

# Ramsden Balmforth on the Reformation and the Evolution of Christianity: A Post-Protestant South African Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Theologians and historians of the Protestant Reformation have often interpreted it in terms that are strongly determined by their own concerns. One such writer was Ramsden Balmforth (1861–1942), a prominent Unitarian theologian and public intellectual in Cape Town from 1897 until the late 1930s who was extensively published in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. An advocate of Darwinian evolutionary thinking, liberal theology, religious freedom, the comparative study of religions, and social reform, this transplanted Yorkshireman perceived the Reformation as an important stage in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, one marked by liberation from the spiritual and intellectual shackles of Catholicism. However, he regarded it as a truncated and ultimately reactionary reform movement which substituted the authority of the Bible and creedal formulations for that of the Roman Catholic power structure. Balmforth called for a “new Reformation” which would resume the liberation of religious life.

**Keywords:** Ramsden Balmforth; Reformation; Unitarianism; evolution; religious freedom

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## INTRODUCTION

The Protestant Reformation was not merely a tectonic upheaval in the history of Western Christianity which shattered the Roman Catholic ecclesiastical monolith in the sixteenth century and permanently changed the religious and political map of Europe. It is *inter alia* a point of reference which countless Christians and non-Christians alike in much of the world have subsequently erected as a valuable milestone along their road of history. To German nationalists, for example, it has functioned rhetorically as a crucial event marking the assertion of independence from foreign spiritual (and, indirectly, political) hegemony. In the intellectual history of Western civilisation, the Reformation has been seen, though again not without dissent, as a new chapter in the liberation of the mind from the shackles of the Middle Ages, a transitional stage in a process which reached greater fruition in the Enlightenment.

In the present article I shall analyse how a prominent English and South African intellectual and churchman, Reverend Ramsden Balmforth (1862–1942) of the Free Protestant, or Unitarian, Church in Cape Town interpreted the Reformation as a stepping stone in the history of human freedom and the evolution of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, beginning with momentous transformation in the history of the biblical Hebrews. It is emphasised at the outset that theologically this minister was unabashedly a liberal's liberal whose religious views were informed not only by his reading of the Bible in the light of nineteenth-century modernist biblical criticism but also by his unswerving commitment to Fabian socialism in tandem with Darwinian evolutionary thought, which he extended beyond biology into other areas of life, including his understanding of religion. Balmforth regarded the confessional orthodoxies which emerged from the Reformation as outmoded and thus of limited relevance or value to Christians of his own era. Nevertheless, he regarded the Reformation as sufficiently significant to write about it repeatedly and, for the most part, interpret it as a noteworthy turning point in the religious history of the Western world when, to his regret, history turned only halfway.

As one of the intercontinentally most prolific South African theologians of his generation, Balmforth wrote dozens of books and articles published in South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America about a broad spectrum of topics ranging from modern theology and comparative religion through anthropology, economics, contemporary politics, and educational reform to history, literary criticism, philosophy, and opera. During the past decade the present writer has analysed various dimensions of this internationally relatively

prominent scholar's religious and political thought, e.g. his advocacy of New Testament higher criticism and the development of his particular variety of liberal theology. As church historians and many other Christians observe the quincentenary of the Protestant Reformation, it is a particularly timely and appropriate extension of scholarly inquiry into Balmforth's thought to consider how this doctrinal maverick interpreted that historical event, given his presupposed evolutionary conceptualisation of history, and why he had only a circumscribed view of the Reformation's value, especially with regard to the progression of religious freedom. This specific augmenting of scholarly knowledge of Balmforth's evolutionary view of how Christianity developed through the centuries has broader historiographical implications. A consideration of his utterly nonconformist perception of the Reformation underscores how theologians' and historians' interpretations of that crucial historical event are not neutral and do not develop in a vacuum but tend to reflect individuals' theological positions, their philosophies of history, and other factors.

Within the context of his denominational tradition, Balmforth's interpretation of the origins of Protestantism was not an anomaly. Unitarians have always tended to perceive the Reformation differently from Trinitarian scholars, especially Lutheran and Calvinist theologians whose denominations were rooted in that crucial era of church history. In ways obliquely analogous to the primary interests of such Christians, Unitarians have focused part of their attention on fringe movements rather than on those emanating from the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg or from Calvin's Geneva. Not surprisingly, the arguably most eminent Unitarian church historian of the twentieth century, Professor George Huntston Williams of Harvard Divinity School, was best known for his work of 1962, *The Radical Reformation*.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, it is not anomalous that in his extensive writing Balmforth, to whom sixteenth-century Protestant confessional theology meant little more than a station on the road to freedom from traditional doctrines, devoted more space to such religious reformers who stood outside the mainstreams of their times, such as John Wycliffe and Michael Servetus.

### **IDENTIFYING BALMFORTH**

Balmforth's interpretation of the Reformation can be better understood when considered against the background of his spiritual formation in England. He was born in Huddersfield,

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1 George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962).

