreover, in accordance with a foundational principle of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century religious liberalism, he regarded certain elements of the Christian message as conveyed in the New Testament as central while downplaying others or indeed rejecting them wholeheartedly as archaic, undesirable vestiges of a pre-Christian era, or irrelevant to the modern scientific world. At the religious base of his ethical thought was the notion that the crux of the Gospel was Jesus's message of brotherly love and the fatherhood of God. This conviction remained with him throughout his ministry at the southern tip of Africa, untouched by the reaction by Karl Barth and numerous other theologians who challenged liberalism early in the twentieth century. As late as 1935 Balmforth expressed this view of the essence of the Gospel in his book *Jesus - the Man*.⁶ As will be seen below, he explicitly propounded it in several of his treatises during the years under present consideration. By contrast, Balmforth had no use for various theologies of the Atonement, especially those which postulated the death of Jesus as a propitiation of divine wrath. He outrightly rejected substitutionary atonement while renewed debates about the viability of the Anselmian theory and proposals for its replacement by other interpretations of the salvific meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus pitted one British theologian against another. In other words, his faith harkened back to the Sermon on the Mount and other key teachings of Jesus while for the most part a theology of the Cross lay beyond the pale of Balmforth's religious thought (although we will see one noteworthy exception to this), as did belief in Original Sin. Illustrative of his personal *non credo* which harmonised with that of many other Unitarians in several countries, in 1925 he responded succinctly to efforts made by Anglican and other Protestant leaders in both the United Kingdom and the Union of South Africa at the reunification of denominationally fractured Christendom: "A Federation of Churches and religions on the lines of the present World Alliance—Yes. Uniformity of belief, creed, or ceremonial—No."⁷

Balmforth engaged in economic and political issues in the United Kingdom before becoming a Unitarian minister, and at no time did he jettison his underlying socialist principles. This young Englishman joined the Fabian Society shortly after the founding of that generally middle-class socialist body in 1884. His direct involvement in it continued through the balance of that decade and until he sailed to Cape Town in 1897. Even after settling in South Africa Balmforth appears to have remained in fairly close contact with many other Fabians. Through the Fabian Society he became acquainted with

⁶ Ramsden Balmforth, *Jesus - the Man* (London: C.W. Daniel, 1935).

⁷ Ramsden Balmforth, "South African Notes", *The Inquirer*, no. 4319 (11 April 1925), p. 229.

better-known British socialists such as George Bernard Shaw and Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Before Balmforth emigrated, non-Marxist socialism was on the ascendancy in England, and it exercised increasing influence on the nascent Independent Labour Party during the 1890s.

Further, Balmforth was profoundly shaped by the progressive intellectual *ethos* of the late Victorian era. As I have argued elsewhere,⁸ like many non-evangelical British Christians of his generation he found Darwin's theory of evolution convincing and to some degree accepted Social Darwinism as an explanation of the course of modern history, although certainly without (in contrast to men like Herbert Spencer) advocating conservative political and economic views. Balmforth's faith in Darwin was part of his general acceptance of natural science as a reliable vehicle in the search for truth. In secular issues as well as in theology, reason far outweighed revelation in his epistemological hierarchy. Repeatedly Darwin referred to the opinions held and the attitudes generally taken by "thoughtful men" as criteria in determining what was intellectually viable.

In harmony with his Darwinist convictions, Balmforth did not believe in universal human equality. His views on race were shaped during the Victorian era of the triumphant expansion of the British Empire, including participation in the "Scramble for Africa", and at no time is he known to have expressed opinions suggesting that African people, for example, were culturally or mentally on a par with Britons or Europeans generally. As we will see, however, this attitude did not prevent Balmforth from realising that within large ethnic groups cognitive endowment and other attributes were unevenly distributed, so that *some* Africans were intellectually the equal of or superior to *some* Caucasians. For him, "civilisation" was a hallmark of human advancement, and in this respect Balmforth clearly regarded the British as a whole as setting the standards which he hoped Africans would gradually meet.

