Contextualising Tensions in Seventh-day Adventism: “a constant process of struggle and rebirth”?

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Abstract

Between 1844 and 1863, fragments of disappointed Millerism developed the landmark ideas, the denominational name and the essential structure of what is now the Seventh-day Adventist Church with fifteen million members in 204 countries. This article contextualises the struggle of recent decades between continuity and change in Adventist teaching, suggesting that a score of doctoral dissertations as well as other studies offer a coherence that is deeply disturbing or insufficient for some believers even though it is satisfying for others. The demands in Western culture for faith to be shaped by evidence and to offer existential meaning have elicited three stances in relation to traditional Adventist thought: reversion, rejection and transformation. While the consequent tensions may be viewed as evidence of “growth, vitality and increased understanding,” they also constitute a call to persist with internal and external dialogue.

Introduction

As The Journal of Religious History was celebrating its first quarter century, founding editor Professor Bruce Mansfield was facilitating an article on Seventh-day Adventist historiography as “the first in a new, occasional, series” on sources for the study of religious history in Australia. The article claimed the sources were already in hand for “substantial and accurate Seventh-day Adventist history to be written” that would “expose increasingly the inadequacies of numerous viewpoints current both within the
denomination and beyond its borders.”¹ Two decades later it seems appropriate to revisit the burgeoning discipline of Adventist Studies to identify trajectories and interpret their nature and significance.

Long ago a Catholic journalist, in the epilogue to an acclaimed volume, described Christian history as “a constant process of struggle and rebirth—a succession of crises, often accompanied by horror, bloodshed, bigotry and unreason, but evidence too of growth, vitality and increased understanding.”² Marilyn Westerkamp states that during the 1970s, religious history in the United States that had been “replete with apologetical positions,” “a poor stepchild to historical scholarship,” tending “toward anecdotal, often uncritical celebrations,” was “transformed.”³ Any such process is unlikely to proceed without imposing significant stresses upon Christianity as a world religion and the denominations that it embraces. This article treats conflicts that are so painful within Adventism that even mention of them, let alone open discussion of them, is often avoided.

During that challenging decade of the 1970s and especially in the subsequent one, Adventism felt a need to marginalise or dismiss some of its historians and other


researchers as well as scores of its clergy. However, by 1979 it had also published its first history textbook written by a trained historian⁴ and it was becoming aware of the professionalisation of its historiography.⁵ This article suggests that what Johnson describes as “a constant process of struggle and rebirth” has always been evident in Adventism. However, the struggle became acutely apparent during the last quarter of the twentieth century, especially in Australia. Are such symptoms a sign of serious illness? Alternatively, can they be interpreted as growing pains that accompany the process of maturation?

**Adventist Studies**

Seventh-day Adventists (SDAs) established their first college during 1874 in Battle Creek, Michigan, and now operate 101 senior colleges and universities worldwide.⁶ Graduate study offered intermittently in the 1930s developed into the church’s premier institution of its type, the SDA Theological Seminary, housed at the Washington (D.C.) headquarters until 1960 when it relocated to the campus of Andrews University in Berrien Springs (Michigan).⁷ A range of accredited PhD degree programs allowing the option of a specific focus on Adventist history and thought have developed since the 1970s within such disciplines as biblical,

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⁶ *Yearbook of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2006).

⁷ Loma Linda University incorporates a Faculty of Religion but its principal focus is health sciences. The exploration of such matters can be commenced with the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996) that forms volumes 10 and 11 of the *Commentary Reference Series*. 
theological and historical studies.\textsuperscript{8} During 1993 the seminary announced a PhD program in Adventist Studies and academic offerings at other church institutions have also moved to include the study of Adventism more intentionally. For instance, when in 2006 Avondale College in Australia was accredited by the Government of New South Wales to offer PhD studies in history, education, pedagogy, health and theology, the college advertised the possibility that students in such disciplines might consider Adventist Studies as a thematic option.\textsuperscript{9}

