NCSE Report: Adventist Education in the Midst of a Sea of Science

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Adventist Education NCSE Reports
“A Wall Unto Them on Their Right Hand and on Their Left”: Adventist Education in the Midst of a Sea of Science

T Joe Willey

Seventh-Day Adventist beliefs concerning the biblical creation of the earth and origin of life (including the Fall of Man) are conservative, drifting into fundamentalism. The more than 16 million members of this worldwide church—many in third world countries—aspire to “the greatest purity” as proponents of creationism by preserving the origin of life found in Genesis and attribution of the geologic history of the earth to Noah’s flood (Numbers 2006). When these beliefs enter the science classroom, scientific discussions provoke questions that are difficult to answer, a cause for confusion, and, for students, more relevant to faith than science. The crisis over the biology program at La Sierra University (LSU) examined in Willey (2012) is one manifestation of the difficulties that arise when Adventist doctrine bumps up against science education in a church-run educational institution. This situation is not unique to LSU; many Adventist higher education schools face the same conflict between a valid contemporary science curriculum and adherence to the church’s doctrine on creation.

The church supports its position from a literal reading of the Bible. But just as important are the writings of the prophetess Ellen G White (1827–1915). Her voluminous writings, even the ones written in the nineteenth century that touch on science, are accepted by the church with almost the same authority as the Scriptures. One reason is because she claimed that while writing her testimonies she was “often conscious of the presence of angels of God” at her side (White 1953:128). To add to her claim, she described how God carried her back in time through a vision to the historic creation week and showed her the sequence of events just as the Bible described (White 1864:90). In her world,

Infidel geologists claim that the world is much older than the Bible record makes it. They reject the Bible record, because of those things which are to them evidences from the earth itself, that the world has existed tens of thousands of years. And many who profess to believe the Bible record are at a loss to account for wonderful things which are found in the earth, with the view that creation week was only seven literal days, and the world is now only about six thousand years old … I have been shown that without Bible history, geology can prove nothing. (White 1864:91–92)

During the mid-nineteenth century, White was aware of the active debate by clergymen concerning geology and Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. In contrast to the evolutionary science of her time, she favored models of degeneration, and she applied Lamarck’s theory of acquired characters to explain degeneration inherited by the descendants:
I have been instructed [implying that she was given this information in a vision from God] that flesh food has a tendency to animalize the nature, to rob men and women of that love and sympathy which they should feel for everyone, and to give the lower passions control over the higher powers of the being. (White 1909:159)

White’s degenerationist view of human history was based on scriptural authority, and the mysterious and limited store of vital energy meant that racial exhaustion was inevitable for those individuals who continued to disobey God and natural law. White’s degenerationism was more than skin deep.

If Adam, at his creation, had not been endowed with twenty times as much vital force as men now have, the race, with their present habits of living in violation of natural law, would have become extinct. ... The wretched condition of the world at the present time has been presented before me. Since Adam's fall the race has been degenerating. Some of the reasons for the present deplorable condition of men and women, formed in the image of God, were shown to me. And a sense of how much must be done to arrest, even in a degree, the physical, mental, and moral decay, caused my heart to be sick and faint. God did not create the race in its present feeble condition. (White 1873:138–139)

It is also apparent from White’s writings that she did not believe in the fixity of the species after creation, but turned to inspiration from God to explain the biological mechanism in which degeneration combined with biologic amalgamation to produce “the confused species which God did not create [but] were the result of amalgamation and destroyed by the flood.” To continue the story, “Since the flood there has been amalgamation of man and beast, as may be seen in the almost endless varieties of species of animals, and in certain races of men” (White 1864:75).

The Protestant evangelical zeal that was beginning to accept evolution as God’s way of creating species never gained any traction in her mind. Throughout her life she criticized “satanic” teachings found in geology and Darwinism, writing

In the days of Noah, men, animals, and trees, many times larger than now exists, were buried, and thus preserved as an evidence to later generations that the antediluvians perished by a flood. God designed that the discovery of these things should establish faith in inspired history; but men, with their vain reasoning, fall into the same error as did the people before the flood,—the things which God gave them as a benefit, they turn into a curse by making a wrong use of them. (White 1891:112)

Over time, these viewpoints became the standard scientific platform for beliefs held by the churchgoers. Maintaining this literal faith in Genesis does not allow a natural process for the emergence of new species or the formation of the geologic column, even overseen by God, as in some more moderate perspectives on creationism (Scott 2004:19). Yet, as in other denominations, there is a wide range of beliefs in the church. More than a few Adventist scientists, theologians, and others accommodate theistic evolution or endorse microevolution, hoping to reconcile the Genesis origins and Flood accounts with contemporary scientific evidence. In response, church leaders continue to urge concurrence on the basic understanding and widespread affirmation of the church’s fundamental belief of the biblical doctrine of creation.
For example, in a speech before a group of scientists and theologians in Atlanta in 2010, Ted Wilson, the General Conference president and chairman of the Geoscience Research Institute board, admitted, “we don’t have all the answers,” but went on to say there is sufficient evidence for a biblical creation and a global flood. And he described theistic evolution as a meaningless process that challenges “a loving God who created us in His image.”