Finally, Balmforth was a pacifist, although he did not record his views on this dimension of his thought in sufficient detail to locate him with precision on the spectrum of positions which have fallen under that label. At any rate, when he landed in Cape Town in 1897 tensions between the British Empire and the two Boer republics were mounting, and as early as June 1899 he launched a campaign, in tandem with editor Albert Cartwright of *The South African News* and other influential Capetonians, to sway public opinion in the Mother City against British military intervention in the South African Republic and the Orange Free State. Although this verbal endeavour was unsuccessful, Balmforth continued his efforts after the outbreak of hostilities

⁸ Frederick Hale, "Interpreting South African Cultural Clashes Through Darwinian Eyes: Ramsden Balmforth in Cape Town" (forthcoming in the *South African Journal of Cultural History* in 2011).

to bring the war to a prompt conclusion and called for a just and equitable conclusion in the interests of regional reconciliation and harmony.⁹ During the 1920s he served as Vice-President of the South African Peace Society and was a member of the executive committee of the Cape Town League of Nations Union.¹⁰

Constituting the Union of South Africa

One of the pivotal and most contentious issues confronting the white men who constitutionally established the Union of South Africa was that of suffrage, particularly with regard to ethnic identity; intimately linked to this was the question of whether black, Asian, and coloured people could be elected to Parliament. Granting either the franchise or the right to serve in Parliament without regard for race would have been a novelty in any of what would become the four provinces of the Union. The matter was hotly debated at the Union Convention of 1908 and 1909 before the foes of reform succeeded in their efforts to maintain a conservative position with a political “colour bar”. It was thus a racially restrictive South African Bill which was taken to London for parliamentary consideration.

Realising that he and like-minded liberals had lost the fight for racial inclusiveness in South Africa, Balmforth appealed immediately to the United Kingdom. In May 1909 he sent a letter to *The Inquirer* requesting its readers to use whatever undefined influence they might have to secure the franchise and equal political rights “for all civilised men in South Africa, of whatever race or colour”. Balmforth found it “odious” that those who were not of “European descent”, including both “coloured people and civilised natives”, would not have a right to serve in the South African Parliament. Non-Europeans in South Africa, he informed readers, included medical practitioners, lawyers, educators, and ministers of the Gospel. In harmony with his Labourite underpinnings, Balmforth emphasised that these unenfranchised ethnic groups were the “labouring classes” of the country and that it was they who had performed most of the “rough work” in the material development of South Africa by constructing roads, railways, streets, telegraph lines, and so on. Their exclusion from the political process struck him as contradictory to “the fundamental principle of citizenship, and, as many of us think, of Christianity”. His elaboration of the latter point was truncated and rested on a supposedly self-evident truth as well as an appeal to readers’ sense of human dignity. “Unitarians and Liberals do not need to be told that when men who have within them the capacity to rise are denied the opportunity to rise, those

⁹ Hale, “A Nonconformist Waging Peace: The Foundations of Ramsden Balmforth’s Initiatives in the Second Anglo-Boer War”.

¹⁰ “Cape Town Jubilee”, *The Inquirer*, no. 4435 (2 July 1927), Supplement, p. ii.

who deny them the opportunity are guilty of the slave-owning spirit”, he declared. “It is that spirit we are fighting, because we believe it to be opposed to the principle of Christian citizenship and the brotherhood of man.” Balmforth emphasised that on this issue he was by no means a lone voice crying in the wilderness; the leaders of the other “English-speaking” Christian denominations had similarly urged the Constitutional Convention on the matter. For that matter, he asserted, even some Dutch Reformed *dominees* agreed with him in opposing the “colour-line” in South African politics; it was “only the more backward part of the white population which has forced the colour-line into the Constitution”.¹¹

Considered several decades later, conspicuously absent from Balmforth’s argument, concentrating as it did on ethnic groups, was any mention of women’s suffrage. The movement to give women the right to vote was well underway in the United Kingdom before he sailed to the Cape in 1897; although not until 1918 did the Qualification of Women Act give British women the franchise, and then only if they were at least thirty years old, and were householders, married to a householder, or held a university degree. A decade later the Representation of the People Act finally gave women voting rights on the same terms as men. Oddly enough, given his very liberal political proclivities, there is no evidence that Balmforth was at all concerned about the possibility of women enjoying political rights in the Union of South Africa. There those of European descent got the right to vote in 1930.