Contemporary Seventh-day Adventism cannot be understood adequately without due attention to its nineteenth-century origin and development in the United States, even though only a million of its members now live in North America. Further, Adventism may be interpreted as one of the many utopian communities that emerged in the United States between 1787 and 1919.\textsuperscript{10} Even more specifically, it should be compared and contrasted with other nineteenth-century movements that developed in the United States, have a continuing presence there and like Adventism have spread to

\textsuperscript{8} Andrews University Seminary Studies, begun in 1963, is the best-known SDA refereed journal and reports dissertations completed. See, for instance, AUSS 44, no. 1 (Spring 2006), 172-174. The church’s “general paper,” Adventist Review, has been published since 1849; geographically focused magazines serve the thirteen world divisions; Ministry, a journal for clergy, commenced in 1928. Other journals focus on such issues as education, law, health, gender, mission and ethics. There is an active independent press driven by a range of concerns. Print has been crucial throughout SDA history: see Bruce Manners, “Publish or Perish: A Study of the Role of Print in the Adventist Community” (Monash University: PhD dissertation, 2004).

\textsuperscript{9} See “Adventist Studies: An Introduction for Higher Degree Students” online at www.avondale.edu.au or the annotated edition in print (Cooranbong: Avondale College, May 2006). While hundreds of websites offer reliable data and (in many cases) ephemeral opinion about the SDA church, its General Conference, world divisions, institutions and ideas, those sponsored by the church’s archives and universities are of prime importance for researchers.

\textsuperscript{10} This observation is contextualised by Rick Ferret, “Charisma, Sectarianism and Institutionalisation: Identity Issues in Seventh-day Adventism” (Sydney College of Divinity: PhD dissertation, 2006).
other parts of the world, especially the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Christian Science and the Jehovah’s Witnesses.\textsuperscript{11}

Sociologists and historians rightly use the word \textit{Adventist} to describe various movements that have flourished throughout the Christian era up to and including the present.\textsuperscript{12} However, in this article the term \textit{Adventist Studies} intends only the broader background, specific history, thought, polity and practice of \textit{Seventh-day Adventism}.

\textbf{Adventist Antecedents and Emerging Beliefs}

The fact that emergent Sabbatarian Adventism may be compared usefully with other millenarian impulses throughout Christian history is well recognised.\textsuperscript{13} Older SDA explorations of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic and prophetic thought, expressed conveniently in four volumes by LeRoy Edwin Froom,\textsuperscript{14} have been restated in popular books as well as qualified and extended by scholars such as Bryan Ball and Charles Scriven.\textsuperscript{15} Ball’s ongoing research is available in part from reputable libraries.


\textsuperscript{12} Observe, for example, the extensive writings of William Sims Bainbridge, including “The Adventist Movement,” in \textit{The Sociology of Religious Movements} (New York: Routledge, 1997), 89-118.

\textsuperscript{13} For two examples, see Stephen Hunt (editor), \textit{Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco} (London: Hurst, 2001) in the context of the writings of Kenneth Newport, author of the chapter on SDA thought; observe the review by John Kloos of \textit{Anglo-American Millennialism, from Milton to the Millerites} (2004), in \textit{Church History} 74, no. 4 (December 2005), 859-860.


\textsuperscript{15} Note Charles Scriven’s thought from the publication of his doctoral dissertation as \textit{The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics After H. Richard Niebuhr} (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1989) to his “Being and Becoming Adventist” lectures at Avondale College, August 2006. The Avondale College lectures are part of Scriven’s forthcoming book.
publishers and has been reviewed approvingly by specialists;\textsuperscript{16} it has also been challenged by those who wish to highlight the Millerite provenance of the SDA movement and the nature of its subsequent development.\textsuperscript{17}