Yorkshire, to working-class parents who were not affiliated with any religious organisation and sent their children to a Secularist school rather than one attached to either an Anglican parish or any of that small city's numerous free churches. As an adolescent he became a clerk at the Huddersfield Cooperative Stores, where he continued to toil for more than a decade while cobbling together segments of an education. Balmforth enrolled in various lessons at the Huddersfield Mechanics' Institution and subsequently took distance courses at the university level, eventually becoming a temporary residential student at Oxford while still living mainly in his hometown and following his clerical career. Royle identified Huddersfield as one centre of great activity for the National Secular Society in the 1870s and 1890s.<sup>2</sup> In such surroundings this gifted youth imbibed at the font of atheism and came under the sway of the National Secular Society led by Charles Bradlaugh, John Mackinnon Robertson, Annie Besant, and other well-known Victorian critics of Christianity. Balmforth and many other residents of Huddersfield gathered on countless Sunday afternoons and evenings to hear their lectures.

Reformist politics became part of Balmforth's life at an early stage. As an evolutionary socialist, he joined the Fabian Society in 1890, six years after its founding, and maintained his membership for the rest of his life, i.e. more than four decades after leaving England and emigrating to Cape Town in 1897.<sup>3</sup> His socialism, in tandem with an abhorrence of war (though he never became an absolute pacifist) coloured his religious faith when that eventually emerged. Balmforth was, in brief, a latter-day Christian socialist who would have felt partly at home in that movement when men like F.D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley were leading it around the middle of the nineteenth century, although doctrinally he was never particularly close to those Anglicans.

In harmony with much of his generation, Balmforth placed a generous measure of his faith in modern science and adopted a Darwinian view of life, including that of humanity, as a constant struggle which nurtured the evolution of species as they constantly readapted to their environments. Many of the intellectual presuppositions underlying the views he espoused in the Cape were extensions, *mutatis mutandis*, of what had shaped his mind in England since the

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2 Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans. Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866–1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), passim.

3 Sue Donnelly, Archivist, London School of Economics, to Frederick Hale, 17 September 2012 (electronic correspondence).

1880s and found its way into liberal periodicals there under his own name or his pseudonym, “Laon Ramsey.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite his family’s hostility to Christianity, especially in its contemporary ecclesiastical forms, Balmforth came under the influence of Unitarianism and joined the Unitarian Church in Huddersfield. Precisely why and when this happened is impossible to ascertain, but in a brief memoiristic piece he attributed it in part to his reading of Ernst Rénan’s immensely popular *The Life of Jesus*, which had been published in both French (as *Vie de Jésus*) and English in 1863 and which presented a strongly humanised rather than a divine view of the Galilean. In the early 1890s Balmforth was a quite active member of that congregation, and in 1893 he briefly left Huddersfield to study for the ministry at Manchester College in Oxford.<sup>5</sup> There he came under the sway of such Unitarian theologians as Joseph Estlin Carpenter and James Drummond. Through these gentlemen, Balmforth disclosed, he had become acquainted with “the Liberal critical school of Germany and Holland.”<sup>6</sup> Balmforth officially began his ministry at the Unitarian Church in Fitzwilliam Street in Huddersfield in July 1894.<sup>7</sup>

## RELIGIOUS HISTORY AS EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

Essential to an understanding of Balmforth’s perception and interpretation of the Reformation is an awareness of his conviction that the history, not only of Christianity but of religious life generally in Western civilisation and its Hebraic antecedents, embodies an evolutionary process. This view was an integral component of a broader *Weltanschauung* which had gained widespread acceptance in British and continental European intellectual circles. As an aspiring late Victorian intellectual, Balmforth was unambiguously a product of his times. History had meaning in a progressive sense, he believed. Balmforth saw in the story of mankind, at least in Western civilisation, a gradual if obviously imperfect and often interrupted development from primeval society to modernity, from despotism to democracy, from ignorance to scientific enlightenment. His socio-political views, anchored in Fabian socialism, were evolutionary, as

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4 No detailed biography of Balmforth has ever been published. See L. Herrman, “Balmforth, Ramsden,” in D.W. Krüger and C.J. Beyers (eds.), *Dictionary of South African Biography*, III (Cape Town: Tafelberg-Uitgewers Ltd., 1977), pp. 44–45, and M. Owen Balmforth, “Ramsden Balmforth—His Life and Work,” *The Inquirer*, 25 October 1947, p. 727, for brief sketches.

5 Owen Balmforth, *The Huddersfield Industrial Society Limited. History of Fifty Years’ Progress. 1860–1910* (Manchester: Co-operative Wholesale Society’s Printing Works, 1910), p. 142.

6 Ramsden Balmforth, *Jesus—The Man* (London: C.W. Daniel Company Ltd., 1935), p. 6.

7 “Huddersfield,” *The Leeds Times*, 14 July 1894, p. 2.

he was convinced that his generation, especially in the United Kingdom and the British Empire, was experiencing the inevitable unfolding of popular rule and social levelling.

