

Better to Light a Candle Than Curse the Darkness

A History of the Unitarians of South Africa

A Presentation by Wayne Visser
to the Parliament of the World's Religions
1-8 December 1999, Cape Town

with Acknowledgements to the
Rev. Eric Heller-Wagner's dissertation on
The Unitarians of South Africa: A Socio-cultural Study
for much of its content

About Unitarianism

Unitarianism is an international, interfaith, non-creedal and non-doctrinal religion, with its distinctive origins in the sixteenth century in Europe.

The Unitarian movement was so named in the sixteenth century by its opponents, for its belief in the absolute Oneness of God and thus its rejection of the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity or Trinitarianism. Associated beliefs which Unitarians denied were original sin, eternal judgment and Jesus as the unique Saviour of the world. Unitarians do, however, revere Jesus as an equal to the prophets and spiritual leaders of other faiths.

More than this theological departure point, however, it is the belief in the equality and need for respect of all religious traditions, which tends to distinguish the Unitarian movement to the present day. To understand the origins of this belief, we need to go back in time to the sixteenth century, to a place which is infamous for two things, of which the founding of Unitarianism is the lesser known. This place is Transylvania.

This is the place where religious toleration was enshrined in the law by the liberal king, Sigismund, and it is the place where the founder of the Unitarian movement, Francis David, began to promote what are today called Unitarian beliefs.

At that time in history, Transylvania was a land of differing ethnic and religious groups. None were large enough to completely dominate the country. In order to maintain peace in his realm, in 1557 king Sigismund introduced a decree of

religious toleration, declaring that:

“in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the gospel each according to his understanding of it, and the congregation like it, well; if not, no one shall compel them, but they shall keep the preachers whose doctrine they approve. Therefore none of the Superintendents or others shall annoy or abuse the preachers on account of their religion, according to previous constitutions, or allow any to be imprisoned or to be punished by removal from his post on account of his teaching, for faith is the gift of God, this comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of God”.

From these origins, the Christian basis of the movement was expanded to embrace other faiths and Unitarianism gradually spread through Europe, to Great Britain and the United States and is, today, actively practiced in most countries of the world. Furthermore, many notable historical figures have called themselves Unitarian, among these being: Ralph Waldo Emerson (the transcendentalist), Joseph Priestly (the discoverer of oxygen) and Clara Barton (the founder of the Red Cross).

Unitarianism in South Africa

Raja Rammahan Roy

The first recorded reference to “unitarianism” in South Africa occurred in 1831 when Raja Rammahan Roy, the Hindu reformist and founder of the Brahma Samaj, visited Cape Town. Roy had denied the divinity of Christ in his book *Precepts of Jesus: the Guide to Peace and Happiness*, published in Calcutta in 1820. While in Cape Town, the editor of the publication - *Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette* - had attacked Roy for his “unitarian” religious views.

William Porter

A few years later, in 1839, William Porter arrived in Cape Town to take up a post as the second Attorney General of the colony. Porter’s father was a leader of the New Light movement in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, which did not subscribe to any confession or rigid creed, and all Porter’s brothers became Unitarian Ministers in Ireland.

That Porter was influenced by his family’s liberal tradition was to be seen in the progressive ideals, which he is said to have promoted in his 34 years in the Cape. For example, he drafted a

colour-blind franchise in the Constitution, he promoted equality before the law, he opposed white injustices against blacks, and deplored English-speaking people's negative attitudes towards Dutch-speaking people.

Porter also took exception to the exclusively Christian prayers that were often used to open parliament. He noted that Jews had sat in parliament and that in the future Muslims would also sit. It would be more than a century before this religious pluralism would be recognised politically, at the presidential inauguration of Nelson Mandela in 1994. Ultimately, in 1872, Porter was offered the Prime Minister position.