Studies of SDA origins in the northeastern United States often explore the complex influences of such impulses as restorationism, revivalism, millennialism and charisma. Millerite historiography, especially the examination of the role of William Miller and his principal ministerial and lay colleagues, has moved through three phases since the Great Disappointment of 1844. Approving “memoirs by the movement’s participants” were followed by a long “debate between detractors and apologists.” A more constructive “academic interest” reached a high point in the 1980s and is ongoing.\textsuperscript{18} Consequently, Adventist and other authors are more comprehensively exploring the American fascination with the millennium and the transition from Millerism to Sabbatarian Adventism.\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{19} Cf. the writings of Russell Staples (Andrews University), Fred Hoyt (La Sierra University) and others on the Methodist antecedents of Adventist ideas with contextual treatments of Millerism such as Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler (editors), \textit{The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) and George R. Knight,
Influential persons in the early Adventist period were mostly devoid of theological education: William Miller was a farmer, soldier, sheriff and justice of the peace in upstate New York; Hiram Edson was a farmer in the “burned-over district” of western New York. SDAs identify three individuals as their cofounders. Of these, Ellen Gould White (1827-1915) enjoyed little beyond three years of formal education; Joseph Bates (1792-1872) was a retired mariner; James White (1821-1881) received 29 weeks of formal education and training to equip him as a teacher. These pioneers and others like them remain in the focus of recent study and publication. It is remarkable that a handful of landmark ideas they proposed in the formative early years were embodied during 1980 in the first expression of SDA fundamental beliefs voted by a General Conference in world session. It is unremarkable that such SDA fundamentals have been at the centre of successive controversies, beginning in 1844 and still flourishing in the twenty-first century.

Controversies Relating to SDA Landmarks

While SDA conflicts are much broader than the church’s 28 fundamentals and their specific implications, they often surround five landmark concepts. In believers’ parlance these core doctrines are known as Sabbath, Sanctuary, Second Coming, State of the Dead and Spiritual Gifts. For the church’s first century, debates about which day of the modern week corresponded with the biblical seventh or holy day usually

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20 A current resurgence of a nineteenth-century struggle relating to the doctrine of the Trinity (Fundamental 2, 1980) appears to be spurred worldwide by advocates of “historic Adventism.”
focused on a cluster of related SDA claims: that the Sabbath was introduced in
Genesis 2, enshrined in the Ten Commandments at Sinai and observed by Christ, the
apostles and the early Christian church. Then, as more Adventist authors earned
doctorates in biblical studies, historical and systematic theology, a new emphasis was
added, focusing on the meaning or spiritual significance of the Sabbath. However, in
recent decades, older debates between SDAs and other Christians have flared anew in
the polemical writings of former Adventists like Dale Ratzlaff (1990, 1995, 1996). In
turn, polemical publications tend to stimulate updated historical and exegetical
treatments.

Hiram Edson’s experience on the morning of 23 October 1844 is still a locus of
vigorous debate, as is his application of Hebrews 8 and subsequent SDA teachings
about the ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary. SDAs have proposed that the
atonement may be best explicated as having phases, such as sacrificial, mediatorial,
judicial and executive. The claim that a heavenly judgment began in 1844 has been
categorised as the distinctive SDA contribution to Christian thought on the one hand,
or as “the most colossal, psychological, face-saving phenomenon in religious
history”21 on the other. A huge volume of publishing has explored the linguistic,
contextual, historical and theological issues.22 The church’s official position is best

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21 The words are those of Presbyterian Donald Grey Barnhouse, contextualised in two chapters of Paul
Ernest McGraw, “Born in Zion?: The Margins of Fundamentalism and the Definition of Seventh-day
Adventism” (The George Washington University: PhD dissertation, 2004); see 176-177. Cf. papers,
articles, books or doctoral studies by Kenneth Wood (1978), Jerry Moon (1988), Leroy Moore (1995,
2005), Woodrow Whidden (1995, 1997) and particularly the dissertation by Juhyeok (Julius) Nam
(Andrews University, 2005). For a recent study by an Australian, note the University of New England
thesis by Eric Livingston.

22 Papers by Raymond Cottrell offer cogent participant testimony from the 1950s onward; the
independent magazine Adventist Today (AT) is placing materials on its website (atoday.org) that relate
to the forthcoming Cottrell biography. For evidence that the full range of options relating to 1844
remain under vigorous discussion, see AT 14, no. 6 (November/December 2006) and note the AT
testament since 1992 to offer “reliable, unfettered news reporting on events, people, institutions and
expressed in the consensus statement of a representative conference held at Glacier View in Colorado (1980); it is defended in multiple publications from a Daniel and Revelation Committee working under the auspices of the headquarters Biblical Research Institute.

