

Adventist Relations with Other Churches

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A Paper Presented at the Meeting of the Religious Research Association, 2008

High Tension during the Early Decades

Adventists viewed themselves as "God's Remnant People," who, as the bearers of "present truth," were charged with delivering God's final warning message in the last days. Other Protestant groups were "apostate" and had become "the whore of Babylon"; the Roman Catholic Church was identified with the persecuting "beast" of the book of Revelation. Adventist evangelists developed an aggressive style, denouncing Sunday-keepers as "commandment-breakers" who risked receiving the "Mark of the Beast" and, ultimately, damnation, and issuing brazen challenges to clergy of other denominations to produce a biblical passage endorsing the sacredness of Sunday.

Adventist eschatology and preaching focused closely on the apocalyptic visions of the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation, where governments were portrayed as wild beasts that hurt God's people. A unique interpretation identified the American Republic with the second beast of Revelation 13, which, although it had "two horns like a lamb," would now speak "like a dragon." In this dragon phase it would breach the constitutional separation of church and state, joining together with the apostate Roman Catholic and Protestant churches to persecute the Remnant just before Christ's return. It would do this by decreeing that since its members were without "the Mark of the Beast," they were not allowed to "buy or sell."

Reducing Tension over Time

Adventists set about building institutions after the Civil War, initially in the US and then, as Adventism became international, also abroad. Adventism was putting down a stake in the

societies where it operated. These institutions later became a vehicle for the upward mobility of Adventists and a Trojan horse bringing widespread changes to Adventism.

During the 1880s and 1890s the National Reform Association headed a campaign to extend the Sunday sacredness "blue laws" already in effect in some states to the national level. By 1892 about 50 Adventists had been convicted under the state laws, and 30 of these sent to prison. Despite the fact that their eschatology saw the passage of a national Sunday law as the culmination of the prophecy concerning the two-horned beast, their prophet, Ellen White, counseled that rather than rejoicing that this was proof that the Second Coming of Christ was at hand, they should instead work to "extend the time" so that they could reach out more broadly with their message that the world was about to end. Consequently, they responded boldly to this threat: they established a magazine, the *American Sentinel*, devoted to religious liberty, in 1883; in 1888 and 1889 they participated in the lobby that helped defeat Senator H.W. Blair's Sunday-Rest bill; in 1889 they founded the National Religious Liberty Association. By 1892, when they entered the debate over the Sunday closing of the Chicago World Exposition, their involvement included petitions to both Houses, the reading of papers before congressional committees, and the presentation of legal briefs in court (Butler 1974:196-98; Morgan 1994:241-42). At that point their embrace of the constitutional principle of religious liberty flowed from an endeavor to win support from others for their own issue.

Changes in Relations with Other Churches

Adventism remained very isolated from other American religious bodies until well into the twentieth century. In the period following World War I there appeared to be an opportunity to break out of that isolation, as they were influenced by the Fundamentalist Movement and became involved in supporting Creationism in the debate around the time of the Scopes Trial, where the Adventist, George McCready Price, became a major player. However, suspicions were too strong on both sides for this to make any long-term impact on their relations with other churches.

Indeed, while Adventism's initial isolation had been pragmatic, flowing from its poor relations with other religious groups, it increasingly became a matter of policy that cooperation with such groups was wrong and should be avoided (Beach, 1998). Its fear that ecumenism might foster the persecution that it was expecting led it to hold aloof both when the Federal Council of Churches [FCC] was formed in 1908 and again from the World Council of Churches [WCC] in 1948 and when the FCC was transformed into the National Council of Churches [NCC] in 1950. However, the explanation given for not joining the NCC – that Adventist beliefs were too different – suggested that attitudes were changing: it was explicitly stated that it was not "because we think that the Protestant leaders who created it are evil men with a sinister, long-range plan to dominate the religious world and drive out all who differ with them" (Nichol 1951: 3).