The avowedly anti-imperialist Balmforth acknowledged at that time that at least on the surface it might seem that he was compromising his principles by appealing to people in the United Kingdom to urge Parliament to assert its authority and influence South African political affairs. His consolation and justification lay in the fact that the Draft Constitution itself explicitly recognised “the supremacy and protective powers of the Imperial Government” in that “several important clauses in the Constitution, embracing *white* franchise rights, are entrenched behind the Imperial veto”. In the interests of consistency, Balmforth argued whether non-white rights should not also be thus protected. He rested his case by assuring British Unitarians that his plea was not for an extension of rights beyond where they presently stood and that they be granted to all. Rather, he and his allies were merely calling for “the protection of existing legal rights—the right of all civilised men, of whatever race or colour, to full citizenship, including, of course, the right to represent their fellow-citizens in Parliament”.¹²

Like many of the other campaigns in which Balmforth fought, it proved to be a lost cause. A delegation led by Jan Smuts and Louis Botha

¹¹ R. Balmforth (Cape Town) to *The Inquirer*, 16 May 1909, in *The Inquirer*, no. 3497 (3 July 1909), pp. 464-465.

¹² Balmforth to *The Inquirer*, 16 May 1909, p. 465.

took the proposed constitution to London, where it was passed by Parliament and signed into law by Edward VII before the end of 1909. The Union of South Africa officially came into being the following year with the vast majority of its inhabitants not enjoying full citizenship in the sense of having the franchise or the right to sit in Parliament.

Toward white ethnic reconciliation in the post-war Union

The confluence of Balmforth's post-orthodox emphasis on the universal brotherhood of man as the crux of the Christian life and his interests in peace and ethnic reconciliation came to the fore in his proposals for resolving the issue posed by the Afrikaner revolt during the early stages of what would subsequently be called the First World War. The outbreak of hostilities in Europe had almost immediate repercussions in several regions of colonised Africa and jeopardised the stability of the newly constituted Union of South Africa. In August 1914, the British government requested that South Africa invade German South West Africa. Many Afrikaners, including several who had been served prominently in the Second Anglo-Boer War (e.g. SG Maritz, JH de la Rey, CF Beyers) strongly opposed such intervention. However, Prime Minister Louis Botha and Minister of Defence Jan Smuts favoured it, not least in the hope that it would eventuate in the establishment of Union hegemony over the conquered territory. The malcontents launched a short-lived rebellion which the Botha government succeeded in suppressing within weeks. Many of its surviving leaders were prosecuted and either fined, incarcerated or executed. The *Helpmekaar* society was founded to pay fines incurred. The National Party surged in response to this incident, though placed behind the South African Party in the 1915 elections, and the first newspaper aligned with it, *Die Burger*, increased its circulation considerably. The treatment of the rebels, and the question of their possible public role after the restoration of peace, vexed South Africa for the duration of the war.¹³

While South Africans fought in East Africa and Europe, Balmforth published a booklet in Cape Town entitled *The war and the coming peace: an appeal to sober-minded people* in which he expounded his views on the political future of South West Africa, the disposition of the rebelling Afrikaners, relations with Germany after the restoration of peace, the necessity of restoring harmony between English- and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, conscientious objection to military service, and how the churches in South Africa had generally fallen short of meeting Christian standards of peace-making.¹⁴ An understanding of some of Balmforth's points is enhanced

¹³ T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa. A Modern History*. Third edition (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1987), pp. 271-272.

¹⁴ Ramsden Balmforth, *The War and the Coming Peace. An Appeal to Sober-Minded People* (Cape Town: O. Hartmann, City Printing Works, n.d.).

by an awareness that he ministered to a congregation which originated among theologically liberal Afrikaners in Cape Town (some of whom traced their lineage to Germany) and for decades had provided a spiritual home both for them and like-minded English-speakers. Surnames like Marquard and Centlivres (German and French, respectively) abounded in this flock. Whether it included any erstwhile residents of German South West Africa, however, is not clear from the extant membership records.

At any rate, to Balmforth the proper disposition of that colony, now occupied by South African forces, seemed obvious: As the home of a large number of German immigrants, it should be returned to German hegemony after the restoration of peace. “We have no wish to add a disaffected German dependency to our possessions”, he reasoned, “and the Union of South Africa is probably not over-anxious to add to its numerous racial troubles by incorporating some thousands of unwilling German citizens”. Balmforth rejected outright the argument that “we cannot afford to have a powerful neighbour like Germany on our borders”, because he was confident that if that European power could be induced to join what he termed a “League of States for the preservation of Peace” (the establishment of which he advocated elsewhere in anticipation of post-war League of Nations) any disputes could be resolved in that body.¹⁵ There is no evidence that decolonisation crossed his mind.