Less divisive but ever crucial has been the discussion of the SDA teaching on a literal, pre-millennial Second Advent of Christ. In the doctoral dissertations by Ralph Neall\(^2\) and Rick Ferret (2006) such themes as imminence and delay are explored. The church’s understanding of the Second Coming shapes its concept of conditionalism or Christian mortalism. Froom’s 1960s review of the antecedents of this doctrine (usually referred to by Adventists as “The State of the Dead”) has, in the main, stood the test of time, although it will be refined when a section of Bryan Ball’s ongoing research (under the projected title, *Resurrection and Immortality: Christian Mortalism in English Religious Thought from Wycliffe to Priestley*) is published.\(^2\) The fifth landmark concept that has evoked enormous effort is SDA Fundamental Belief 18, expressed during 1980 by the General Conference world session under the title “Gift of Prophecy.” This fundamental, in constant focus since December 1844, entered a theological movements associated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church [and] a sense of connection among people who treasure their Adventist heritage while rejecting some fundamentalist elements of historic Adventism.” The issues can be discerned as lying behind the text of such works as Raoul Dederen (editor), *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Vol. 12, *Commentary Reference Series* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000).


new phase of debate 55 years after Ellen White’s death. An effervescent literature
relating to it is expanding rapidly in the present century.  

Ellen White Studies

The life and writings of Ellen White and the substance of Fundamental 24 (“Christ’s
Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary”) have combined throughout Adventist history to
form the movement’s most-discussed issues. An inter-related cluster of ideas are at
stake: historicism as a method of interpreting biblical apocalyptic literature, the
Old Testament prophetic office, the New Testament teaching on spiritual gifts, the
doctrine of revelation/inspiration, the primacy of biblical authority in Protestant
thought, SDA identity and mission, and many others. Complex debates flaring in the
1960s embraced issues as diverse as origins and eschatology and caused the
termination of scientists and biblical scholars employed by the Geoscience Research
Institute and Andrews University. When Ronald Numbers was writing his
controversial volume about Ellen White (published in 1976) the church could not
provide him with a doctrine of inspiration that embraced his findings adequately.
However, it deemed it was necessary to dismiss Numbers for not applying its dynamic

Association of Seventh-day Adventist Forums 33, issue 2 (Spring 2005), 71-2, reviews five books about
Ellen White; since the article was published three other volumes have appeared and others are under
preparation. Spectrum initiated the new phase of the debate with its Fall 1970 issue and has published
more than ninety articles on the theme. Several positions taken that seemed experimental or even
radical at the time have since become SDA orthodoxy whereas some SDAs have prided themselves on
destroying, unopened, copies of the journal mailed to them. Spectrum presents itself as “a journal
established to encourage Seventh-day Adventist participation in the discussion of contemporary issues
from a Christian viewpoint, to look without prejudice at all sides of a subject, to evaluate the merits of
diverse views, and to foster Christian intellectual and cultural growth.”

26 For sources relating to the past four decades, see Donald R. McAdams, “Shifting Views of
Burt, “Overview and Brief Critique of Publications on Ellen G. White’s Writings and Prophetic
2006. Note Burt’s call for a “process that will systematically develop biblical and historical
understanding” (p. 18).

27 See the 1989 doctoral dissertation by Kai Arasola, published as The End of Historicism: Millerite
concept of inspiration in his historical enquiry. 28 Matters flagged at Consultation I and Consultation II (early in the 1980s) came into greater prominence during 1991 with the publication of Alden Thompson’s Inspiration and the spirited rejoinder to it published privately by the Adventist Theological Society (1992). Subsequent research by Adventist scholars including Ray Roennfeldt has the potential to resolve many of the tensions, were it applied effectively to the Adventist discussion. 29 Conflict is ongoing: for instance, during 2006 the White Estate and the Biblical Research Institute made public negative categorisation of Graeme Bradford’s volumes that attempt to tell the Ellen White story in popular language. 30