David Pieter Faure (Unitarian Minister 1867 –1897)

D.P. Faure was born in 1842 and raised in the Cape as a first generation Afrikaner of French Huguenot ancestry. Unlike Porter, Faure's religious upbringing was very conventional. He later described it as follows: "At home I had received the ordinary orthodox religious education. We were all members of the Dutch Reformed Church, regularly attending it twice every Sunday, and we all believed the accepted, the popular, doctrines; doubts were foreign to us, [and] the Bible and the creeds were simply accepted as infallible, because we had been taught to regard them as such."

This all changed when Faure went to Leiden University in the Netherlands to study for the ministry, having felt called by a "mysterious Power". There he was exposed to Unitarian thinking, especially the works of American Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker. His reaction was as follows. He said: "*I was horrified when I first heard from older fellow students that the Bible was not infallible, was of human origin, and had to be read and judged just as any other book. ... [But] gradually my views transformed; one by one I found to be untenable, indefensible, founded on unreliable tradition, contrary to fact, baseless and untrue.*" Hence, by the time that he qualified as a Dutch Reformed Church minister, he was a Unitarian at heart.

His first act of defiance (or liberation, depending on your perspective) was to refuse to undergo the *Colloquim Doctum*, a process whereby prospective ministers who had trained in Holland were screened for their orthodoxy before being allowed to serve a congregation in South Africa. There is a story, which shows the extent to which this liberal stance burnt his bridges for a future in the Dutch Reformed Church.

Shortly after arriving back in the Cape, he managed to secure an invitation to preach at the Adderley Street church, but, apparently despite his best efforts not to be controversial, his progressive ideas did not go down well. When he returned to the vestry after the service, his colleagues and churchwardens refused to retrieve their hats in his presence and he was forced to leave the church alone.

So, in August 1967, he placed an advertisement in the newspapers for a series of public talks on what he called the New School of Modern Theology. These meetings were successfully held in the Hall of the Mutual Assurance Society, which he hired at his own expense. As a result of the following gathered around these presentations, the “Free Protestant Church” was born.

Faure said that he avoided the name Unitarian as “*not being sufficiently distinctive, for at that time there were many Unitarian churches, which, while rejecting the Trinitarian dogma, adhered to the popular creed in all other respects*”. He also mentions in his autobiography that he regretted they did not more consistently refer to themselves as a “congregation” rather than a “church”.^[1]

Two years later, in 1969, Faure’s “*schoolfellow ... fellow student [in Leiden] and bosom friend*” - Dr P Vincent - began another Unitarian congregation in the rural town of Graaff-Reinet in the Northern Cape, which apparently prospered until Vincent died in 1873 of consumption. A Unitarian graveyard is still maintained in this small country town to this day.

The three basic beliefs of the church which Faure promoted, and which confirmed members aligned themselves with, were as follows:

- 1 That God is a loving, not an angry or cruel, God; hence that the doctrines of eternal punishment, atonement for original sin and predestination are not necessary to uphold.
- 2 That it is everyone’s religious duty to love their neighbour; hence that people of all faiths and races, should be treated as equals.
- 3 And that the human potential for goodness and conscious personal growth exceeds the tendency towards evil; hence, that there should be continuous striving for improvement and use of the faculty of reason in all religious pursuits.

To emphasise the very last point, about the use of reason in

religion, I want to digress with a tongue-in-cheek, although apparently true, story. I tell the story, because I suspect that the author might very well have been Unitarian; or at least I find his enquiring line of thinking rather typical of the Unitarian approach to religious questions.

The story is in fact the answer given by a student of the University of Washington, in a chemistry examination to the following question: "Is Hell exothermic (gives off heat) or endothermic (absorbs heat)? Support your answer with a proof."

Most of the students wrote proofs of their beliefs using Boyles Law - namely, that gas cools off when it expands and heats up when it is compressed - or some variant of this standard science.

One student, however, (our potential Unitarian) wrote the following:

First, we need to know how the mass (or weight, or heaviness) of hell is changing in time. So, we need to know the rate that souls are moving into Hell and the rate they are leaving. I think we can safely assume that once a soul gets to Hell, it will not leave. Therefore, no souls are leaving.