Turning to the fate of the rebels, Balmforth also argued his case on secular grounds, although undoubtedly it was informed in part and indirectly by his liberal view of the Christian ethical thrust of the religion of Jesus. He suggested that South Africans approach this issue “without undue bitterness”. Balmforth sympathised with those who had lost family members or property because of the rebellion but advised that calls for the rebels to receive “justice” be tempered by a deeper understanding of that concept. To his pragmatic mind, as part of a “working hypothesis” it could be defined as “that which will help to make a man a better, a more capable, and more public-spirited citizen, willing to devote his energies to the progress and well-being of the commonwealth”. Imprisoning the rebels, he contended, would do little more than alienate them even further from the South African government. By analogy, Balmforth recalled an anecdote about Abraham Lincoln at the end of the American Civil War in 1865. When people urged him to hang defeated Confederate leaders, the American president replied that it was far more important to “hang on to them”. Balmforth did, however, believe it reasonable to demand that the rebels pay a special tax for two or three years which would serve as reparations for damages inflicted on numerous property-holders in the Union.¹⁶

¹⁵ Balmforth, *The War and the Coming Peace. An Appeal to Sober-Minded People*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁶ Balmforth, *The War and the Coming Peace. An Appeal to Sober-Minded People*, pp. 8-9.

To the pacifist Balmforth, one of the silver linings in the dark clouds of the war was that it taught a grave lesson about the need to amend the Defence Act and allow conscientious objection to obligatory military service. "If Tolstoy had lived in South Africa", he lamented, "he would have been imprisoned under the Defence Act". Balmforth noted that because of the lack of such a provision, scores of South Africans who had resisted conscription, some of whom were "educated", had been punished with compulsory labour in road construction. "It makes one sick", he judged. The "clear" remedy to this lack of "liberty" was what he termed "differentiation of function", in other words allowing people to perform national service in a variety of professional ways, not merely by taking up arms. "Even in time of war men can serve their country without joining an army", Balmforth reasoned. "For the soldier must have food, clothing, shoes, railway and postal service, means of communication, etc. —all of which have to be produced or kept going by civilians." Conspicuously absent from his too-brief argument was any mention of the quandary in which pacifists found themselves; pacifists whose convictions prevented them from carrying out these ancillary functions. Nevertheless, this Unitarian pacifist urged readers to ask candidates for seats in Parliament and whether they would support amendment of the Defence Act to include a "Conscience clause". In the same breath, Balmforth urged removing the military cadet system from South African schools. "A lad of fourteen is too young to decide the rave question as to whether he will allow himself to be trained to kill and destroy (in the teeth of his Scripture lessons[,] by the way), or whether he will rather be trained to help to build up, protect, and strengthen human life."¹⁷

As Balmforth pondered the war that was raging in Europe and elsewhere, he found little consolation in the way churches had responded to its outbreak. He apparently entertained no illusions that the British, German, or other churches necessarily could have forestalled the beginning of the conflict in 1914. However, against the backdrop of occasionally criticising much that he saw in organised religion, especially churches which he perceived as standing doctrinally far to the right of his own, he levelled his lance at their general willingness either to condone warfare or at least their failure to raise prophetic voices against it. Some of his strongest invective occurred in this context. "Surely if there is any organised body which is capable of feeling shame and humiliation at the present condition of things, it is the Christian Churches, whether Roman Catholic, Evangelical, or Liberal", he charged. "Someone has said that this war has proved the bankruptcy of organised Christianity. It has indeed." In one of his few published references to the crucifixion of Jesus, Balmforth accused the churches of not having

¹⁷ Balmforth, *The War and the Coming Peace. An Appeal to Sober-Minded People*, p. 28.