This mode of thinking in terms of development and general improvement profoundly influenced Balmforth in his perception of biblical scholarship and the Judaeo-Christian tradition generally. His acceptance of Darwinian evolutionary theory with regard to animal and plant life undoubtedly contributed to his general thinking about humanity. While many Victorians had seen in Darwin the slayer of long-accepted notions about the Bible, and concluded that “we have no need of God,” Balmforth rejected that “hasty conclusion” as unfounded and was relieved that it had “been wholly revised.” The general Darwinian theory, he argued, was “admitted on all hands by scientists themselves” to refer only to a process of change, not to “an originating force.” He found comfort in the words of Herbert Spencer that humanity was ever in the “presence of an Infinite and Eternal Energy from which all things proceed” and in the same breath referred to Arnold’s reference to the divine as “the Eternal, not ourselves, which makes for Righteousness.”<sup>8</sup> Religion and science, including biblical scholarship, were ultimately compatible, although our views of the Bible, as part of the general course of human thought, must continue to evolve. As will be seen shortly, Balmforth was certain that recent decades of research had shed immense light on the development of religious life in ancient Israel, and he interpreted it as not only change but also, and more significantly, maturation. In the preface to his *The Bible from the Standpoint of the Higher Criticism. The Old Testament* (1904), he went so far as to declare that if the Bible is to be “intelligible” and meaningful, it must be read “from the evolutionary standpoint”: “Only in this way can its treasures be worked into our common life—only in this way can the content of our moral experience be brought one step nearer to the ‘Everlasting Real.’”<sup>9</sup>

Balmforth continued to espouse Darwinism and its interdisciplinary implications during his decades in Cape Town. Writing in the *South African Journal of Science* in 1911, for example, he referred with unintended exaggeration to the “almost universal acceptance of the Darwinian theory of evolution.” “We think and speak in terms of evolution,” he elaborated, “and the theory has so far permeated all our thinking, that not only biological science, but ethics,

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8 Ramsden Balmforth, *The Bible from the Standpoint of the Higher Criticism. The Old Testament* (London. Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Lim., 1904), pp. 4–5.

9 Balmforth, *The Bible from the Standpoint of the Higher Criticism. The Old Testament*, p. vii.

economics, social and political theories and institutions are beginning to feel the influence of the new ideals and methods of thought which the theory has brought with it.”<sup>10</sup>

The comparative study of religion was another tributary stream in Balmforth’s thought. This academic discipline came from continental Europe and especially the German academic world to the United Kingdom during the last few decades of the nineteenth century, in large measure owing to the efforts of Friedrich Max Müller, an immigrant Orientalist who taught and did research at the University of Oxford. This approach to religious studies undermined the assumed uniqueness of Christianity by emphasising *inter alia* common elements it shared with several other religions, including those of Asia. Eventually Balmforth’s principal mentor in Oxford, Joseph Estlin Carpenter, who was and remained a New Testament scholar, also did pioneering work in comparative religion. This subject, which had gained a firm foothold in Oxford by the time Balmforth arrived there in 1893, made an impact on him and shaped his perception of spiritual life as a universal phenomenon which manifested itself and evolved in individual religions. When he began to write and preach about it in Cape Town early in the twentieth century, the transplanted Unitarian parson often referred to “religion” in contexts where Trinitarian clergymen would have tended to say or write “Christianity.” This underscores Balmforth’s perception of an evolutionary continuum which, at least in what was often described as the Judaeo-Christian tradition, began among very early Hebrews, underwent considerable refinement (especially in terms of ethical emphasis) in the history of the Jews, and continued to evolve, if inconsistently and with setbacks, in Christianity. He believed that generally speaking one could trace a gradual progression towards his own post-orthodox kind of religion, which regarded many conventional doctrines, such as original sin, the atoning death of Jesus, and the Trinity as atavisms from a bygone era which were mere hindrances to a universal, ethically orientated religious faith. Balmforth’s view of the Protestant Reformation must be seen as part of this progressive *Weltanschauung*. He explained his merger of Darwinian evolutionary thought (especially its social and intellectual ramifications) in detail in his book of 1921, *The Theory of Evolution and Its Influence on Religious Thought*.<sup>11</sup>

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10 Ramsden Balmforth, “The Influence of the Darwinian Theory on Ethics, with Special Reference to the Ethical Conditions of the Struggle for Existence,” *South African Journal of Science*, VII (1911), p. 386.

11 Ramsden Balmforth, *The Theory of Evolution and Its Influences on Religious Thought* (London: H.F.W. Deane & Sons The Year Book Press Ltd., 1921).

## EVOLUTION OF RELIGION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

As a crucial theological antecedent to Balmforth's evolutionary view of church history, we can consider his stage-setting understanding of the extensive and multi-faceted transformation of ancient Hebrew religion as manifested in the Old Testament. His implied argument was that if one can find unambiguous evidence of religious change in the sacred Scriptures which incorporated the first stages of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, there is cause for tracing its continuing evolution during the past 1 900 years. His understanding and advocacy of higher criticism of the Old Testament underlying this approach was postulated in part on his *a priori* commitment to evolutionary thought even before becoming a Unitarian and undertaking studies in Oxford. This mode of thinking in terms of development and gradual ethical improvement profoundly influenced Balmforth in his perception of biblical scholarship and the Judaeo-Christian tradition generally.