As early as 1980, a comprehensive agenda was developed for the study of Ellen White’s life and writings. 31 Groundwork for such objectives was creatively started by


31 The topics (literary, historical, scientific, theological, hermeneutical, methodological) were agreed upon jointly by the White Estate and the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference. For analysis of the need for a mature hermeneutic for Ellen White’s writings, see Michael Leigh Chamberlain, “The Changing Role of Ellen G. White in Seventh-day Adventism With Reference to Sociocultural Standards at Avondale College” (University of Newcastle: PhD dissertation, 2001). Chamberlain’s study is currently being edited for publication.
Arthur White’s papers on inspiration developed during the 1970s, Ronald Graybill’s and Robert Olson’s investigations that flowered at the 1982 International Prophetic Guidance Workshop, Fred Veltman’s research on *The Desire of Ages* and related initiatives. A coherent overview from the White Estate was needed urgently and was promised in the publication by Herbert Douglass, *Messenger of the Lord* (1998). This 586-page work took a constructive step in the right direction despite a profound limitation. An effective study typically begins with an inclusive literature review. However, as a consensus project, the Douglass volume did not even name some of the important researchers, let alone analyse in any detail their explorations of the component issues.

Perceived outcomes still appear daunting in the eyes of some believers. Currently, much of the agenda as stated in 1980 is unfulfilled in any comprehensive way by the combined efforts of the White Estate and the Biblical Research Institute. The sterling intentions of the Adventist Theological Society to help the church embrace and proclaim a viable doctrine of inspiration seem to be constrained by a theology that dismisses crucial findings within the discipline of Adventist Studies during recent decades. Meanwhile, independent organisations channel millions of Adventist dollars into alternative programs driven by their analysis of “the ills of God’s church”

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32 All such historical references can be verified and explored in the Ellen G. White/SDA Research Centre and the Adventist Heritage Centre that serve the church’s South Pacific Division, Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia. Similar entities are located in the church’s twelve other world divisions.

33 Note recent initiatives such as the cycle of “International Faith and Science Conferences” (see *Adventist Review*, 11 November 2004, 12-15), “Integration of Faith and Learning” seminars, Bible conferences in Jerusalem and Istanbul, the input of regional Biblical Research committees and related attempts to foster understanding and unity. Of importance for the South Pacific Division have been biblical and theological conferences (2003, 2006) and an Ellen White Summit (2004). Note an address on 8 July 2006 to 240 theologians and scholars in Izmır, Turkey, by world president Jan Paulsen, “The Openness That Lies Before Us,” reported in *Adventist World*, October 2006, 10-12.
or a doctrine of inspiration that claims “inerrancy in the autographs” for both the writings of Ellen White and the Scriptures.\textsuperscript{34} The Western church is still losing adherents who experience unbearable cognitive dissonance, often because they are unaware of research that clarifies the issues effectively.\textsuperscript{35} Even so, the church is still tempted to be hesitant in fostering research, to the point that on occasion dedicated members working individually are the ones who appear to break fresh ground.

This observation is illustrated by the research of medico Don McMahon and historian Fred Hoyt. McMahon, in the view of some believers, has contributed to the Adventist jigsaw puzzle the single most important piece relating to Ellen White’s inspiration of any that have been submitted since 1970. However, T. Joe Willey has produced a substantive critique of McMahon’s claims.\textsuperscript{36} The world church knows little about the illuminating research that Hoyt commenced in the 1970s. Bulging filing cabinets and boxes of data in Hoyt’s crowded office offer potential for a fuller understanding of early Adventist charismatic experiences, the education of Ellen White, the influence of John Wesley on Ellen White’s life and ideas, the relationship between Ellen White’s literary indebtedness and the doctrine of inspiration, as well as a cluster of related matters. Neither McMahon nor Hoyt claim expertise outside their respective

\textsuperscript{34} See the range of conservative independent publications from books and magazines written by Russel R. and Colin D. Standish, volumes written or edited by Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, as well as magazines and journals like \textit{Adventists Affirm} (Vol. 20, 2006) and \textit{Journal of the Adventist Theological Society} (Vol. 17, 2006).