learnt “that the highest kind of sacrifice is that typified by the Cross—the sacrifice which gives itself to save, other rather than the sacrifice which gives itself to kill”. He reported having “looked in vain through the utterances of the Clergy on the war for any thoughtful attempt to show the relation of Christian ethics and Christian teaching to militarism and war, or even for any emphasis on the moral obligation lying upon every Christian man and woman to find a way of escape from the iniquity of a civilisation which resorts to such foul means”. Balmforth wondered whether any Protestant theological colleges in either Europe or America taught anything about the relationship of war, international law and international arbitration to Christian morals or, for that matter, “the fellowship of God’s peoples”. On the domestic front, he thought it a “disgrace to the Dutch Reformed Church, the Anglican Church, and the Free Churches of South Africa, who profess to be followers of the Prince of Peace, that there is not a single Peace and Arbitration Society through the whole of the Union”.¹⁸

Equity for indigenous South Africans: responding to the Bulhoek Massacre

One of the many ethically dismal chapters in the saga of race relations in the Union of South Africa was the so-called “Bulhoek Massacre” of 24 May 1921. In this incident, followers of the self-proclaimed millenarian “prophet” Enoch Mgijima calling themselves “Israelites” squatted on land south of Queenstown in the Eastern Cape. Tensions between them and white authorities gradually escalated until a police and military force used machine guns to mow down the largely unarmed occupants, killing nearly 200 and injuring many more. Condemnations of and other reactions to this intervention came swiftly. The daily press, the religious press, politicians across the ideological spectrum, representatives of black and other protest movements, and other members of society either voiced outrage or defended to varying degrees the action against Mgijima’s disciples. The standard history of the massacre and reactions thereto by Robert Edgar did not mention Balmforth,¹⁹ and the present writer’s study of various Christian responses, which concentrated on larger white denominations, both English- and Afrikaans-speaking, similarly left his part untouched.²⁰

Balmforth commented at length on what he termed “the terrible shooting of natives at Bullhoek [*sic*]”, not least in lengthy and, in his view, “unbiased” reports which he sent to *The Inquirer*. That a pall of racism hung

¹⁸ Balmforth, *The War and the Coming of Peace. An Appeal to Sober-Minded People*, p. 29.

¹⁹ Robert Edgar, *Because They Chose the Plan of God. The Story of the Bulhoek Massacre* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1988).

²⁰ Frederick Hale, “Fear and Support of an African Independent Church”, *Fides et Historia*, XXVI, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 1994), pp. 68-84.

over coverage of the incident, and that the carnage of the Great War concluded less than three years earlier had left many people jaded about human life, he did not question. In his first piece about the incident, Balmforth averred that if a slaughter such as that south of Queenstown had occurred before 1914, or that if almost 200 whites had been slaughtered in similar circumstances, “it would have sent a shock of horror throughout the whole civilized world”.²¹

Balmforth acknowledged that what he termed “religious fanaticism” had lain at the root of the confrontation, and he quoted the black press at length to describe the “Israelites”. He did not veil his antipathy toward their eschatology which he thought made them “somewhat careless of earthly consequences” and perceived a widely applicable lesson in this dimension of the movement: “The reader will notice the curious combination of moral effects which are often the results of religious fanaticism—a raising of the moral and spiritual life within the circle of the sect, and a lowering of it in the shape of bigotry, intolerance, and overbearingness, to those outside it, [*sic*] The ‘chosen people’ over again!” However, to Balmforth it seemed indisputable that the blame for both the underlying social injustice and the escalation of the matter into a massacre lay with the white side. He called attention to the Natives Land Act of 1913 as a “very unjust measure” which had granted whites a severely disproportionate tenure of territory and “undoubtedly caused great hardship amongst natives in various part[s] of the Union”.²²

Within two days of the massacre, Balmforth sent a letter to South African newspapers (a copy of which also went to *The Inquirer* in London) expressing his outrage at initial reactions to the military intervention. Calling it more a “battue” than a “battle”, he was thoroughly disgusted at such rhetorical justifications like the phrase “pitiful, but justifiable”, which seemed to him to be an echo of the “lamentable, but necessary” excuse that had followed in the wake of shootings of Xhosas at Port Elizabeth in 1920. Moreover, this latest incident left him disillusioned and less optimistic about the future of race relations in the Union. He recalled that several months before the massacre at Bulhoek he had delivered a lecture in London in which he insisted that despite the “shortcomings and injustices” of South African racial policies, “it was, on the whole, more enlightened and humane than native policy in other parts of the world”, such as Australia, and in the Union there had not been “systematic lynchings” of the kind regularly reported from the American South. But the incident at Bulhoek, which Balmforth compared

²¹ Ramsden Balmforth, “The Tragedy of Bullhoek [*sic*]”, *The Inquirer*, no. 4126 (30 July 1921), p. 405.

