Seventh-day Adventism

Professor Ronald Lawson, Professor Emeritus, Queens College, City University of New York

Published in Robert Wuthnow (ed.) (2007). *Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion*, 2nd Edition Congressional Quarterly Books: Washington D.C.

Seventh-day Adventism is a Christian denomination with a conservative, even literalistic, approach to the Scripture. Its adherents observe Saturday, the "seventh day," as the Sabbath. Adventist evangelists focus on the apocalyptic visions of the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation, interpreting them to show that the second advent of Christ is near (and so the name "Adventism"). Such preaching tends to draw undereducated and unsophisticated converts, most of whom are relatively poor. Because of their emphasis on education and their system of educational institutions, however, Adventists in the United States typically have experienced considerable upward mobility, especially in the second and third generations.

Formally organized in 1863, Seventh-day Adventism has become a global movement that grew rapidly in the twentieth century, especially in the Developing World: at the end of 2005 it reported that it was active in 204 of the 230 countries recognized by the United Nations and claimed a baptized (adult) membership of 14.4 million people. Its centralized structure, global presence, and extensive educational, health care, and publishing institutions have led it into a complex web of relationships with governments. Adventists in the United States have been an influential force in advancing religious liberty and in protecting the separation of church and state.

Origins and Development

Seventh-day Adventists emerged from a revivalist movement inspired by the preaching of William Miller (1782-1849), a Baptist lay preacher in New York State. Miller prophesied that the Second Coming of Christ would occur in 1843-4 and that this would be followed by the millennium, his thousand-year reign. The Millerite movement attracted a wide following in the northeastern United States. When the prophecy failed to come true, Miller's followers broke into several smaller groups, most of which did not survive. Seventh-day Adventists became the most prominent of the ones that did survive.

Early Adventism's apocalyptic beliefs led to ridicule and tensions with government authorities. Its followers, who identified the United States with the second beast of Revelation 13, believed the beast would join together with the "apostate churches" to persecute Adventists. Arrests of

Adventist farmers between 1850 and 1895, peaking at more than one hundred arrests during the final decade of that period, were seen as evidence that the expected persecution was already waxing. The farmers, who worked on Sunday after resting on Saturday, were arrested for breaking state "blue laws." During the American Civil War (1861-1865), Adventists, who regarded the taking of human life as the transgression of the commandment "Thou shalt not kill," declared themselves conscientious objectors and refused to fight; they were treated with scorn and their loyalty was questioned.

After the Civil War, Adventists sent out missionaries, and the movement grew internationally as well as within the United States. They built schools, hospitals, and publishing houses. As the movement put down roots and spread, the urgency of its apocalyptic vision became less intense. Ellen White (1827-1915), the influential Adventist prophet, counseled rapprochement with civil authorities to facilitate missionary work around the world. She encouraged Adventists to help prolong America's future so that the Adventist message might flourish.

In 1888 the National Reform Association launched a campaign to extend the Sunday blue laws in effect in some states to the national level. Although Adventists saw the passage of a national "Sunday law" as the culmination of the prophecy of persecutions that would precede the millennium, they felt obliged by Ellen White's counsel to respond boldly to this threat in order to "extend the time" to build their program of global evangelism. They established a magazine devoted to religious liberty in 1883; they participated in the lobby that helped defeat legislative bills requiring the observance of Sunday as the day of rest in 1888 and 1889; and they founded the National Religious Liberty Association in 1889. By 1892 their involvement included petitions to both houses of Congress and, eventually, the presentation of legal briefs for their causes in court.

Moves toward Accommodation

In the twentieth century Adventists continued seeking ways to make accommodations with the secular world and maintain their own beliefs. They became identified as strong proponents of the separation of church and state. They built coalitions with other religious groups to lobby for legislation they supported or to argue against legislation they considered threatening.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Adventists modified their position on military service. By allowing conscripted members to serve as noncombatants (soldiers without arms), usually in medical units, they could uphold their faith while expressing their patriotism. Service in medical units also helped to resolve the other major problem posed by conscription, the threat to observance of the Sabbath. Adventists regarded medical work on the Sabbath as

legitimate since it was “doing good.” However, they continued to face problems concerning Sabbath observance during basic training, and many were imprisoned for disobeying officers.