Of the continental European biblical scholars whose work either directly or indirectly influenced Balmforth's understanding of the Old Testament, none loomed larger than the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuenen. The Cape Town Unitarian found compelling support for his evolutionary understanding of biblical religion in *The Religion of Israel to the Fall of the Jewish State*, the three-volume English translation of Kuenen's *De Godsdienst van Israël tot den Ondergang van den Joodschen Staat*. Kuenen flatly disavowed that the Jewish religion was an exclusive vehicle of truth. "For us the Israelitish is one of those religions," he declared, "nothing less, but also nothing more."<sup>12</sup>

Acknowledging his indebtedness to Kuenen, Balmforth published his *The Bible from the Standpoint of the Higher Criticism. The Old Testament* in 1904. He reiterated his commitment to an evolutionary approach while making clear his opinion, echoing Kuenen, that the religious life of ancient Israel and its Scriptures did not stand alone: "In a word, we see the Bible, and the religion of which it is the outcome, brought into line with the great scientific concept of Evolution, and taking its place—with a special and peculiar interest for us—along with the other great religious and sacred books of the world."<sup>13</sup>

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12 A. Kuenen, *The Religion of Israel to the Fall of the Jewish State*, I (London: Williams and Norgate, 1874), pp. 5–6.

13 Balmforth, *The Bible from the Standpoint of the Higher Criticism. The Old Testament*, p. 250.



Armed with this conceptual compass, Balmforth trekked through the Old Testament, outlining what he was certain was the historical progress of the Israelites with regard to their “religious ceremonial,” their moral standards, and their conception of God. The words “gradually” and “slowly” appear repeatedly in his summaries of these developments. The initial stage of Hebrew religious life, he generalised, was strongly influenced by “the primitive and awful savagery of those early times,” and this was “most clearly exemplified” by the practice of human sacrifice. Balmforth adduced no specific textual evidence to support this but merely declared that it was done to propitiate the wrath of a “stern and angry God.” As the Israelites matured, however, “slowly” the sacrificing of animals sacrifice replaced that of humans.<sup>14</sup>

Balmforth then described the unfolding of a crucial ethical dimension which pointed the way to Christianity. This supposedly began with some of the prophets whom Balmforth quoted. Key illustrative passages in their writings exemplify this shift, especially Micah 6:8: “What does Yahweh require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”<sup>15</sup>

The crucial final chapter of Balmforth’s book about the Hebrew Scriptures considered anew is titled “The Evolution of Religion in the Old Testament.” Its emphasis on “evolution” underscores his assumption that the beliefs and practices of the early Hebrews were the start of a trajectory which has continued across the centuries, especially in progressive Western civilisation, to heights illuminated and facilitated by recent scholarship. He reaffirmed the value of substituting “a natural for a supernatural explanation of the Bible” and insisted that the modern approach did not detract from the value of “this great literature as a means of edification and inspiration.” On the contrary, the “educational value” of the Bible was thus enhanced, because bringing the texts down to earth and considering them as human products enabled readers “to trace the growth of the moral and religious conceptions of a considerable section of mankind.”<sup>16</sup>

Given Balmforth’s lifelong concern for social ethics, it is not surprising that he found “a much more interesting line of development” in the “moral conceptions” in the Old Testament. The

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14 Balmforth, *The Bible from the Standpoint of the Higher Criticism. The Old Testament*, pp. 250–251.

15 Balmforth, *The Bible from the Standpoint of the Higher Criticism. The Old Testament*, p. 252.

16 Balmforth, *The Bible from the Standpoint of the Higher Criticism. The Old Testament*, p. 250.

early centuries of the Hebrews were a time of “slavery,” “savagery,” and low esteem for human life. Massacres of other people were attributed to the will of God; the death penalty was imposed “for comparatively trivial offences,” and “the individual seems of no account.” In Deuteronomy, however, and in the prophets one could find “a perceptible advance in the estimate of the value of human life.” Moreover, at that later period slavery had been “modified,” while “philanthropy and benevolence are insisted upon,” and justice is to be administered to all, and a tender solicitude is shown for the education and training of children.”<sup>17</sup>