\textsuperscript{35} A strategy document relating to the life and writings of Ellen White, developed by the South Pacific Division late in the 1990s (the decade in which effective consensus started to develop) and recently updated, is the most constructive document of its type produced by an Adventist entity on this subject. Perhaps it is not coincidental that the chairperson of the Biblical Research Committee of the South Pacific Division (concurrently general secretary of the Division) earned a doctorate in the historical study of Adventism at Andrews University (Barry David Oliver, 1989).

\textsuperscript{36} T. Joe Willey to Arthur Patrick, e-mail with attached copies of several unpublished articles, 16 November 2006. Ronald Numbers kindly referred me to research by Willey and others. More than any other person, Numbers has brought Ellen White into the public discussion of American religion.
fields of medicine and history. Their findings and those of others (not least, Fred Veltman) offer a continuing challenge to the church’s biblical scholars, systematic theologians and pastors whose responsibility it is to interpret their significance for the church at large.37

Pieces of a Jigsaw?

As one examines the individual fragments of information derived from the efforts of the many who have engaged in Adventist Studies during recent decades, it is apparent that these indicate the reality of a larger whole. Consideration of the jig-saw pieces is fruitful, as is the attempt to assemble them into a coherent picture. Selected sketch lines may be identified in terms of the following observations.

The church has invested enormously since 1972 to implement its decision to facilitate research by enhancing access to primary and other sources that relate to Seventh-day Adventist Research Centres (or equivalent heritage entities) to serve the various geographical sections of the world, effective research by believers and others relating to Adventist history and thought as well as the life and writings of Ellen White has been facilitated. Further, the church continues to invest hugely in a system of higher education that meets increasingly the accreditation requirements of the various nations within which Adventist institutions are located.

37 Gilbert Valentine offers an illuminating historical account of efforts by White Estate to fulfil its mission respecting Ellen White’s writings: The Struggle for the Prophetic Heritage: Issues in the conflict for control of the Ellen G. White publications 1930-1939 (Muak Lek, Thailand: Institute Press, 2006). In a volume now being researched and written, Valentine offers perceptive analyses of Ellen White’s relationships with General Conference presidents during her lifetime of ministry. Early drafts of the forthcoming Ellen White encyclopedia indicate that the projected volume (Vol.13, Commentary Reference Series, initiated 1954) will meet a real need. Another long-term enterprise by a Newbold College scholar will describe the people to whom Ellen White addressed letters.
It is evident that during the past two decades, trans-disciplinary research has flourished as individuals have crossed boundaries between component modes of inquiry that focus on Scripture, history, theology, pedagogy and education. The same may be said for an array of physical, biological, social, health and other sciences that impinge on matters of faith. Such processes are enhancing the comparative study of Adventism, not least with their trans-denominational qualities. It is, for instance, unlikely that the Adventist struggles over soteriology can be solved without reference to the Christological controversies of the early Christian centuries, the writings of magisterial Reformers and Puritans, as well as the specific input of Adventists who have engaged in the discussion since 1844. This principle can be extrapolated to every aspect of Adventist thinking and doing. It is best illuminined by studies that investigate Adventism as an organic entity in terms of its antecedents, founding and development up to the present.

There is much to be gained from the processes that focus diverse minds on Adventist Studies, including believer-participants, researchers in Adventist and non-Adventist settings and those who do not identify with the church as adherents. Adventists who desire to see themselves as others see them are glad when the “prayer” of Robert Burns (to see ourselves as others see us) is answered, but for others the process is too daunting to contemplate.

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38 Such sentences are likely to be illumined usefully by a conference at Andrews University, 24-27 October 2007; the focus will be the first fifty years of the controversial volume Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine (1957).
Apologetics is a valid enterprise but it often presents particular perils. While the Adventist past may be littered with casualties of credibility, these events are diminishing in number as better research methods are adopted. It is encouraging to note that the church is moving increasingly to interpret data rather than seeking to control information in the way that it attempted to do during the Australasian crisis of the 1980s. The advent of the mimeograph machine began to change the ethos of Adventist Studies; the ham radio and the photocopier accelerated the change; computer technology has democratised the process. Technology in its electronic and other forms now requires the church to function in an open manner.