During the years between World Wars I and II, Adventists sought accreditation for their educational institutions. With the new focus on accreditation, colleges sent their faculty members to secular universities for doctoral studies. The quality of Adventist schools and colleges improved, and secular content in their curriculums was expanded. These changes prepared the way for increased upward mobility of graduates.

With the outbreak of World War II in Europe in 1939, Adventists reached out to cement relationships with the American military and, through them, with political authorities. To make their members attractive to medical units, they again established a program to give medical training to potential draftees. Their American Medical Cadet Corps was directed and supervised by regular army officers, through cooperation with the armed forces. Adventists had become “conscientious cooperators.”

During the Korean War in the 1950s, Adventist military chaplains, who were paid by the armed forces and had regular military careers, were appointed for the first time. In 1954 the U.S. Army established a special camp where all noncombatants could receive basic training. More than half the men trained there were Adventists. That same year the U.S. surgeon general contacted Adventist headquarters, seeking approval for the army to ask Adventist draftees to volunteer as guinea pigs in biological warfare research. With the encouragement of church leaders, 2,200 Adventists participated in “Operation Whitecoat” between 1955 and 1973.

The Adventist relationship with the state in America had clearly become more comfortable. In 1943 the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Barnette v. West Virginia State Board of Education,* reversed an earlier decision that allowed school boards to expel Jehovah’s Witnesses who refused to salute the flag, thus strengthening religious liberty, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt included religious freedom as one of his four basic freedoms. The editor of the Adventist church’s paper commented that the millennium lay further in the future. After the war there was considerable debate within American Adventism over the extent to which it should accept the government aid that had become available to private institutions, such as schools and hospitals. The decision to accept aid for its institutions, with some restrictions, compromised the Adventists’ previously unyielding stand on the separation of church and state.

In the early 1980s, church leaders discovered that vast sums in government aid were available for relief and development work. They transformed the church’s disaster relief agency into the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), which they viewed as an “entering wedge”

that could penetrate regions where conventional missionaries were often unwelcome. In many ways, however, the source of the funds and the restrictions placed on their use gave the appearance of making this agency an arm of American foreign policy. For example, during the 1980s, when the U.S. government opposed the Nicaraguan government, ADRA distributed aid generously in Honduras but provided nothing to the people of Nicaragua.

In 2003, Rear Admiral Barry C. Black, an Adventist pastor who had been commissioned as a Navy Chaplain in 1976 and had risen to the post of Chief of Naval Chaplains, was elected the 62nd Chaplain of the United States Senate. He is the first Seventh-day Adventist and also the first African-American to hold that post. His appointment to a position that had previously been held only by ministers of Mainline Protestant denominations—primarily Episcopalians, Methodists and Presbyterians—was embraced with pride by Adventist leaders and periodicals. It was a remarkable symbol of the changed relationship between Adventism and state within the USA.

Adventists and the U.S. Courts

Until the coming of the five-day work week in the 1930s, almost all Adventists who needed employment (unless they worked for the church or for other members) faced problems in gaining and keeping jobs. Thereafter, any who were required to work shifts continued to face problems. In spite of the arrests of Adventists during the nineteenth century for working on Sunday, and the extent to which they continued to be at a disadvantage in the twentieth-century job market, Adventists developed no concerted legal response. They had few attorneys among their members and lacked grounds for defense. Even though the adoption of a five-day week opened many jobs to them, they were still excluded from shifts that required work on Friday night or Saturday. As Adventist members became urbanized in the interwar years, and as many employers sought to increase efficiency by working factories multiple shifts, pressures mounted for the church's General Conference to work for change.

Responding to these pressures, the General Conference took the first step toward building a legal department in 1936. Moreover, the development of the legal doctrine of incorporation about the time of World War II obliged the states to honor the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom. The doctrine of incorporation refers to the process in which the Supreme Court identified certain rights--those in the Bill of Rights--as inherently "incorporated" in the Fourteenth Amendment concept of due process. Incorporation meant, in effect, that such rights were made binding on the states through the Fourteenth Amendment. The free exercise clause was incorporated in *Cantwell v. Connecticut* (1940); the establishment clause was incorporated in *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947). Despite these developments, however,

the Adventists' first strategy for change was not through the courts but was an attempt to negotiate solutions directly with employers.