As for how many souls are entering Hell, let's look at the different religions that exist in the world today. Most of these religions state that if you are not a member of their religion, you will go to Hell. Since there are more than one of these religions and since people do not [generally] belong to more than one religion, we can project that all people and all souls go to Hell. With birth and death rates as they are, we can expect the number of souls in Hell to increase exponentially.

Now we look at the rate of change in volume in Hell, because Boyle's Law states that in order for the temperature and pressure in Hell to stay the same, the volume of Hell has to expand as souls are added. This gives two possibilities:

- 1 If Hell is expanding at a slower rate than the rate at which souls enter Hell, then the temperature and pressure in Hell will increase until all Hell breaks loose.*
- 2 Of course, if Hell is expanding at a rate faster than the increase of souls in Hell, then the temperature and pressure will drop until Hell freezes over.*

So which is it? If we accept the postulate given to me by Ms. Therese Banyan during my freshman year that, "it will be a cold

night in Hell before I sleep with you,” and take into account the fact that I still have not succeeded in having sexual relations with her, then the second option cannot be true, and so I conclude that Hell is exothermic.

This student got the only A.

Actually, most Unitarians would be unlikely to believe in Hell, but I think the story illustrates in a humourous way, the use of questioning and reason in Unitarian thinking.

So, back to the main theme of my talk, this reasoning approach, together with belief in a loving creator and tolerance of all faiths, are the beliefs which Faure, and Unitarians to this day in South Africa, uphold and for which they are often attacked, criticized or condemned, by the more orthodox institutions.

Despite these attacks, or perhaps because of them, Faure was not one to hide his light under a bushel, or to take criticism lying down. In any typical year, he had numerous letters to the editor published in the newspaper, as many as one every other day. Many of these public debates via the media centered on what were commonly regarded as Faure’s controversial sermons and his critique of the social issues of his day.

One such example was the sermon preached by Faure on Darwinism, which argued that the belief in Darwin’s theory is in no way incompatible with belief in God. Having been published in the *Standard and Mail*, a copy of the sermon was sent to a Rev. La Touche who forwarded it on to Darwin and commented in a letter to the *Herald Times* that “Mr Darwin himself has expressed his approval of this discourse.”

Faure also seemed to promote an unpopular set of moral values for his time. For example, he found himself opposing the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, which had the objective of allocating resources towards treating and preventing the spread of contagious diseases. The association of these diseases with prostitution was the cause for controversy. In addition to supporting their human plight, Faure also pointed out the role of the unsanitary living conditions of the poorer sections (or so-called “half-castes”) of society, in spreading these diseases. Unfortunately, the Act was repealed nevertheless, and the consequent increase in contagious diseases became the regular testimony of many respected doctors in the annual District Surgeon’s Report.

Another example of his unpopular stance in the name of social justice was during his time as an interpreter in the Supreme and Circuit Courts, a position which he took up in 1872 due to the inability of the congregation to support him as a full time minister. There was a case, which involved the killing of fifty Koramas and Bushmen people, including ten woman and children, by an Afrikaner commando on the Northern Border of the Colony. Among these were four captives murdered in cold blood. Miraculously, a fifth captive survived the revolver bullet to the head, and two rifle shots to the neck and shoulder, and was able to testify against these murderers. However, the trial was set to take place in the same district which had supplied the members of the Afrikaner commando. The jury was also selected from this far-from-impartial community.

The sight of such blatant injustice caused Faure to write a momentous letter to the Cape Argus newspaper entitled Deeds of Shame which commented in detail on the what he called the “*disgraceful and humiliating farce acted out*” in this court case. This resulted in a public outcry and media accusations that, should Faure’s statements be verified, the Attorney General was unfit to hold his position of office.

While many more such stories could be told of Faure’s life, suffice it to say that throughout his life, he continued to be an outspoken defender of justice and promoter of the liberal religious tradition. In 1893, Faure conducted the mayoral service for John Woodhead. The media remarked on the fact that he used readings from non-Christian scripture, such as the Koran.