Among the other, and most important, biblically incorporated matters in ancient Israel that gave “evidence of the evolution of religious life” was “the varying characters of God as given in the different books at different stages of development.” Balmforth evinced some degree of sophistication in his understanding of this. He acknowledged that philosophers and theologians could debate “whether an advance in man’s moral ideas and customs is due to a higher conception of God, or whether a higher conception of God is the result of purer and loftier moral ideas.” Balmforth thought there might be truth in both possibilities. He was certain, however, that one’s concept of the divine, together with one’s interpretation of the universe and one’s ideals of duty to society, were of great import in determining “character and conduct.” The view that a person has of God, Balmforth thought, indicated whether that person was patient or impatient, forgiving or vengeful, gentle or arrogant, unostentatious or proud. The Israelites created their literary images of God variously at different times in their history. At a very early stage, he is very anthropomorphic and sometimes militant, “delighting in the smell of sacrifices,” walking with the patriarchs, giving advice as to how “to deceive and rob the Egyptians,” and authorising massacres. Yahweh was originally a tribal deity, somewhat similar to but higher than the deities of other tribes, such as Baal, Moloch, and Astarte. Roughly at the time of the prophets, Balmforth argued without mentioning that this spanned several centuries, “universalist ideas” of the divine emerged, and God began to be conceived as “the creator of the Universe, the subverter and the builder of empires, the Supreme Master-worker, and the Lord of Life and Death.” This was followed by a time of personal introspection “as the human spirit turns in upon itself” in such books as Job and Ecclesiastes, and Yahweh was portrayed as not only powerful and righteous but also as “a God of Mercy, Truth, Pity, and

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17 Balmforth, *The Bible from the Standpoint of the Higher Criticism. The Old Testament*, p. 252.

Loving-Kindness.”<sup>18</sup> To Balmforth, these last-named attributes represented higher and more true perceptions of what is divine and, one must suspect, what was of greater value to humanity.

#### **ASSAYING THE REFORMATION IN *THE EVOLUTION OF CHRISTIANITY* (1898)**

Not long after arriving in Cape Town in 1897, Balmforth began to preach series of sermons, or “discourses” as he preferred to call them, at his Sunday evening services. One of the first such series was published in London the following year as *The Evolution of Christianity*. It encompassed nine orations covering segments of a trajectory from the religion of the Old Testament (in a discourse confidently titled “The True View of the Bible”) to liberal Protestantism in the nineteenth century. In a prefatory comment Balmforth emphasised that he had not sought to represent “the general tone of Unitarian thought” but only his views and suggested that “many” of his denominational fellows might “shrink from some of the views arrived at.”<sup>19</sup> The penultimate discourse in the series bore the title “The Protestant Reformation and Its Implications.” What the sources of Balmforth’s information about the Reformation were he nowhere disclosed. To any church historian with even a modest understanding of that chapter in the saga of European Christianity, however, it is obvious that he viewed it as refracted through the prism of his post-orthodox faith.

The fourth discourse, “The Doctrine of the Atonement,” sheds light on Balmforth’s attitude towards much orthodox Christian doctrine, and an awareness of its content facilitates readers’ understanding of his attitude towards the Protestant Reformation. In brief, he rejected the prevailing Anselmian substitutionary theory of the death of Jesus Christ, which he regarded as a linear descendant of the Jewish rituals involving animal sacrifice to appease Yahweh. After denigrating that practice in brief detail, Balmforth lamented, “Forgiveness of sin was impossible without it. It was connected with the very dictates of God himself.” He faulted the apostle Paul, who by then had become a standard whipping boy of British liberal Protestantism, for emphasising the blood of Jesus as an essential ingredient in Christianity and making his death on the cross necessary for salvation. Modern Christians, Balmforth argued, had to shoulder responsibility for returning to a proper relationship with God and not find the path thereto by way of the cross. Nevertheless, he emphasised, Jesus was central; his role was “not

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18 Balmforth, *The Bible from the Standpoint of the Higher Criticism*. The Old Testament, pp. 256–258.

19 Ramsden Balmforth, *The Evolution of Christianity* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Ltd., 1898), p. ix.

to placate God,” but to “regenerate the inward life of man, to kindle in the soul the flame of higher aspiration, to bring it one step nearer, by divine resolves, to the life of God.” After all, he believed in harmony with numerous other nineteenth-century theologians, “It is not God who needs to be conciliated, it is man who needs to be won to obedience to the Supreme Will.” Consequently, in their acceptance of Jesus, Christians should “lay stress upon his life, not upon his death.” This attitude, one might add, was far removed from the theology of reformers like Luther and Calvin, but that did not sway Balmforth. Indeed, again in accordance with his progressive view of history, including that of Christian doctrine, he professed that “‘substitution,’ ‘imputed righteousness,’ [and] ‘salvation through the blood of Christ,’ these are the words and phrases of a passing religion.”<sup>20</sup>