Eventually, however, individual Adventists began to turn to the courts, and one of these cases *(Sherbert v. Verner,* 1963) resulted in a landmark Supreme Court decision. This case addressed the issue of an employee, fired for refusing to work on her Sabbath, who subsequently had been declared ineligible for unemployment benefits. The Court found that her disqualification from benefits because she had refused to accept employment that would have contravened her religious beliefs "imposed a burden on the free exercise of her religion." The decision propounded the first clear theory of the free exercise clause of the Constitution, which requires the state to demonstrate a compelling interest if a decision running counter to a religious belief is to withstand challenge. *Sherbert* consequently became an important precedent.

The number of court cases brought by Adventists has multiplied since *Sherbert.* The General Conference has sharply increased the size of its legal department and the number of cases litigated in house. These cases have recognized the right of Adventists to engage in door-to-door activity *(Tate v. Akers*, 1977; *Espinoza v. Rusk,* 1980); protected members with a conscientious objection to union membership *(Nottelson v. Smith,* 1981; *Tooley v. Martin-Marietta Corp.,* 1981); and extended the protection of unemployment benefits for those dismissed because of conflicts over the Sabbath to new converts *(Hobbie v. Unemployment Appeals Commission,* 1987). Most cases, however, have focused on attempts to preserve the jobs of Sabbatarians through application of the antidiscrimination clauses of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended in 1972. Although many cases have been settled with good terms for the plaintiffs and the Church lawyers have been successful in moving several large employers to adopt policies that have prevented further problems, significant legal problems continue because of a narrow interpretation given by the Supreme Court to the "escape" clause, which says that accommodation should not cause an employer "undue hardship." Adventism, then, has made the least legal progress in the area most important to it: Adventists continue to face problems because they are not excluded from shifts that require work on Friday nights or Saturdays.

Adventist institutions—hospitals, schools, colleges and universities, publishing houses, and vegetarian food factories--played a major role in accommodating Adventism to society. Hospitals and educational institutions were obliged to come under government regulation; they attracted patients and students from their communities; and their staffing needs encouraged members to seek higher levels of education. The participation of Adventist institutions in the broader society, and especially in selling their products and services, led many of them into disputes that had to be settled in the courts.

As members gained confidence in the court system and became more independent of church control, they were willing to initiate suits against their church and its institutions when they felt wronged by them and the problems seemed intractable. In some cases they were joined by government agencies seeking to enforce statutes outlawing discrimination on the basis of gender and race. The most important of these were a series of suits brought against the Pacific Press Publishing Association of Mountain View, California, in the 1970s. In these cases women charged discrimination in salaries and opportunities for promotion and--when they were fired as a result of their suits--retaliation *(Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and Silver v. Pacific Press Publishing Association,* 1976; *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v. Pacific Press,* 1982). The church's defense, which principally invoked the free exercise clause of the Constitution, was based on a belief that its institutions, as religious organizations, were immune to antidiscrimination laws and a fear of state interference that was rooted in its apocalyptic expectations. The Court ruled that it was Congress's intent to prohibit religious organizations from discriminating among their employees and that applying the law to employees who did not fulfill the functions of a minister did not violate the First Amendment. This decision affected the rights of millions of employees of religious organizations and has since been cited widely in other cases.

Perhaps the most striking symbol of the Adventist Church's accommodation to its environment was its decision to trademark its name, an act that was completed in 1981. This church, whose apocalyptic vision had led it to expect persecution at the hands of the government, has made use of the government's legal system to attack schismatic Adventist groups *(General Conference Corporation of Seventh-day Adventist v. Seventh-day Adventist Congregational Church,* 1989) and disapproved organizations of church members, such as one representing gay and lesbian Adventists *(General Conference Corporation of Seventh-day Adventist v. Seventh-day Adventist Kinship, International, Inc*., 1991). These cases mark a huge shift in its position.

Church-State Relations outside the United States

Sending missionaries to countries outside the United States became an important strategy as Adventists sought to evangelize people groups around the world. Adventists abroad modified church practices to fit the options open to them. Their primary goal was to avoid conflict with the state. For example, as the formerly separate Australian colonies planned to federate and create a new nation in 1901, Adventists there became so noisily engaged in the debates on what the new Constitution should say about church-state relations that historians such as Ely and Patrick have concluded that they played a key role in securing the incorporation of the

essential wording of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution into the Australian document.

