

Book Review

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Review of Zdravko Plantak, *The Silent Church: Human Rights and Adventist Social Ethics*. 1998: Macmillan, London.

In this reworking of a dissertation, this ethicist/theologian considers the history of the Adventist Church, and finds that it has been largely silent on issues concerning human rights. However, when he examines some case studies, he concludes that there has been some variation over time, with peripheral interest in some issues by a few pioneers followed by indifference, and then recently some renewed interest.

When he sets out to explain the lack of concern for such issues, Plantak notes that the early apocalyptic urgency shifted the attention of Adventists from this world to the imminent Kingdom of God, that their premillennialism led Adventists to expect that conditions on earth would deteriorate and to rejoice when they could report data supporting this, that the triumphalism of their Remnant theology fostered a narrow exclusivism, and that their American-style pragmatism made Adventists reactive, individualistic, and willing to accommodate in order to survive. It should not be surprising, then, that Joseph Bates, one of the early pioneers, who had been active in the abolitionist movement, withdrew from it after converting to Adventism in order to place all his energy into proclaiming the Adventist message of warning.

After some decades Adventists chose to become politically active, but this activism was usually self-serving. They opposed legislation that would have declared Sunday a holy day, embraced the issue of religious liberty as they set out to protect themselves, and became involved in the debates about temperance and military service because of their own stances. Similarly, when they founded clinics and hospitals to care for the sick there seemed always to be a hook involved – the motive of using these to convert people to their religion. Later Adventists collaborated with the Nazi regime in Germany so that they might protect their institutions, and in spite of their concern for religious liberty, they made no official protest against the persecution of the Jews, and indeed disfellowshipped members whose background was Jewish to distance themselves from the pariah ethnic group. Similar patterns occurred in the Soviet Union, its satellite states, and recently during the wars in the former Yugoslavia.

However, in the decades since the 1960s there have been signs of a growing interest in issues of human rights, with many articles by left-leaning theologians, and an increasing, but still very limited, involvement in such issues by Adventists. Church leaders have chosen to issue official statements on some current social issues, timed usually to coincide with General Conference Sessions, which typically foster increased media interest in Adventism. More wide-reaching programs have emerged to aid the poor, culminating in ADRA, and there has been renewed debate on to what extent to open up opportunities for church employment to women. Plantak examines the Adventist responses to three divides – wealth, race, and gender – in greater detail.

He finds that a continuing focus on what is best for the survival and growth of the church and the individualism that accompanies the widespread upward mobility of Adventists still dulls the senses of most members.

Plantak analyzes the reasons for the growing interest among Adventists in these issues in recent decades, pointing to the delay of the eschaton, which has resulted in more attention recently to what it means to "occupy" until Jesus returns, greater contact with other denominations as the doctrine of the Remnant has receded, and a new interest in immediate material benefits flowing from a new emphasis on holism. He points also to what he calls the "liberation of Adventist theology" since the emergence of a much greater emphasis on education among Adventists after World War II, with a moving from a focus on doctrinal purity and personal perfectionism to love and the loss of a sense of specialness among Adventists. Finally, he attempts to show that there are strong grounds within Adventist theology for the development of a far greater concern for human rights.