Strong's Liberal Contemporaries: Adelaide, 1870-1914

David Hilliard

During the second half of the nineteenth century the religious culture of Adelaide was probably more receptive and less hostile to liberal ideas than any Australian city outside of Melbourne. In Sydney, evangelicalism was strongly represented among lay people and liberal Christianity obtained few footholds before the twentieth century. The intellectual culture of the churches in Brisbane was undeveloped; Perth and Hobart were small cities and geographically isolated.

Adelaide, with population of about 150,000 in 1901, was a strongly Protestant society, with the smallest proportion of Roman Catholics of any city in Australia and the highest proportion of Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists and Unitarians. Each of these denominations had a cluster of city and inner suburban churches that provided space for questioning intellectuals who worried whether traditional formulations of Christianity were true and wanted its teachings to be re-stated for the new age. And in Adelaide, like Melbourne, there were a number of men in public life who had a deep interest in religious questions. One of them was Sir Richard Davies Hanson, chief justice of the colony until his death in 1876 and a lifelong Congregationalist. In 1869 he published in London, anonymously, a scholarly life of the historical Jesus, as an entirely human figure, without miracles or divinity.[1]

In this paper I propose to identify five different strands in liberal Christianity as it took shape in Adelaide in the late nineteenth century and those who were its principal expounders.

1. Rational Christianity

The first congregation that explicitly identified itself as both liberal and Christian was the Unitarian Christian Church which was formed in 1854 and opened its new church opposite the Roman Catholic cathedral in 1857.[2] English Unitarianism contained two streams of thought, in uneasy coexistence. The first emerged on the radical wing of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century: that the doctrine of the Trinity was false because it was unscriptural. It was not the faith of the primitive church. The other strand grew out of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century: that the doctrine of the Trinity (and miracles) was untenable because it was unreasonable. Unitarian Christianity therefore claimed to be both scriptural and rational.

---

[1][Richard Davies Hanson], *The Jesus of History* (London, 1869).

[2]David Hilliard, 'Dissenters from Dissent: The Unitarians in South Australia', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, no. 11 (1983), pp.92-104.

The first minister of the Adelaide Unitarian Church, John Crawford Woods, recruited from Northern Ireland, was in the latter tradition. He was minister from 1855 until his retirement in 1889 and died in Adelaide in 1906. It was a lonely position, for the nearest minister of his church was in Melbourne. As the only Unitarian minister in the colony, Woods was very much in the public arena as an expounder of Unitarian Christianity. At different times he preached a series of sermons on challenging subjects such as (in the 1880s) 'Some eminent doubters and their attitude towards religion', in which he discussed such thinkers as Voltaire, John Stuart Mill, Darwin and Matthew Arnold. Few other ministers in Adelaide in this period offered such meaty topics. Some of his addresses and sermons were published as pamphlets, so we can gain a fairly good idea of his thought and the sort of sermons that he preached each Sunday.

Woods stood in the mainstream of British Unitarian thought of the mid-nineteenth century in both his intellectual optimism and his view of human life as a path of moral and spiritual improvement. He taught that Jesus was 'God's agent' (his expression), a man of the noblest spirit who came to enlighten human minds as to religious truth and the nature of God. Unitarians were his disciples. But Jesus was not God the Son and should not be worshipped as God. Woods applauded what he saw as the decline of the traditional Christian doctrines of original sin, eternal punishment and vicarious atonement as reflecting an idea of an angry and revengeful God that was unworthy of a perfectly good being and in any case was no longer tenable in the light of modern science and philosophy. He taught that the human race had not fallen from a state of original purity through Adam's sin but instead had 'gradually and slowly risen from ignorance and barbarism to its present condition'.[3] Progress required human effort as fellow-labourers with God and an untrammelled search for new truth, and this required toleration and liberality of thought. Morality and duty were central to religion: true religious belief required obedience to the divine commandments and a righteous life. In religion, he claimed, the evidence pointed to an upward path towards greater enlightenment, and Unitarian ideas were spreading in other churches:

> It is a source of great satisfaction to us that every scientific discovery, every advance in knowledge, all the best literature of our times are favourable to our views as Unitarian Christians.[4]

---

[3] John Crawford Woods, *Adam, Where Art Thou?... A Lecture delivered in the Unitarian Christian Church, Adelaide, August 13, 1882* (Adelaide, 1882), p.4.

[4] John Crawford Woods, *Unitarian Christianity: Scriptural, as well as Reasonable* (Adelaide, 1858), p.98.

In fact Unitarianism in Adelaide did not grow. Its numerical peak, as a proportion of the total population, was at the 1871 census. One of the main reasons for this was that as other denominations in the late nineteenth century liberalised their theology the Unitarians were no longer the only church where those who doubted the truth of traditional doctrines could find a home.