During World War I, Adventists in Germany (which had the second largest concentration of Adventists at that time), moved both by patriotism and the realization that the imperial government would not countenance a noncombatant position, reversed their earlier stance as conscientious objectors and chose to serve as combatants. This decision resulted in a bitter schism. The pacifist "two percent" who refused to compromise with the state created the schismatic Seventh Day Adventist Reform Movement. A similar compromise was made in the Soviet Union when Joseph Stalin, the communist dictator, attacked religious freedom. In 1928 Russian Adventist leaders proclaimed that military service was a Christian duty and that anyone teaching otherwise must leave the church. They accepted new laws that proscribed proselytizing and charitable work. Although this capitulation allowed the Adventists to function openly, it caused another schism and brought persecution when the break-away members went underground. The schismatics called themselves the True and Free Adventists: "true" because they were faithful to the commandments to observe the Sabbath and refrain from killing and "free" because they refused to be registered by the government.

In Nazi Germany Adventists went out of their way to cooperate with authorities, fearing that their observance of the Sabbath and certain food prohibitions would result in their being confused with Jews. They expressed enthusiastic support for Hitler, most of their conscripts bore arms willingly even though they had been accorded the right to opt for medical duties, and some turned in pacifist Reformed Adventists to the authorities to distance themselves from the schismatics.

The major exception to this pattern of compromise occurred in South Korea during the Korean War in the 1950s. As a result of serving beside American troops, Korean Adventists trained for and sought positions in medical units, even though it was not guaranteed that they would be offered such posts. Two members who failed to secure noncombatant positions were executed when they refused to use their weapons; dozens of others faced long prison terms. However, when the South Korean regime broadened conscription following the American withdrawal from Vietnam in the early 1970s, and insisted that universities assume responsibility for training their students or face closure, the Adventist university there, after consultations with church headquarters, also chose to compromise and established military training as part of its curriculum.

In recent decades, the International Religious Liberty Association, which is sponsored and financed by the Adventist Church but is ecumenical and inter-faith in membership, has become

a major player in religious liberty issues both in the U.S. and globally. The President of both the international body and its regional and national affiliates is now typically a prominent non-Adventist, but its Secretary General is the head of the department of Political Affairs and Religious Liberty at the Adventist General Conference or its regional or local office. The IRLA has sponsored many series of meetings and congresses—the Washington Coalition for International Religious Freedom, the IRLA Meeting of Experts concerned with religious liberty issues, International Congresses that are typically scheduled to meet in countries with religious liberty problems or where legislation protecting religious freedoms is being considered, and World Congresses. The purpose of the international meetings, which feature speakers from many faiths, is to highlight issues of religious liberty. For example, an International Congress in Tbilisi, Georgia, in 2005, launched the Georgian Religious Liberty Association, a IRLA affiliate. Those elected as President and Secretary General followed the usual pattern, while those elected to the 21-member board included Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim leaders. When Adventists fight to establish or protect religious liberties, they now often work closely with representatives of religious groups, such as Catholics, which, in earlier decades, they saw as likely sources of persecution aimed at themselves. They are also no longer focusing merely on self-protection, but have broadened their concern enormously. For example, their Meeting of Experts in Spain in 2005 produced a document entitled *Guiding Principles Regarding Students' Rights to Wear or Display Religious Symbols.* Other events that year included a congress in Bucharest, which, it was felt, made "an important contribution" as Romania finalized the draft of its Law of Religion for submission to Parliament; a visit to Peru just before a law on Religious Freedom and Equality was to be submitted to the government; and participation in a meeting in Spain of a United Nations Group of Experts on Islamophobia.

The nineteenth century Adventist policy of avoiding trouble abroad has been replaced by the pursuit of political advantages with various governments. Adventists were successful in establishing such relationships with authoritarian regimes, of both the left and the right, in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The leaders of the General Conference frequently became actively involved in these relationships. Adventists sought liberties (freedom to evangelize, freedom to observe their Sabbath, protection of their institutions) and favors (accreditation of their schools). In return, they were willing to help legitimate or otherwise assist the regimes.

For example, Neil Wilson, president of the General Conference in the 1980s, intervened personally in the Soviet Union and Hungary, where schismatic Adventist groups, discontented with the church's history of making compromises with the state, were an irritant to political leaders. In both cases Wilson announced that the official branch of the world church was the one recognized by the state. Both interventions resulted in favored treatment by the

governments: in the Soviet Union Adventists were granted permission to establish both a seminary and a publishing house, and to build a headquarters administrative building in Moscow.