Such realities are apt to make the church more aware of old and new troubling issues, including those of poverty, justice and gender equality.39 The costly and demanding processes that have developed far-sighted approaches to Christian service (for example, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency), responses to the issues of sexual and domestic abuse (well illustrated in Australia by Adventist Support and its 2006 publications), also mean that the church’s employment practices are more transparent. It is unlikely that control of Adventist Studies will again be exercised in the mode of the past century. The indicators suggest that in both the administrative and the scholarly spheres, the church will attempt to maintain a healthy marriage between academic freedom and academic responsibility. The self-correcting nature of effective scholarship, the ongoing dissemination of research through print and electronic publishing (including the checks and balances provided by the independent press on both the church’s right and left) will tend to maintain balance in this regard.

39 Observe the recent action on an issue from World War II: “Church Leaders Say ‘We’re Sorry’,” Adventist Review, 13 October 2005, 18-120; cf. decades of research and publishing relating to the Nazi era by Adventist historian Roland Blaich and others.
Another important realisation from the past two decades is that doctrinal development in Christianity and Adventism is a reality that may be destructive or constructive.

Many of the believers engaged in Adventist Studies see it as part of their responsibility to contribute toward constructive outcomes and shape their activities accordingly. Further, the church appears to be fostering more effectively “the dialogue and dialectic of a community” rather than employing disciplinary measures to control research.40

Trajectories

If the research of historian and sociologist Ronald Lawson is seriously considered, Seventh-day Adventism is a denominationalising sect.41 The evidence is unmistakable that Adventism is experiencing the range of tensions that might be expected as a nineteenth-century movement faces the exigencies of Western civilisation following World War II and the flourishing of Post-Modernism.42 In the first decade of the

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twenty-first century, the tensions in Adventism are real, and the interpretations of them are prolific.

More than twenty of the volumes published by twin brothers, a medical doctor and a psychologist, call the church to faithfulness to its pioneers and their teachings. The Standish brothers represent what is clearly an international impulse in Adventism driven by a determination to maintain Scripture and Ellen White as inerrant and to utilise the proof-text method as the normative way of arriving at the truth of inspired writings.

In the polar-opposite position are former believers who have given up on Adventist faith but remain nominal members, or advocate entire separation from Adventism and identification with another form of Christianity (most often evangelicalism) or secularism.

The Adventists closer to the middle are, even so, varied in their perceptions. Those who identify with the Adventist Theological Society (ATS) find it difficult to accept as true believers at least some of the 360 members of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies (ASRS). Many ASRS members have felt their integrity as researchers would be compromised by signing even the updated ATS statement of faith. However, both groups agree that biblical exegesis is the core activity for those who want to define Adventism and express its identity faithfully. Both ATS and ASRS members are likely to advocate revival and reformation as a constant necessity for individual believers and their community of faith. However, the ASRS scholar is more likely to see as constructive the processes of change documented by Rolf Pöhler,
whereas the ATS scholar in more likely to be nervous about such change and to identify more closely with continuity.\textsuperscript{43}

This article suggests that there is a striking degree of coherence in over a score of the doctoral theses/dissertations that it lists as completed or published during recent years, reflecting research in Adventist and other institutions. However, the grassroots understanding of the church’s faith is a continuing focus of dialogue, dialectic and sometimes schism. Many other dissertations could be cited to illumine this situation more fully. Furthermore, the field of Adventist Studies is characterised by unfinished business more than by tidily completed research; in other words, options abound for further research. Within the church and beyond it, innovative initiatives are needed and some are underway, not least in the Ellen White encyclopedia, in the Newbold College study of the persons to whom Ellen White addressed letters, in the early Adventist research of Fred Hoyt at La Sierra University, in hoped-for feminist and other biographies of Ellen White, and in ongoing research at universities in various parts of the world.\textsuperscript{44}

\textbf{Struggle and Rebirth?}

It is instructive to view Adventist conflicts against a broader background. Secular “history wars” in North America and Australia engage not only historians but also

\textsuperscript{43} Rolf Pöhler’s 1995 Andrews University doctoral dissertation has developed into articles and books, including \textit{Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching: A Case Study in Doctrinal Development} (Frankfurt and New York: Peter Lang, 2001). If the recent past is a guide, one of the important debates in Adventism during the next decade will relate to cosmology. For constructive viewpoints by SDA theologians and scientists, see \textit{Understanding Genesis: Contemporary Adventist Perspectives} (2006) published by the independent foundation that publishes \textit{Adventist Today}.