2. Conservative liberalism

The Congregationalists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century imported from England and other colonies a stream of scholarly ministers for their city churches such as Stow Memorial Church in Flinders Street and Brougham Place Church in North Adelaide. William Roby Fletcher, a graduate of the University of London and minister of Stow Church from 1876 until his retirement in 1890, was a contemporary of Charles Strong. Like Strong, he was active in the community outside the church and his intellectual interests were broad. While at Stow Church, he wrote hundreds of leading articles and essays for the daily newspapers, gave public lectures on many subjects and was a governor of the South Australian Museum, to which he gave the Egyptian antiquities that he himself had collected. At the University of Adelaide he was vice-chancellor from 1883 to 1887 and for several years acted as both professor of English language and literature and professor of mental and moral philosophy. In his spare time he was also principal of the South Australian Congregational theological college, and in 1892 he was elected chairman of the Australasian Congregational Union.[5]

As one of the denomination's leading intellectual ministers, Fletcher's theological views may be taken as representative of a large section of Congregational opinion. He was a cautious liberal. For him, the scholar's quest for truth was paramount and he accepted the principle of higher criticism. However, he was not persuaded by many of the claims of biblical scholars, whom he thought to be too clever by half, and he was pleased to find apparent endorsement for the authenticity of events recounted in the Old Testament in the new science of archaeology in which he took a keen interest. So in his addresses and sermons he urged a 'conservative and cautious' attitude towards the new theories of biblical scholars. Some theories were valuable but others were foolish. In any case, he declared, 'our anchorage is not so much the Bible as the living Christ'.[6] Therefore 'if the Old Testament were to evaporate away it would not rob us of our Divine Master':

---

[5]R.B. Walker, 'Fletcher, William Roby', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 4, ed. Douglas Pike (Melbourne, 1972), pp.189-90; J.J. Halley (ed.), *A Short Biographical Sketch of the Rev. Wm. Roby Fletcher MA: Together with Selections from his Lectures, Sermons, Papers, &c.* (Adelaide, 1895).

[6]W.R. Fletcher, *Modern Aspects of the Fight of Faith and the Higher Criticism of the Bible, in the Light of Modern Discoveries* [Two lectures] (Sydney, 1892), p.7.

> Our New Testament is a help, a comfort, and a joy; but our grip of the hand of Christ is stronger than our critical judgment as to the manuscript evidences of a text or of a letter.[7]

But beyond this Fletcher did not go. For him, the core of the Christian gospel remained unchanged: a message of individual salvation, atonement through the cross of Christ, pardon and forgiveness. He sympathised with socialism for its desire to reduce inequalities, help the weak and oppose injustice, but he also criticised it. Social progress, he said, must develop from within each individual; acts of parliament cannot re-make human souls, and only Christianity had succeeded in making the world better.[8]

3. Liberal evangelicals

This viewpoint was well represented among the younger generation of Baptist ministers. The Baptists – in South Australia similar in size to the Congregationalists – were more open than Baptists in other Australian colonies to new theological ideas and more willing to reinterpret, within limits, traditional doctrines to take account of new scientific theories and the apparent findings of higher criticism.[9] Of course their response was not uniform. A number of Baptists still championed the old ways and deplored what they saw as doctrinal wobbling, and even the most liberal Baptists were more conservative than the most advanced wing of the Congregationalists. But from the 1890s the overall trend among younger ministers was clear. They wanted to see a broader evangelicalism that reached an accommodation with evolutionary theory and higher criticism. In this their thinking was closer to that of the English Baptist John Clifford than to his opponent Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Ministers with conservative theological views usually remained in small country and suburban pastorates, while Adelaide's largest and most prosperous churches, with a high proportion of well-educated and thoughtful members, were more open to modern critical thought. This liberal evangelical outlook was dominant among South Australian Baptist ministers until at least the 1940s.

One of these churches was Norwood Baptist Church, in the inner eastern suburbs. Its minister from 1892 was Charles Bright, who came to Adelaide from Bathurst Street Baptist Church in Sydney. Bright did not publicly deny evangelical doctrines such as substitutionary atonement but bypassed them.[10] He regarded creeds and doctrines as mere scaffolding, historically conditioned and too narrow to contain the message of Christianity for the modern world. Christ, he taught, was 'the high-water mark of human

---

[7]Fletcher, *Higher Criticism of the Bible*, pp.20, 27.

[8]W.R. Fletcher, 'Socialism', in Halley (ed.), *A Short Biographical Sketch*, pp.206-18.

[9]J.S. Walker, 'The Baptists in South Australia, 1863-1914', BTh Honours thesis, Flinders University, 1990, ch.2.