In parallel with his Unitarian path, Faure was also a Freemason and rose to the office of Deputy Grand Master of South Africa in 1892. In 1897, he fell ill with a mild stroke and was no longer able to continue as minister of the church.

Ramsden Balmforth (1897-1937)

In Faure’s letter of resignation in 1897, he recommended that the committee invite Ramsden Balmforth, an English Unitarian minister, to fill his shoes. Balmforth accepted the invitation, stating that he intended to stay six months to improve his health in the dryer climate. He ended up serving as the Cape Town minister for 40 years.

Faure and Balmforth were like chalk and cheese. Faure was from a respectable middle-class Afrikaner family, and boasted a university education. Balmforth came from a very poor working

class English family, one of ten children, and was self taught. Faure had never experienced the same kind of hardship as Balmforth.

There is the story told that, on his eleventh birthday in mid-winter in England, Balmforth was sent out in the morning with a packet of sandwiches and told not to come back unless he found paid work. When he returned after dark, having had no success, his father sent him back out into the cold night with the same message as before – that is, only to return when he had found work. Mercifully, his mother and sister intervened and he was able to sleep the night at home.

From this background, it is perhaps understandable that Balmforth was a Socialist, something that initially upset the local Cape Town congregation. But he soon proved himself to be an effective organizer, orator and writer and was accepted. He initiated a literary society for young people at the church and wrote several books about the importance of the modern drama in addressing social and religious issues. Small groups were started in the southern suburbs of Cape Town, in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Advertisements were placed in the press, a monthly newsletter was established and Balmforth became one of the first ministers of religion to broadcast on radio in Cape Town.

Balmforth continued Faure's tradition of taking controversial stands on various social issues. He was a teetotaler, a non-smoker, and a pacifist. He supported the Women's Enfranchisement League, old age pensions, a higher age of consent for girls, better schools, equal pay for men and women, and compulsory education for coloured children. He also opposed vaccinations and immunizations, claiming that they killed more people than they helped and that diseases like small pox could be more effectively controlled through proper sanitation and hygiene.

Balmforth was a great advocate for improving the living conditions of the coloured people of Cape Town. He would regularly take walks through the coloured district of town and he was well known in the community. During his ministry, there was a small but noticeable number of coloured people attending his services. He also hosted the first ordained woman minister to preach in a church in South Africa, and a number of speakers from non-Christian religions, a process which has continued to the present.

During Balmforth's time, a Unitarian congregation also existed

in Johannesburg, from 1989 to 1919 and in Pretoria during the 1930s.

Short Term Ministers (1937 – 1979)

Following Faure and Balmforth, numerous shorter-term ministers sustained the church, highlights of which will be briefly presented here.

The Constables (1937-1941)

A clergy couple, the Reverends William and Wilna Constable, followed Balmforth. At the time, a woman minister was a highly unique occurrence in South Africa. Sadly, this is still largely true today. The Constables served the church faithfully for four years, but not without difficulty. Their stipend was so small that wealthier church members often brought them hampers of food.

The Johannesburg congregation revived for a short period, from 1939 to 1941.

Donald Livingstone (1941 - 1949)

After the return of the Constables back to England, Donald Livingstone came from a working class congregation in Leeds to serve in Cape Town. The war years were difficult ones for the church and the Livingstones. One again, the stipend was small and existence was marginal. The congregation, with English, Afrikaans, Jewish and German members, uncomfortably held the full diversity of opinion on the war, from support of the allies, to neutral and pacifist positions, to a few followers of Hitler.

Other social issues were nevertheless addressed during the Livingstone ministry. For example, a Women's League Sunday was introduced in 1945, whereby the Woman's League takes responsibility for the worship service and it usually follows a theme of women's issues. This annual event continues to this day. In 1948, the same year as the Nationalists were voted into power and began the design of apartheid, the church went on public record opposing the segregation of the trains. Mary Livingstone also became one of the most active and long-serving members of the Black Sash, a women's organisation opposing apartheid.