Balmforth treated the Reformation as a natural sequence to the Renaissance in his evolutionary understanding of the development of intellectual and religious freedom. That “re-birth of the human mind after the long slumber of the Middle Ages,” he argued, had prepared the way for this further development without, however, significantly relaxing the grasp of the Roman Catholic Church on much of the European population or terminating the intimate ties which had existed between church and state since the fourth century. Given these conditions, wholesale ecclesiastical reform was by no means a foregone conclusion, sorely needed though it was: “Clear-sighted men saw that a change was coming, but they knew not when or how.” Many decades passed while the pleas of such advocates of reform as Wyclif, Hus, and Savonarola went largely unheeded before conditions were ripe in the sixteenth century. Balmforth did not discuss such factors as the politics of the Holy Roman Empire or the proliferation of printing as agents stimulating or nurturing change. Instead, he was content, especially given the constraints on his weekly time in the pulpit, to comment, quite in accordance with his progressive view of history that “the heterodoxy of to-day is the orthodoxy of to-morrow.” Continuing that theme, Balmforth cautioned his audience that the Reformation of the sixteenth century was “only half a Reformation” whose culmination had come only in their own day. He tempered his critique of late medieval Catholicism by disavowing a Manichean juxtaposition of Catholics and Protestants at the time of Martin Luther: “On both sides there were deep earnestness and conscientiousness; on both sides there were passion and fanaticism; [and] on both sides there were saintly men and women.”<sup>21</sup>

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20 Balmforth, *The Evolution of Christianity*, pp. 57–58, 60–65.

21 Balmforth, *The Evolution of Christianity*, pp. 124–126.

Balmforth acknowledged that he could describe only the “essential principles and implications” of the Reformation. His selection clearly reflected his prejudices and presuppositions; it did not include certain vital elements which especially Lutheran scholars would have highlighted.

This foe of ecclesiastical authority and doctrinal rigidity tipped his hand by emphasising “the supremacy of the individual conscience” as “the first and greatest” of the principles which motivated the great reformers. His congregation heard nothing about the doctrine of justification, for example, or Luther’s challenge to the normative Catholic theology of the Eucharist. Nor did Balmforth seem to have been aware that Luther by no means believed that his own mind was unfettered, i.e. that in his proclamation of the Gospel he felt obliged to adhere to what he, in accordance with other theologians of his era, found in the Scriptures. Instead, to Balmforth the great German reformer was his own man who had boldly announced at the Diet of Worms, “Here I stand; I can do no other; God help me.”<sup>22</sup> It is a highly selective view of ecclesiastical history, one in which a writer projected his own *Weltanschauung* and presuppositions into a sixteenth-century situation and interpreted developments accordingly while ignoring much complex reality which did not fit his opinion of what he wanted to see there.

Balmforth drifted far from the moorings of well-established facts about the Reformation, especially its seminal German Lutheran segment, by suggesting that the “second great principle” was the restoration of “religion as an inward rule of life rather than an observance of outward forms and the repetition of formal creeds.”<sup>23</sup> His phrasing suggests that he believed that statements of faith either disappeared or were pressed into the background while “an inward rule of life” was stressed. Again, that perception is far removed from the mainstream of Reformation historiography. At no time did Luther or other major Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century generally advocate the wholesale dismissal of such statements. Quite the contrary; they underscored the value of the ecumenical creeds of Christendom, not least the Apostles’ Creed, as basic statements of doctrine, and the “repetition” of them continued liturgically as a vital component of Lutheran worship. By 1530 such statements as the

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22 Balmforth, *The Evolution of Christianity*, p. 127.

23 Balmforth, *The Evolution of Christianity*, p. 128.

*Confessio Augustana*, or Augsburg Confession, had been drafted as fundamental expressions of what they taught. It is true that the number of creeds multiplied as the Reformation spread internationally, but as a historical phenomenon this was a continuation of what had been launched at a very early stage. In the meantime, in the late 1520s Luther composed his Shorter Catechism to educate young Christians about specific Christian doctrines; it included sections dealing with original sin, the atonement of Jesus Christ, the Apostles' Creed, and other teachings which had been part and parcel of Christian orthodoxy for more than a millennium. He, Calvin, and numerous other reformers used many litres of ink to explain specific doctrines in lengthy treatises, university lectures, and sermons. They were never the doctrinally disenthralled people who Balmforth imagined them to be in the early stages of the Reformation.

No less surprisingly, Balmforth apparently misunderstood the pivotal question of justification by faith. In his summary of Luther's revolt against Catholic theology in 1517, he described how this German professor discovered the Pauline pronouncement "The just shall live by faith." Balmforth, however, assumed that this meant living an upright life inspired by what he called "the Christlike-, the God-like spirit," not one burdened by such distractions "of mortification, of ritual, [and] of intercession." When Christians adopted such a simple spiritual lifestyle, he believed, "the accumulated mass of form, ceremony, [and] penance" were "swept away," and people "stood face to face with the Eternal."<sup>24</sup> In fact, the consensus of Lutheran scholars has always been that Luther interpreted this text in Romans 1:17 to mean that it is faith in God's unearned grace that gives salvation, in contrast to earning it by human efforts.