In Chile the Adventist college was at a great disadvantage because it did not have accreditation. When General Augusto Pinochet, the Chilean president, was invited to visit, he was greeted in a welcoming ceremony before television cameras, during which the college president offered a prayer thanking God for sending Pinochet to save the nation. This occurred at a time when the president was under attack from the Catholic cardinal for human rights violations. In return for this legitimation, the college received accreditation, and Adventists became known in Chile as "friends of Pinochet."

In Kenya Adventists fostered a close relationship with President Daniel Arap Moi, who in return arranged to provide them with land and a charter for their University of East Africa. In 1988, when the General Conference staged its annual council in Nairobi, its president's speech was reported under the headline, "SDA head lauds Kenya for upholding freedom." This public support was offered to Moi at a time when he was under attack from the National Council of Churches of Kenya for brutalizing opposition leaders and attempting to make constitutional changes designed to help him retain power.

Finally, Adventists have become a noticeable political presence in parts of the Developing World. This is especially the case in Papua-New Guinea, other South Pacific island groups, and in Jamaica and some other Caribbean nations, where several Adventists have served as cabinet members, judges, leading civil servants, and, in PNG and Antigua and Barbuda, as Governor-General; in Micronesia, where an Adventist served as the President of Palau; in Uganda, where the Prime Minister and later Vice-president was an active Adventist; and among the Aymara of Peru, in the highlands around Lake Titicaca. These developments took the leaders at church headquarters in the United States by surprise, for Adventists have rarely walked the corridors of political power in their home country.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allen, Lahai T. "In His Own Words: Barry Black." *Adventist Review* 180 (2003): Aug.7, 336-39.

Baker, Delbert. *From Exile to Prime Minister.* Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1988.

Beach, Bert B. *Bright Candle of Courage.* Boise: Pacific Press, 1989.

Blaich, Roland. "Religion under National Socialism: The Case of the German Adventist Church." *Central European History* 26 (1993): 255-280.

Bull, Malcolm, and Keith Lockhart. *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream.* San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989.

Butler, Jonathan M. "Adventism and the American Experience." In *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,* edited by Edwin S. Gaustad. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

Dwyer, Bonnie. "Praying for Peace, Praying for Presidents." *Spectrum* 32:3 (2004): 73-75.

Ely, Richard. *Unto God and Caesar: Religious Issues in the Emerging Commonwealth, 1891-1906.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1976.

Lawson, Ronald. "Church and State at Home and Abroad: The Evolution of Seventh-day Adventist Relations with Governments." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 (1996): 279-311.

------. "Onward Christian Soldiers? Seventh-day Adventists and the Issue of Military Service." *Review of Religious Research* 37 (1996): 97-122.

------. "Sect-State Relations: Accounting for the Differing Trajectories of Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses." *Sociology of Religion* 56 (1995): 351-377.

------. "Seventh-day Adventists and the U.S. Courts: Road Signs Along the Route of a Denominationalizing Sect." *Journal of Church and State* 40:3 (1998), 553-588.

------. "Tensions, Religious Freedom, and the Courts: The Seventh-day Adventist Experience." Pp. 73-92 in *Religion and Social Policy,* edited by Paula D. Nesbitt. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2001.

McLeod, Merikay. *Betrayal: The shattering sex discrimination case of Silver vs Pacific Press Publishing Association.* Loma Linda: Mars Hill, 1985.

Morgan, Douglas. *Adventism and the American Republic: The Public Involvement of a Major Apocalyptic Movement.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001.

------ (ed). *The Peacemaking Remnant.* Adventist Peace Fellowship, 2005.

Patrick, Arthur N. *Christianity and Culture in Colonial Australia: Selected Catholic, Anglican, Wesleyan and Adventist Perspectives, 1891-1906.* Ph.D. thesis, University of Newcastle, 1991.

Plantak, Zdravko. *The Silent Church: Human Rights and Adventist Social Ethics.* Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press, 1998.

Sapiets, Marite. *True Witness: The Story of Seventh Day Adventists in the Soviet Union*. Keston, England: Keston College, 1990.

Sicher, Erwin. "Seventh-day Adventist Publications and the Nazi Temptation." *Spectrum* 8 (March 1977): 11-24.

Syme, Eric. *A History of SDA Church-State Relations in the United States.* Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1973.