Wilson very forcefully stated that he wanted to

see that all Seventh-Day Adventist teachers, whether they are theologians or science teachers, believe and accept the biblical creation as the church has voted and understood it. That is our goal, and that is what we need to move toward. (Campbell 2010)

For Adventists, unanswerable questions concerning the bothersome parts of the Bible and Noah’s flood story will be answered when the saints arrive in heaven and can ask God directly how He went about achieving His marvelous constructions of the universe and life. This has wondrous appeal and quiets individuals from going on an intellectual safari searching for the answers to the mysteries of life. This viewpoint is used to justify an even stronger literalist biblical position than found in most other Christian faiths. As Ronald L Numbers points out, Adventists maintain a 94% confidence in creationism, which is higher than for any other Protestant denomination (Numbers 2006:330).

**Adventist Schools of Higher Education**

Despite this prior commitment to a literal reading of the Scripture, the Adventists maintain an extensive educational system from elementary schools to colleges and universities claiming an open mind in searching for “truth”. There are thirteen colleges and universities in North America and over ninety higher education institutions outside the United States connected with the Church. These are four-year, tertiary institutions dedicated to providing “quality undergraduate and advanced education in a Christian environment.”

There are three professional universities within the American group, including the flagship Loma Linda University, which supports schools in academic medicine and other health sciences, as well as graduate programs in geology, psychology, social science and religion. Instructors are expected to demonstrate a willingness to cooperate with the faith lifestyle of the Adventist church, even though in the professional schools about half of the clinical instruction is provided by non-Adventist clinicians and instructors.

Each institution is a separate non-profit corporation with its own by-laws and board of trustees; often half are church administrators, pastors, or individuals employed by the church who serve ex officio. Other board members are Adventist individuals in law, business, or education, and so on, capable of enhancing the school.

A common complaint from leaders in the Church’s Educational Department is that the trustees are

poorly trained board members, on the one hand, who do not take seriously their role in the ownership of an institution, and in other instances board members taking their role seriously enough but lacking any perspective of what might be best for the needs of the Church beyond the immediacy of the institutional board of which they are a member. (GCCHE 2005:8)
The Church itself has identified other problems with its boards. On the horizon, it appears secular accrediting commissions may bring about changes in the make-up of these boards in the direction of greater institutional autonomy and academic freedom—issues that are at the core of the problems at LSU (Willey 2012).

These Adventist schools have limited endowments and require outside financial assistance. Church appropriations generally account for less than 10% of operating funds. Roughly 70% of revenues are derived from student tuition, much of this obtained through federal and state student loans; although Adventist students are eligible for some tuition support from Church funds. Regional accreditation by non-Adventist agencies is significant in providing access for student loans and grants from government agencies. Lower teacher salaries—in effect a “sacrificial wage for Christian higher education”—also provide indirect operating subsidies that might typically come from an endowment in a secular university (Riley 2002:15).

Of the more than 25,000 students enrolled in Adventist institutions in the US, a high percentage may be non-Adventist, though they tend to be from conservative Christian backgrounds. From available data, only 25% of college-bound Adventist high school students enroll in an Adventist institution (GCCHE 2005:6). More than 50% of Adventist students applying from secondary schools maintained by the church are admitted to Adventist institutions of higher education. A physician, dentist, nurse, or a PhD in a number of disciplines could have begun in elementary school and advanced all the way through doctoral studies in the Adventist learning environment without exposure to secular education.

Beginning at an early age, Adventist children receive faith indoctrination in “Sabbath School” at the church, and as they grow older, many participate in summer camps and vacation Bible schools to fill the summers. By the time Adventist youth leave high school to enter college, they are believed by their pastors and parents already to possess the orthodox religious truth sufficient for salvation. If they attend an Adventist institution of higher education, then the expectation is that they will continue to be affirmed in the faith by the institution and their instructors.

**Adventist Attitudes Toward Education**

Adventists place considerable emphasis on education to enhance Adventist youths’ future standard of living, but also hope that it will contribute to preserving their faith. Although a significant amount of church tithe is used to fund education, the limited resources available from the church have not built institutions with solid academic reputations. Dudley and Gillespie (1992:52) write: “Only a small majority of the parents, pastors, and teachers believe that Adventist schools are academically superior to public institutions.” Despite this shortfall, parents and students want an education in an Adventist institution to be as strong as programs elsewhere—while at the same time expecting the learning experience to adhere to Adventist doctrines.