Given his understanding of ecclesiastical history as essentially one of progress towards freedom of thought and conscience, especially as finally attained in Unitarianism, and an emphasis on ethics, Balmforth found it discouraging that the Reformation had not progressed significantly more but rather halted at a "half-way house" by reverting to an advocacy of an "outward authority," in this case the Bible. On the one hand, he lauded the liberating spirit which access to the Holy Writ had given Christians in many lands after centuries when it, generally in Latin, had been inaccessible and thus virtually unknown to most of them. The consequences for the general populace, Balmforth declared, had been "amazing" not only for their religious but also their political and private moral life. By placing the Scriptures into the

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24 Balmforth, *The Evolution of Christianity*, pp. 131–132.

hands of the faithful, he thought, “the Reformers had sent man back to the inner life, to their own individual conscience.”<sup>25</sup> But then, Balmforth lamented, progress towards individual freedom had come to a halt. Having left behind the authority of the pope and the Roman Catholic Church generally, the reformers replaced it with biblical authority. The Reformation precept of *sola scriptura* conflicted with the rationalist Balmforth’s enthronement of human intellect as the ultimate arbiter of religious truth.

Much of the turmoil resulting from regarding the Bible as the final authority in doctrinal disputes, he argued, inevitably stemmed from the fact that people interpreted its texts differently and “there sprang up a thousand different interpretations,” each distancing itself from the others according to “the quality of the varying mind.” These conflicting variations, in turn, led to the formulation of more creeds and to believers condemning one another rather than living in the spirit of doctrinally liberated Christianity. In a choice phrase, Balmforth believed he encapsulated one central result of this dimension of the Reformation: “Justification by Faith was turned into Justification by Belief.” And to this post-orthodox parson, the beliefs which were or became central, such as the atonement, nudged aside what he believed should have remained the liberating spirit of Christianity: “Men talked a great deal about Christ’s blood, but showed little of his spirit.” Intolerance became just as deeply entrenched in Protestant lands as in Catholic ones. This was true even in the country of his birth, Balmforth lamented; “the Episcopalians in England drove hosts of Puritans across the Atlantic; and the Puritans themselves persecuted their own brethren.”<sup>26</sup>

#### **ADVOCATING A “NEW REFORMATION” TO COMPLETE THE PROTESTANT ONE**

Balmforth did not despair. Fairly well versed in the history of Unitarianism, he understood that Christians were not irretrievably locked into confessionally conservative denominations; in his own life he had witnessed the proliferation of liberal theology in England. Accordingly, Balmforth stressed that the “half-Reformation of the sixteenth century could be ‘completed’ by a ‘new Reformation’” in the lives of his congregation and readers. The key, he believed, was a return to “the authority of conscience and the inward life” which he regarded as the hallmarks

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25 Balmforth, *The Evolution of Christianity*, pp. 132–134.

26 Balmforth, *The Evolution of Christianity*, pp. 136–137.

of the initial stage of the Protestant Reformation. Unquestioning reliance on the Bible as the canon of religious truth should be rejected, Balmforth argued, because it was “human literature” rather than unadulterated divine revelation—and thus fallible. It was incumbent upon Christians “to sift its truth from its error, to wrest its nobler teachings from the superstitions of a barbarous age.” At the same time, and as a touchstone for determining what in the Old and New Testaments was of value to modern man, he counselled reading “the literature of the world” though without suggesting particular texts. Thus armed, Christians could take up what he defined as “the principle of Jesus—the purity and supremacy of the inward life” and sally forth to apply that principle to their daily lives, following the “inward voice” as the “final arbiter” in religious and ethical matters. Quoting the American Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson (“Every man must be a priest unto his own soul”), Balmforth underscored that those who participated in the “new Reformation” needed “no rite, no form, no priest, [and] no fixed, centuries-old creed.” Instead, they required only “the simple, loving heart, and the earnest aspiring soul to know and live and love the very highest and best.”<sup>27</sup>

Balmforth acknowledged that the utter subjectivity of this approach might lead people far beyond the pale of Christianity. Every human soul, he professed, must have the right “to formulate, reverently, its own faith, its own religion, leaving the rest to God.” The primary principle of freedom of conscience could not restrict this. In some cases, Balmforth allowed, it could imply “the rejection of the Bible and of the church as standards of faith and life.” This did not appear to trouble him greatly, nor did the fact that many eminent thinkers, not least in the United Kingdom, identified themselves as “atheists” or “agnostics.” As examples of such compatriots who stood far from conventional belief, Balmforth adduced John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and George Eliot. Their “spirit,” he declared, mattered far more to him than did any label.<sup>28</sup>

Balmforth concluded his survey of the Reformation as an arrested liberation movement by emphasising that despite the elevation of the Bible to a perch of authority, the positive if indirect effects of liberation from Catholic power were manifest in the modern world, especially in the United Kingdom as the natural evolution of humanity continued. Recent decades had witnessed an acceleration of these ostensible consequences. “We see it in the

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27 Balmforth, *The Evolution of Christianity*, pp. 137–138.