[10]Walker, 'Baptists', pp.50-59.

character', the supreme revelation of divine love and wisdom. Christ's message was the need for righteousness in thought and action and to fight for the regeneration of the whole of human life in the present:

> Subtract the sublime love and regard that Christ had for the welfare of humanity from his teachings and life and you have an enigma. There is nothing left worth talking about.[11]

Claiming to be inspired by Christ, 'the greatest sociological reformer', in 1893 Bright was a founder of the Society for the Study of Christian Sociology, to encourage the discussion of social issues. He was the only minister in the colony to make a submission to a parliamentary committee investigating state pensions, a move that he supported.

4. Progressive religion

In 1904 Alfred Depledge Sykes, a young minister from Romford Road Congregational Church in the outer East End of London was appointed minister of Stow Memorial Church.[12] Sykes was a more advanced liberal than his predecessors and, as a wide reader, was well attuned to the latest currents in British and European Protestant thought. The essence of Sykes's theology as expounded in his sermons and articles in London and Adelaide was that human apprehension of divine truth could never be final but evolved. In his farewell sermon at Romford Road Church in 1904 he had summarised the ideas that underlay his preaching: the gospel of redemption through fellowship, in a deep personal relationship with Christ; a progressive gospel open to new light and truth; a pervasive gospel that applied to all areas of life; a rational gospel based upon reasoned argument; and a Catholic gospel which stressed what the different branches of the universal church held in common. 'I believe in a progressive gospel', he declared. 'Dogmas and creeds have their value, but God's way in the world through and through is evolutionary, not stationary. The golden age is yet to be.'[13]

In Adelaide, Sykes was the first to expound from the pulpit the ideas of R. J. Campbell's *The New Theology* (1907), a book that in England had triggered a storm of controversy on a scale that was not repeated until the publication of John Robinson's *Honest to God* in 1963. Sykes had known Campbell personally and was proud to identify himself with 'the essential idea of this progressive liberalizing movement; for the spirit of it all is that it is simply carrying out to

---

[11]Charles Bright, *Christ in the Life* (Adelaide, n.d.), p.8.

[12]David Hilliard, 'Sykes, Alfred Depledge', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 12, ed. John Ritchie (Melbourne, 1990), pp.152-53; David Hilliard, 'A Seeker for Truth: Alfred Depledge Sykes', *Church Heritage*, vol. 6, no. 3 (1990), pp.1-17.

[13]Romford Road Congregational Church (London), *Forest Gate Magazine*, vol. 4, no. 7 (July 1904), pp.73-76.

their logical issue the principles of the Reformation'.[14] The subject of his chairman's address to the Congregational Union of South Australia in 1911 was 'Organised Christianity and the Modern Man', in which he called for a theology

> that reckons with the dominant intellectual conceptions of the twentieth century, and the presentation of the Church's message must harmonise with those conceptions – the conception of evolution, the conception of the immanence of God, the conception of social solidarity, and the conception of an authority that is real and verifiable in experience.[15]

At the centre of Sykes's teaching was the importance of the human search for God through religious experience. It was the business of the church, he said, to specialise on the spiritual life, to care for souls; for its worship to encourage an intense devotional spirit and to bring people in touch with spiritual realities and the consciousness of God: 'what we need is the Deep Church'.[16]

This meant changes in the style of worship. In this area Sykes brought to South Australia the new ideas that had been circulating for a decade in English Nonconformity, combining theological liberalism with dignified liturgical worship. Everything in a church building should contribute to the spirit of worship. In 1907 Sykes had the interior of Stow Church remodelled to create a raised sanctuary with a central communion table; the pulpit was moved to the side and the organ to the east transept. He introduced a semi-liturgical form of worship drawn from Dr John Hunter's *Devotional Services for Public Worship*, and the church choir began wearing robes.

The New Theology as expounded by Sykes and several other ministers (such as Alfred Gifford of Brougham Place Church) aroused opposition among theologically conservative Congregationalists led by the formidable J.C. Kirby of Port Adelaide. As chairman of the Congregational Union of South Australia in 1907, he had given an address on 'The Theology of the Glorious Blood', setting out the central articles of the evangelical faith that the New Theology denied. The tension climaxed at the annual meetings of the Union in 1909 when Kirby moved a motion 'That Congregationalists have, and ought to have, a common creed'. This aroused passionate debate. The liberals proposed an amendment: 'That Congregationalists have a common faith', which was broad enough to please almost everyone. Realising that the

---

[14] 'The New Theology', *Observer* (Adelaide), 30 March 1907, p.44.

[15] A. Depledge-Sykes, *Organised Christianity and the Modern Man* (Adelaide, 1911), p.17.

[16] A. Depledge Sykes, 'The Church: Its Inner Mission', in Congregational Union and Home Mission of South Australia, *Year Book for 1913*, p.34.

numbers were against him, Kirby withdrew his original motion.[17] A split was thus avoided, although the bitterness lingered.