Meanwhile, Evangelicals had regularly labeled Adventism a "cult" in their critiques. In the mid-1950s two well-known Evangelical scholars, Walter R. Martin, the director of cult apologetics for Zondervan Publishing Company, who had already classified Adventism as a cult in his book *The Rise of the Cults* (1955), and Donald Grey Barnhouse, the founder and editor of *Eternity* magazine, began a comprehensive evaluation of Adventist theology in preparation for writing a full exposé, and contacted the General Conference seeking representative published materials. The leaders there proved eager to avoid having Adventism classified as a cult – they were concerned for its public image and had no wish to be grouped yet again with, for example, the Jehovah's Witnesses, who had already received stern treatment from Martin. They therefore chose to cooperate closely with the researchers, appointing three men who had had, for Adventists, a great deal of ecumenical contact to work closely with them. These spent hundreds of hours with Martin, answering questions that had arisen from his study of Adventist primary sources. When their answers to these questions were published, it became apparent that they had denied three doctrines relevant to the specialness of Adventism and its end-time message which had been widely held among Adventists but were offensive to Evangelicals (QOD 1957). These doctrines were that Christ was born with a sinful nature (this change disowned the bulwark of last-generation perfectionism), that the writings of Ellen White were free of error and equal to the

Scriptures, and that Adventists alone comprised the biblical Remnant. Although some Adventists expressed a sense of betrayal over the new formulation of belief, there was widespread exhilaration when Barnhouse authored an article asking "Are Seventh-day Adventists Christians?" (1956), a question he answered in the affirmative, and when Martin's subsequent book, *The Truth about Seventh-day Adventism* (1960), declared that Adventists were not a cult but were "bretheren" of the Christian Evangelicals.

Such acceptance encouraged Adventist leaders to lower barriers further. Adventist representatives began to attend meetings of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches as observers in 1968, participating in discussions but without the right to vote. The General Conference also affiliated with several subdivisions of the National Council of Churches, such as its Broadcasting and Film Commission and its Religious Liberty Commission. In 1975 it began to invite other denominations to send official observers to its quinquennial Sessions, and in 1980 it established the Council on Interchurch Relations to deal with ecumenical relations. Meanwhile, in 1977 the International Religious Liberty Association, which is sponsored by the General Conference Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty (PARL), organized the first of a series of World Congresses on religious liberty, in which major figures from other religious traditions have participated. During this same period Adventist pastors became increasingly active in local interdenominational clergy associations.

During these years the statement in the General Conference *Working Policy* written in 1926 to govern relations with other mission societies in developing countries (with whom relations have always been easier) was revised to apply to other Christian bodies in general:

"1. We recognize those agencies that lift up Christ before men as a part of the divine plan for evangelization of the world, and we hold in high esteem Christian men and women in other communions who are engaged in winning souls to Christ.

"2. When mission work brings us in contact with other missionary societies and religious bodies, the spirit of Christian courtesy, frankness, and fairness shall prevail at all times" (General Conference, 1990: 371-2).

Beginning in the early 1970s, B.B. Beach, a long-term key PARL administrator, proved increasingly successful in his pursuit of official dialogues with other religious bodies. Between 1970 and 1998, Adventists met with several international inter-denominational organizations (the World Council of Churches, the World Evangelical Fellowship), the international bodies representing multi-national denominations (the Salvation Army, the World Lutheran Federation), and other Sabbath-keeping groups (the Church of God Seventh Day, the Worldwide Church of God). Most significant of these was a series of meetings with leaders of the World Lutheran Federation between 1994 and 1998, at which formal papers were presented and discussed. At the end the participants agreed on a statement that Adventism should no longer be seen as a sect but as a "free church and Christian world communion" (Report, 1998: 15). Beach commented later that he hoped that the Adventist Church would benefit from such an assessment because of the Lutheran influence in certain countries. He added that a prime reason for PARL's existence and for its increasing ecumenical participation was to "project an image of a Christ-centered church rather than a queer sect" (interview). Since then, under John Graz, Beach's successor, there has been dialogue with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the international Presbyterian body, and the Presbyterian Church USA. Graz has become the Secretary of Christian World Communions, where the world churches are represented.

Meanwhile, the International Religious Liberty Association, which is Adventist-sponsored, has held many more international and regional congresses, where Graz makes sure that different faiths and churches are represented. The Association has moved beyond the original focus of Adventist activity in the area of religious liberty – attempts to protect Adventism and Adventists from discrimination and attack – to concern for the religious freedom of all religious groups. The IRLA has sponsored one or two regional congresses a year, and an international congress every 5 years. There were 600 delegates at the Capetown international congress in 2007. There will be a regional congress in Chile in 2008. Congresses are open to all faiths, and all can speak: "we demonstrate that religious freedom is a principle for us" (Graz, 2008).