28 Balmforth, *The Evolution of Christianity*, p. 138.



spread of education,” this Fabian reformer argued. “We see it in a hundred forms of social activity. We see it in the manifold developments of science. We see it in the wider view of politics, and in the splendid code of industrial and social legislation which England has elaborated during the last sixty or seventy years.”<sup>29</sup>

#### **“THE HISTORICAL PAGEANT OF UNITARIANISM AND LIBERAL RELIGION” (1917)**

The tetracentenary of the Reformation, commemorating specifically Luther’s public questioning of numerous Catholic doctrines in 1517, was celebrated variously in countries which had significant Lutheran and/or other Protestant populations. In Balmforth’s native England it was a much smaller affair than in Germany, to cite the most obvious comparative example. The dean of Canterbury, Henry Wace, a former professor of ecclesiastical history at King’s College, London, presided at a meeting at the Queen’s Hall and Henry Martyn Gooch, the general secretary of the World’s Evangelical Alliance, spoke. This evangelical Anglican lauded the Reformation: “Whatever the errors of enthusiastic fallible men in their manner of fashioning and developing a movement which had many sources and many currents, he must be strangely blind to the lessons of history who fails to see that the Reformation of the sixteenth century did, in the providence of God, bring immeasurable blessing both to church and peoples in Europe and throughout the world.” At the same time, it was announced that the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, a Welsh former evangelical, had announced the fixing of a National Day of Prayer.<sup>30</sup>

Had Balmforth remained in England instead of sailing to Cape Town two decades previously, it is questionable that he would have joined in festivities of this sort, though it is conceivable that he might have done so with less enthusiasm while viewing the historical event from a perspective much different from those of his counterparts in Trinitarian Protestant denominations. In any case, Balmforth was then in Cape Town, where he does not to have observed the tetracentenary in any conventional way. Instead, he continued to laud the historical unfolding of his own post-orthodox legacy in a manner that highlighted the evolutionary development of Christianity. One lengthy sermon he preached that year, “The Historical Pageant of Unitarianism and Liberal Religion,” underscored his limited appreciation

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29 Balmforth, *The Evolution of Christianity*, p. 141.

30 “A Day of National Prayer,” *The Times* (London), 7 November 1917, p. 7.

of the Protestant Reformation. Balmforth's critical attitude towards the great Reformers was underscored in his section praising Michael Servetus, the Spanish scholar and physician whose denial of the Trinity cost him his life after he had ventured to John Calvin's Geneva. Balmforth painted a horrifically graphic picture for his audience, describing "a hilly place" near that theocratic city to which the condemned Spaniard was led. "He is fastened to the trunk of a tree, and a crown of straw and leaves, sprinkled over with brimstone, is placed upon his head," the Unitarian parson told his flock in Cape Town. Balmforth related how the death sentence was pronounced by members of the city's ecclesiastical court as the hapless Servetus awaited his demise with his anti-Trinitarian book fastened to his body. "The pile is lighted. A strong breeze sprang up and scattered the flames and so kept him in great torture for about half-an-hour," continued the preacher. "His piteous cries excited deep sympathy among the spectators."<sup>31</sup> Without mentioning Calvin's name, Balmforth thus laid bare the sanguinary intolerance inherent in sixteenth-century Calvinism. That this dimension of the Reformation did not mark an advance over medieval Catholicism was also tacitly stressed, because earlier in the sermon Balmforth had cited the posthumous burning of John Wycliffe as one of many examples of the lack of religious freedom before the Enlightenment.

## CONCLUSION

When read through the eyes of a church historian with a solid grounding in basic themes of the Protestant Reformation and especially the origins of Lutheranism, Balmforth's treatise is a deeply flawed work. One hardly exaggerates in characterising it as amnesic, idiosyncratic, and utterly subjective. In terms of its scholarly value, it lagged far behind much of what he wrote about topics in which he was more firmly anchored and had done exacting research, such as his historical pieces about Unitarianism and the rise of evolutionary socialism in the United Kingdom. Broadly speaking, Balmforth stood on historiographically firmer ground when commenting on the English Reformation and its consequences than when seeking to assess its German Lutheran counterpart. He provided very few clues about the sources of his knowledge of the rise and proliferation of Protestantism in the Holy Roman Empire.

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31 R. Balmforth, *The Historical Pageant of Unitarianism and Liberal Religion* (Cape Town: City Printing Works, 1917), pp. 5–6.

Nevertheless, the value of Balmforth's interpretation should not be overlooked. Although it is amnesic insofar as it disregards much which did not fit neatly into his preconceived evolutionary framework, this piece reminds us that retrospective considerations of something as controversial as the Protestant Reformation tend to reflect views that are refracted through doctrinal and ideological prisms. This is the case when one reads, for example, Marxist historiography of the early course of Lutheran history, including the peasants' revolt, or vilifying treatments of Martin Luther by such conservative Catholic scholars as Heinrich Denifle. To cite another extreme case, the Jesuit historian Hartmann Grisar wrote a multi-volume study marshalling Freudian psychology to assess Luther as a pathological, manic-depressive person. These works are generally dismissed today as being of very circumscribed scholarly value. They do, however, help critical readers to understand the impact of various factors on the crafting of historiography.

Much the same can be said of the South African theologian Balmforth's consideration of the Reformation. In this case, it sheds more light on the mind of this noteworthy public intellectual than it does on sixteenth-century church history.

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