Magnus Ratter (1949 - 1960)

After Livingstone, Magnus Ratter, a Scottish minister whose first language was Gaelic, entered an increasingly politicized and

polarized society, with apartheid beginning to be institutionalized. His best efforts to spread the Unitarian message flew in the face of the government's campaign towards conservative, orthodox Christian values. The Cape Town congregation also came under increasing pressure from international Unitarians to oppose apartheid.

In 1958, Ratter proposed the expansion of the Church committee so that consensus could be reached on political issues, thereby allowing the minister to take a public stand. However, the committee declined in fear of its potentially divisive effects of the church.

Perhaps the lack of progress made on promoting racial tolerance during this period was compensated to some extent by the bridges Ratter helped to build between the English and Afrikaans people, who still felt the divisive effects of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 and the First and Second World Wars. Prior to leaving in 1960, he proposed that the leading English newspaper (the *Cape Times*) and the dominant Afrikaans paper (*Die Burger*) exchange and publish each other's lead articles. This practice was instituted and continued for some time, as a way to break down the barriers between these two conflicting language groups.

Once again during this period, from 1953, the Johannesburg congregation revived and continues to this day. A Bantu Unitarian Church (later renamed African Unitarian Church) also existed in the African township adjacent to Wepener in the Orange Free State from 1956, led by a Reverend Seleso of the Lesotho people. Unfortunately, not much is known of this congregation, or when it ceased to exist.

Victor Carpenter(1962 - 1967)

After being without a minister for two years, the congregation received its first American Minister, Victor Carpenter in 1962. There was an increasing interaction with non-Christian religious groups, as well as with people from the African community in Cape Town.

The church once again attempted to confront the issue of racial discrimination, this time with greater success. They voted to support the Council of Churches declaration against the 90-day detention law, and defied the segregation policies of the government when they were refused a permit to hold their annual bazaar because it was a mixed race event. During the 100th anniversary of the founding of the church, a Centenary Book

Bursary was also established for a student from the black high school of Langa.

Eugene "Woody" Widrick (1968 - 1971)

Another American Unitarian minister, Eugene Widrick, followed Carpenter, during a period when relations between the South African and American movements were somewhat fragile. The Unitarian Universalists of America had, in 1966, passed a resolution supporting sanctions against South Africa. While the Cape Town congregation generally opposed apartheid, they did not support sanctions. One of the arguments used by many whites and a minority blacks was that sanctions affected the poor most harshly, who were the same group they were supposed to be helping. Partially due to this conflict, and Widrick's humanistic approach, the secretary of the church resigned.

Magnus Ratter and Leon Fay (1971 - 1979)

After Widrick, Ratter returned to Cape Town for a five year period, and resumed the practice of making the church available for hire to many other religious groups, including the Seventh Day Adventists, Apostolic Church, a Yoga group and a Meditation group. There is also the story of four seaman from India visiting the church and holding a prayer meeting there, since it was the only place in Cape Town that would allow them to hold such a meeting.

Another American Unitarian minister, Leon Fay, who was the last of the full-time ministers of the church, followed Ratter for two years.

Robert ("Bob") Steyn (1979 - 1997)

Bob Steyn became the second homegrown minister (Faure being the other), although he continued his full-time profession as a journalist and later as a liaison officer at the South African Media Council. His progressive stance was illustrated through his participation as a journalist in a gathering of liberal-minded Afrikaners in 1975, which was called "The Coetzenburg Table".

During his ministry, Steyn did a great deal to promote interaction with different liberal spiritual traditions in Cape Town. In fact, the Sufis and the Christian Scientists held their first meetings in the Church building in Hout Street. His non-judgmental wedding and naming-and-blessing services - based as they were for a large part on the inspiring poetry of Lebanese mystic and poet, Kahlil Gibran - provided a sought after service to many

hundreds of people over the years. Likewise, his Christmas service, which celebrated the births of the seven great spiritual leaders from the major faiths of the world, achieved great popularity.