Graz has also begun to fulfill his dream of sponsoring popular festivals focusing on religious freedom, with singers, music, celebration. The first of these was held in Sao Paulo in 2000. PARL is now seeking to replicate and develop this, using stadiums in Angola, St Petersburg (Russia), Hawaii, San Domingo, and Lima. The goal is to bring people together from different religious persuasions to celebrate and promote religious freedom. Graz reports that many from a variety of religious traditions are showing interest in participating (2008).

Meanwhile, there have been signs that the tension between Adventism and Catholicism is also easing. Adventists participated as observers in the Second Vatican Council during the 1960s. In the early 1970s, when the Pacific Press was sued by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission because of its discrimination against women in salaries and promotions, the defense brief distanced Adventism from its "earlier" anti-Catholicism as "nothing more" than a manifestation of an attitude then common among conservative Protestant denominations "which has now been consigned to the historical trash heap so far as the Seventh-day Adventist Church is concerned" (*Pacific Press Case* 1975: 4). In 1995, the previously unthinkable occurred, when PorterCare Adventist Health Services, the Adventist hospital system in Colorado, and the Catholic Sisters of Charity Health Services Colorado joined together to form a new corporation, Centura Health, in order that both could survive in an increasingly competitive market. Adventist officials involved in this decision argued that Adventist hospitals had more in common with Catholic hospitals than any others because their missions were so similar (interviews). In 1997, the General Conference released a statement on "How Seventh-day Adventists View Roman Catholicism." While this was worded cautiously, it was markedly different from many of the diatribes of earlier years. It stated that Adventists could not ignore the "severe abuses of religious freedom" when the Catholic Church had allied with the state in earlier centuries, and believed that in the future a union of church and state would again result in "widespread religious oppression," with "the seventh-day Sabbath as a focal point." However, "we recognize some positive changes" in Catholicism since Vatican II and "stress the conviction that many Roman Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ" (General Conference, 1997: 21-22). William Johnsson, then the editor of the official church paper, responded to the statement by urging: "Let's put aside all Catholic-bashing from the pulpit or classroom" [1997: 5].

This is not to say that all Adventists are marching in lockstep towards good relations with other denominations. Beach admitted that the problem had been solved more at the administrative level than at the grassroots. He explained that he was careful in his statements and actions lest he inflame the laity with traditional mind-sets. Thus, when he wrote about the dialogue with Lutherans in the church paper, he referred to it as "conversations" (Report, 1998:1); he avoided participating in Communion in the churches of other denominations in order to escape critical letters from Adventists; and although he thought that dialogue with Roman Catholics could be fruitful, especially since its embrace of religious liberty during Vatican II, he did not pursue this because he was acutely aware that some Adventists would be dismayed. He complained about Adventist evangelists who continue to spout vitriol against other denominations and about those Adventists who enjoy blowing up bridges rather than building them. He confessed that the Adventists who met with the Lutherans "could not declare that we no longer see them as part of 'Babylon' – we had to be vague there. In order to prevent a division among Adventists, we have to proceed slowly. I would like to see such a declaration in my lifetime..." (Beach 1998). Graz explained that in ecumenical activities Adventists "are very open to cooperate with other groups in activities that promote social work and religious freedom. However, we are still very prudent re formal ecumenism. We seek good relations between groups, so that all can work together on the same things, but are not ready to give up our own identity for ecumenical unity." He also explained that the cautious language employed in the statement on Catholicism was designed to avoid offending members who still cling to traditional Adventist fears and expectations: "Because of the suspicion of our members, we must make sure that they understand our purpose and activities well" (2008).

In spite of the caution exercised, the changes have indeed caused deep disquiet among traditional Adventists: "...our close fraternization with the World Council of Churches, with the churches of Babylon, and with the local ministerial associations has nearly shut our mouths to giving to the world the distinct message that has made us God's remnant church in this last generation" (Spear 1993: 29).