²² Balmforth, “The Tragedy of Bullhoek [*sic*]”, p. 405.

with the massacre at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India, on 13 April 1919, had caused him to change his mind: "I must take back my words."²³

His disillusionment deepened within the next several months because of the disposition of the case. Less than a week after the massacre, speakers at a demonstration in Cape Town who had denounced the military personnel at Bulhoek as "assassins" and "murderers" were successfully prosecuted. To Balmforth, this legal action was a regrettable departure from venerable British traditions of free speech. He recalled how the British Liberal politician William Gladstone, the English Congregationalist minister Joseph Parker, and others had called the sultan of Turkey a "crowned assassin" and how the poet Percy Shelley had denounced the men responsible for the Peterloo fields massacre at Manchester in 1819 as "hired murderers". Then Balmforth presided at a well-attended meeting of the South African Peace and Arbitration Society in the Cape Town City Hall where the Bulhoek catastrophe was debated. Part of the discussion had centred on the failure of the government to handle the confrontation adequately in a nonviolent way. A resolution was passed almost unanimously that evening which expressed the "alarm and indignation" at the way the matter had been dealt with and urged the appointment of "an independent Commission of Inquiry, on which the Natives should be represented, to investigate and report as to who is responsible for this terrible tragedy". What incensed Balmforth most was the comment of the presiding judge, Sir Thomas Graham, at the trial of the Israelite leaders when Enoch was found guilty and sentenced to six years' imprisonment while the military personnel were exonerated. Balmforth protested against this in the *Cape Times*, invoking the words of Jesus from Matthew 25 to underscore his point that a higher law than that of military command was involved: "Inasmuch as ye have done these things unto one of these, my brethren, even the least, ye did them unto Me." The entire sordid affair, in his view, made a mockery of Christian ethics. In the same piece which he wrote for the *Cape Times*, Balmforth argued: "We have either to disavow and condemn Bulhoek, or we have got to tear out of the spiritual constitution of our Churches the fundamental principle of Christianity—the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man."²⁴

Racial discrimination in the labour market

Hard on the heels of this shocking ethnic clash, South Africa suffered years of labour unrest during the 1920s. Strikes and attendant violence during the early years of that decade were followed by calls to secure legislatively the

²³ Balmforth, "The Tragedy of Bullhoek [sic], p. 405.

²⁴ Ramsden Balmforth, "South Africa. The Bulhoek Tragedy and Trial", *The Inquirer*, no. 4154 (11 February 1922), pp. 83-84.

employment of white workers of varying levels of skill in the face of cheaper non-white competition in the labour market. This, it should be noted, came at a time of rapid Afrikaner urbanisation and the growth of the Afrikaans-speaking component of the working class in numerous cities. Proposals for protecting this section of the population were hotly debated, but the government of Barry Hertzog succeeded in getting the Wage Act through Parliament in 1825 and the Colour Bar Act through in the following year. There was not, it should be noted, a racially united labour movement in the Union but several movements which were sharply divided along ethnic lines.

Clearly, Balmforth was disgusted by the response of the white ones in South Africa, which from his perspective ran counter to his efforts to promote the interests of the working class against capitalist interests (a continuation of his political interests in late Victorian Britain) as well as protect the vulnerable non-white masses in South Africa. In an epistolary essay penned for *The Inquirer* in 1925, Balmforth explained his reaction to the present crisis. "Liberal-minded men and women in South Africa" such as Olive Schreiner and Saul Solomon, he argued, had found racial and religious discrimination in both civic rights and economic advancement offensive in principle. Moreover, he generalised, "whenever this has been attempted it has spelled disaster to the dominant race". Linking his criticism of discrimination to an earlier theme in his commentaries, Balmforth declared that "civilization is not a monopoly of the white man" and, pragmatically considered, "no restrictive racial or colour legislation can permanently stop the natural development of a people". He found it embarrassing that many Labour members of the South African Parliament had supported the colour bar, since he had assumed that "better things" could be expected from that party, but took heart from the courage which two Labourites had shown in breaking party discipline and voting against the Bill.²⁵