In seeking to address the politically inspired dissent of the day, Steyn initiated working with an organisation called Lamla, which sought to promote greater tolerance in society. The social plight of those close to home was not overlooked either. Bob held services and provided sandwiches for the local street people, who after a time proudly named themselves the “Hout Street Hopefuls”. Some of these went on to successfully find employment and re-create sustainable livelihoods.

In 1984, a Unitarian meeting group started in Somerset West in the Cape and in 1986 in Durban, both of which continue to this day.

In July 1989, the elected mayor of Cape Town, Gordon Oliver, appointed Steyn as mayoral chaplain for a two-year period. Oliver also became a recognised member of the church during his term. John Woodhead too had been a Unitarian and Mayor of Cape Town in late 1800s, but had not selected Faure as his mayoral chaplain. The Unitarian influence was most obvious in the proceedings of the annual Mayoral Sunday, wherein the hymns and prayers were, for the first time, inclusive of the inter-faith character of the city. The hymn, ‘Nkosi Sikelel i-Afrika or God Bless Africa, was also sung, perhaps for the first time at an official proceeding, prior to it becoming South Africa’s national anthem in 1994.

Steyn testified that many diverse religious persuasions, including Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians, expressed their gratitude at being able to attend a service which did not violate their religious convictions and with which they could identify completely. Many also remarked on how well the Unitarian approach reflected the spirit of the newly emerging South Africa.

Steyn lost a battle to cancer in 1997 and leaves his wife, Marie, behind, who is still on the Unitarian Church committee and authors the Cape Town Unitarian newsletter.

Gordon Oliver

The congruence of Oliver’s liberal thinking and values with Unitarianism became evident early on in his office as mayor. Since his story illustrates the way in which many individual

Unitarians have contributed to the tide of reform in South Africa, it is retold briefly here. At the time, South Africa was teetering between civil war and political transformation. In his inaugural speech on 8 September 1989, which was highly criticized by the entrenched political voices, Oliver committed his office to advancing the ideal of Cape Town as the gateway to a post-apartheid South Africa.

Five days later, he took a demonstrable public stand to support his words. A group of anti-government groups led by, among others, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Dr Alan Boesak and Sheikh Nazeem Mohammed, decided to express their protest by peacefully marching through the streets of the City. Oliver was invited to participate and had no hesitation in agreeing to do so, despite the “illegality” of the march. On 13 September, 40 000 people walked the streets of Cape Town and peacefully expressed their abhorrence of violence and their earnest desire for an apartheid-free City.

More than his political actions, Oliver brought a refreshing spiritual perspective to Cape Town, no doubt influenced by his Sufi and Unitarian associations. This was clearly reflected in his inaugural speech, where he drew the following profound conclusion, which I would also like to conclude with.

“I believe Capetownians have a significant role to play in contributing to a raising of spiritual consciousness in our country and to an increasing awareness of our place in the universe, of the interconnection that exists between ourselves as citizens of a very blessed city, and of the relationship between ourselves and the Mother Earth which is our home. Essentially, we must learn to relate to the larger cosmic plan in which there is a need to harmonise our life styles , our relationships with each other as citizens of this land and of this planet, and to harmonise our energies with those of the universe.

I pray that more and more Capetownians will be moved to an even greater awareness of the need to work together in a spirit of love and stewardship to heal ourselves and our earth. May we become healers in a completely holistic sense so that we may contribute to and experience a wholeness, or “Abundant Life” in all we are and do. For this surely is our birthright and the goal towards which all people are striving.”

These words are as true, and I believe, as Unitarian, today as they were when they were spoken ten years ago. We are grateful that Gordon Oliver now plays a leading lay-minister role in our

Cape Town Unitarian Fellowship. And in conclusion, I want thank you all for listening and to extend a warm invitation to all of you our service on Sunday, held at 64 Hout Street, Cape Town (just down the road from the Parliament proceedings). The place of worship is a lovely building with stained glass windows and a pipe organ and you would all be most welcome.

I thank you.

¹¹ (During Balmforth's time (around 1900), the name was amended to the *Free Protestant (Unitarian) Church*, and the brackets around "Unitarian" dropped during Bob Steyn's ministry in the 1980s).