\textsuperscript{44} For instance, currently the University of Queensland has a number of research students examining matters that are important for Adventism, including Mark Pearce, David Thiele and Jeff Crocombe. Earlier, John Knight’s doctoral dissertation at the University of Queensland (1977) equipped him to write journal articles and examine dissertations on Adventism. Many other important voices might be noted in the public conversation about Adventism in its South Pacific setting; see, as examples, the writings of educator John Godfrey (Edith Cowan University) and sociologists Robert Wolfgramm and Peter H. Ballis (Monash University).
politicians and the populace at large. The corresponding attempt to understand religion in a single nation is likely to be a complex enterprise that evokes diverse interpretations. To illustrate the point: since World War II, the history of one Australian religion (Christianity) has benefited from vigorous debate. A large number of voices must be heard if earlier imbalances are to be corrected: Manning Clark, Bruce Mansfield, Patrick O’Farrell, Walter Phillips, Don Wright, Brian Dickey, Ian Breward and many more. In its global expression, Adventism has often felt misinterpreted rather than understood, especially in older polemical writings stocked by Christian bookstores. Worldwide patterns are changing, not least under the impact of better encyclopedias of religion. Meanwhile, Australian Adventists are increasingly cheered by the perspectives of professionals who do not identify with their particular faith; note, for instance, the writing, editing, supervising or examining of Richard Ely, Stuart Piggin, John Knight, Mark Hutchinson, Robert D. Linder, Philip Hughes and others.

In summary, since 1970, Adventists have experienced what Johnson describes as “a constant process of struggle and rebirth” in a context so dynamic that many believers have adopted one of three competing stances. Carrying what novelist Morris West might describe as “a heavy load of unexamined certainties,”45 some have found comfort and security in the nostalgia of reversion. Nothing short of total escape has been adequate for others; an unacceptable level of cognitive dissonance has caused them to reject their Adventist heritage and opt for a different expression of Christianity or secularism. A third option, the principal one, has sought the transformation of Adventism. In part, the discipline of Adventist Studies must

document the various responses and assess their strengths and weaknesses. In an Arminian movement committed to the Reformation notion of the priesthood of all believers, the role of the individual is crucial, as is the need for community. The long-term outcomes of the struggle to define Adventist identity coherently in the twenty-first century may be, in some respects, unclear. However, at least one volume, tested in a Western culture as a textbook for a number of years before achieving its final form, acknowledges “controversy” but identifies “growing understanding.”

A final illustration of how this process occurs over time may be useful. For instance, the *JoRH* article of 1987 observed the controversy surrounding an Australian theologian, Desmond Ford. Since then, the component issues have been explored or reviewed in a number of doctoral studies, and summarised by Adventist and other authors. Ford’s personal insights and reflections may be assessed from his website and his voluminous published writings that are still being augmented by magazine articles and books. The perspectives of his wife, Gillian Ford, provoked intense debate during the 1970s but are achieving a fresh maturity with her ongoing studies at the University of New England.

As early as 1999, an astute systematic theologian observed that Ford was “dismissed from the Adventist ministry in 1980 because of his disagreement with traditional Adventist views” but that “subsequent Adventist thinking in North America seems to have moved closer to his position and further away from that of those who dismissed him.”  For the reversionists, this is a sure sign that apostasy is flourishing.  For the alienationists, it too little, too late. However, at least some transformationists interpret it as a sign that the struggles so well documented by the Ballis thesis have, in fact, led to what Johnson might agree to interpret as “increased understanding.”


49 Observe the content of the special issue of Adventist Today, November/December 2006; cf. the content of Sydney Adventist Forum presentations, 22 October 2005.