Balmforth addressed the attitude, which he knew was widespread among white South Africans and in the United Kingdom, that discrimination in employment practices was justified because the "lower type of life and a lower standard of civilization" of non-white people in the Union would inevitably drag down both the wages and the living standards of its white citizens. Related to this, Balmforth answered to objections that issues of health and safety were involved, in other words that "the inefficient and therefore dangerous handling of tools, machinery, and mechanical and electrical appliances [by people from backgrounds where these materials were not well known] might endanger the life or the safety of fellow-workmen". His response was that the matter could be resolved not through racial discrimination but through the adoption of a "civilization-bar". To Balmforth,

²⁵ Ramsden Balmforth, "South African Notes. The Colour Bar", *The Inquirer*, no. 4336 (8 August 1925), p. 499.

it was “simply untrue” that “colour, in reference either to the South African native races as a whole, or to the Asiatic races, is *necessarily* synonymous either with industrial inefficiency, or, in the case of Asiatics, with a low type of civilization”. He allowed that it “may be true of the vast majority of South African natives” and of “many Asiatics” but argued that it also held true for “some Europeans”. Putting “undue stress” on such factors as “colour, race, creed, or religion” was not merely an offence to “courtesy, good manners, and good feeling”; it was “an insult to the most sacred thing in life—human personality, and the spirit enshrined in it”. Balmforth informed co-religionists in the United Kingdom that he and unnamed allies in South Africa had long advocated the adoption of a “civilization bar” based on such factors as educational attainment, the ability to earn a living wage, and “house-rental”. He himself suggested that this could be augmented by the granting of certificates of “civic fitness” which could be earned through training beginning at the primary school level with lessons in health and sanitation and in the higher school standards to instruction in “civic duties and responsibilities”. The import of such a document would be a crucial determinant in one’s life, according to Balmforth’s vision of how South African society should be constructed, by implication along lines laid out by the imposition of European civilisation: “The possession of such a certificate should entitle the holder, of whatever race or colour, to be regarded as qualified for civic responsibilities with all the opportunities and careers of civilized life open to him.” He granted that such a system would be more complicated to administer than crass racial discrimination, but at least, he pointed out, it would open the way for “highly civilized men like Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore”, two internationally known and widely respected non-Christian Indians, to participate fully in public life.²⁶

Conclusion

Balmforth’s copiously expressed views on public issues, no less than a consideration of those of many other Christians in the annals of South African church history who stood at diverse points of the theological compass, underscore the virtual impossibility of drawing a neat line of demarcation between the religious and the secular, especially with regard to matters of social ethics. He was a keen observer of contemporary developments in the new Union and apparently felt called to challenge both his bilingual flock in Cape Town as well as a larger readership in South Africa and the United Kingdom to respond to them in terms of what he believed were enlightened principles anchored in the ethics of Jesus. That said, it must be acknowledged

²⁶ Balmforth, “South African Notes. The Colour Bar”, p. 499.

that the extensive extant evidence does not indicate that Balmforth addressed every important public issue of the day. One wonders, for example, what his position on women's suffrage was.

More surprisingly, there is no evidence that Balmforth continued to advocate on South African soil some of the Fabian socialist principles he had so strongly espoused in the United Kingdom, particularly with regard to public ownership of key industries and national resources. One can only speculate that either his ideology underwent some transformation after his emigration or that he saw little hope of implementing any form of socialist reforms in the Union of South Africa. Other matters, most notably ethnic reconciliation, undoubtedly seemed more urgent in the young nation. In Cape Town, Balmforth was much more an advocate of political liberalism than of socialism.

Only to a limited extent can Balmforth's social ethics in South Africa be interpreted as justification for white hegemony. His arguments in favour of a "civilisation-bar", to cite an obvious example, testify to an unarticulated but undeniable acceptance of European cultural imperialism. At the same time, however, his passionate criticism of disproportionate land tenure and the use of military force against black protesters cannot be dismissed or disregarded.

It can hardly be overemphasised that research on Balmforth (and, for that matter, the history of Unitarianism in South Africa in general) is still in its infancy. Given the thematic breadth and quantity of his writing as he pursued the interplay of his liberal faith with natural science and philosophy, the relationship of religious belief and politics, and the examination of religious and ethical motifs in various literary genres, further investigation of Balmforth's views promises to shed additional light on hitherto tenebrous corners of South African church history and its relationship to the intellectual currents in the Northern Hemisphere.

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