Sykes's subsequent career had several twists and turns. In 1915-17 he was minister of Collins Street Independent Church in Melbourne, across the road from Scots Church and only a few blocks from Strong's Australian Church. Then in 1922 he joined the Anglican Church (or rather returned to the church in which had been brought up in Huddersfield), having coming to the conclusion that Christianity required a corporate expression through dogma, sacraments and the historic episcopate. After ordination, he was appointed to a small parish in North Adelaide and in the 1930s was drawn to the Oxford Group Movement (Moral Re-Armament). Unhappy with Anglican ecclesiasticism, in 1937 he returned to Congregationalism and Stow Church where he was appointed as associate minister. He died in 1940. Sykes's fundamental ideas had not changed: he was always a liberal but on the move.

5. The Christian Socialists

Christian Socialists stressed the social message of Christianity. They claimed that true Christianity could be applied directly to modern conditions of life to realise the kingdom of God on earth and that social reform was equal in importance to individual conversion. Some of the liberals I have previously described were not, on the whole, particularly interested in the details of social Christianity beyond a general idea that Christianity was concerned with the whole of life and that it was a good thing to reduce inequality and bring about greater harmony between the social classes. The Unitarian congregation, for example, was supported by a number of conservative business leaders and politicians. Bright's Christian Socialist sympathies were constrained by his well-to-do congregation at Norwood Baptist Church. Sykes, although he believed that the church should 'sanctify' social relationships, was not radical in his own social views. As a widower, his second wife was the daughter of a rich businessman who was a deacon of Stow Church.

The first exponents of liberal theology conjoined to an avowed Christian Socialism appeared among the Primitive Methodists, whose tradition was working class and non-intellectual. Their main Adelaide pulpit was Wellington Square Primitive Methodist Church in North Adelaide, under Hugh Gilmore, who was minister from 1889 until his death in 1891, and John Day Thompson, minister from 1892 to 1898.[18] When the feminist Catherine

---

[17]Edward Sidney Kiek, *An Apostle in Australia: The Life and Reminiscences of Joseph Coles Kirby*, *Christian Pioneer and Social Reformer* (London, 1927), pp.184-87; Hugh Jackson, 'Religious Ideas and Practice in Australian Congregationalism, 1870-1930: Part II', *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 12, no. 4 (1983), p.437.

[18]R.B. Walker, 'Gilmore, Hugh', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 4, pp.252-53; Arnold D. Hunt, *A Tall Cedar in Our Lebanon: Hugh Gilmore and Primitive Methodism* (2nd ed, Adelaide, 1983).

Helen Spence wanted a change from her own Unitarian church this was where she attended on Sunday evening. The views of Gilmore and Thompson differed from other liberal ministers in the city in their activism and their willingness, in the application of Christian principles, to get involved in controversial social and political issues. Gilmore publicly supported the maritime strikers of Port Adelaide in 1890, was president of the Adelaide branch of the Single Tax League, and endorsed the movement for women's suffrage. Thompson was likewise a prominent supporter of the suffrage cause, wrote and spoke in support of federation and won the trust of the emerging labour movement. An address he gave in 1894 on 'The Simple Gospel' attacked the view that it was the duty of ministers to proclaim the simple gospel and avoid social issues and critical scholarship. This got him into trouble with conservative Primitive Methodists in England.[19]

When we compare the varieties of liberal theology expounded in Adelaide pulpits in the four decades from 1870 we see many points of similarity, although they varied in emphasis and were mixed in different proportions:

- There was a gulf between the Christianity taught by the churches and the modern age; therefore Christianity had to adjust to modern thought. However there was no agreement over the extent to which received doctrines should be radically reinterpreted or dropped altogether.
- The search for truth was paramount, and theology should allow freedom of inquiry
- The person of Jesus Christ was the supreme revelation of God, the pattern of the perfect human life, although this did not necessarily mean that Jesus was divine.
- Creeds were products of a past era, historically conditioned, and were inadequate to define Christianity in the modern world
- An intellectual framework was provided by the concept of evolution, which applied in religion as well as in the natural world.
- A this-worldly emphasis: that Christianity should relate to the whole of human social and economic life.

All these ideas echo those expounded by Charles Strong and they illustrate the intellectual unsettlement among Australian Protestants in this period. But none of the liberal clergy in Adelaide could compare to Charles Strong in the length of his ministry and the range and depth of his thought.

Biographical note

[19]Stuart Mews, 'Against the Simple Gospel: John Day Thompson and the New Evangelism in Primitive Methodism', in Stuart Mews (ed.), *Modern Religious Rebels: Presented to John Kent* (London, 1993), pp.214-19.

David Hilliard holds academic status as an associate professor in the department of History at Flinders University in Adelaide where he taught for many years. He has published widely on the history of Christian missions in the Pacific Islands and the religious and social history of Australia.