Adventist higher education often gets blamed for the estimated 50% percent of young adults who are no longer practicing Adventism (Dudley 2000:35). These levels are similar to those for born-again Christians entering public universities (Kinnaman 2011). It concerns church leaders that Adventist higher education is beginning to stray doctrinally due...
to their accepting non-Adventist students, their dependence on government money, and their placing less emphasis in the curriculum for training workers for the church.

The accelerated gain in worldly knowledge and breakdown in faithful adherence to church teachings also frequently causes church leaders to call for reform. In the past, there have been disruptive academic upheavals or disheartening criticism of faculty accused of teaching heretical content that challenges church doctrines (Bull and Lockhart 2007:317); the example at La Sierra University is the most recent (Willey 2012).

Students who go off to study science at non-Adventist graduate schools are likely to acquire a strong scientific background, and when they return to teach in an Adventist college or university may express sympathy for the evolutionary view—even if they themselves had been educated otherwise in the Adventist educational system. Even in non-scientific fields, there is a significant exposure to “worldly” ideas—that is, secular views that use discipline-based methods and theories, rather than religious doctrine, as the basis of scholarship and learning. Individuals who return to Adventist schools after a broader exposure to the world both philosophical and scientific often find it difficult to stay faithful to rigid Adventist doctrines. Of course this is not true for everyone. But there is an ongoing concern in these institutions over the subtle secular “seeding” that makes its way into the schools after individuals return from graduate school training. This was one reason why Adventists established their own graduate schools.

This tension between science and Adventist doctrine and professional standards in Adventist educational institutions has another dimension that bears on the legitimacy of these institutions. Outside accrediting agencies are also concerned with matters relating to institutional autonomy, academic freedom, due process for dispute resolution, and institutional pressures on faculty to conform to the Church dogma and strict indoctrination. The practical need for accreditation of Adventist universities—including their eligibility to receive state and federal aid for students, research, and other resources—also adds to the tension.

**Educational Standards Governed by Accreditation**

There are some in the church today who believe that without the approving statements made by Ellen White in a letter written in 1910 to Church leaders in California, there probably would not be any accredited Adventist colleges and universities (Knight 2008:26). According to Knight, White opposed higher education nearly all of her life, but apparently changed her opposition about giving out academic degrees just before she died. As medical training was becoming more professional in the early 20th century, she advised administrators involved with Loma Linda College that students should be prepared to “meet the entrance requirement specified by state laws.” Thereafter Adventist higher education became the staging ground for the training of teachers and nurses who wanted to be employed outside the denomination. Graduates needed a legitimate diploma, and acceptance for premedical and other professional schools added further pressure for program accreditation.

In 1928, the General Conference tried to establish its own accrediting association by forming the Board of Regents. It was hoped that, with the Board’s approval, graduates would be accepted by other institutions and thereby avoid the “contamination” of seeking “outside” approval from non-Adventist agencies. However, as with other schools across the nation, it became clear that the practice of peer-reviewed accreditation would improve the financial
stability of the institutions, deepen the educational resources, and broaden the training and expertise of the teaching faculty. Still, there was always the concern that outsiders’ reviews would dilute fundamental Adventist doctrines at these institutions.

The accreditation issue took center stage in 1931 when the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (*JAMA*) published student entrance statistics for the College of Medical Evangelists (CME)—now known as Loma Linda University School of Medicine. CME was the most ambitious education enterprise of the church (Greenleaf 2005:78) and was established to train missionary doctors to take the Adventist message into all the world. But the *JAMA* article revealed that only about 25% of first-year students came from accredited colleges (Neff 1964:248), placing CME in a precarious position. Administrators at CME emphatically insisted to Church leadership that all students entering medicine henceforth had to pass through accredited colleges, and this provided the impetus for accreditation at all Adventist junior and senior colleges. Shortly thereafter, the denomination learned that California, Nebraska, and Michigan refused to grant state teacher’s certification unless students graduated from accredited institutions, which further expanded accreditation to schools where these students were trained.

Today, there remain several smaller, little known, unaccredited Adventist institutions outside the direct sponsorship of the Church. These independent schools train missionaries, evangelists, and health educators who do not require accreditation or licensure from secular agencies. All the rest of the Adventist educational institutions in the United States have voluntarily accepted accreditation through one of the six secular regional agencies, such as the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), that review and approve accreditation for higher education institutions in their regions.

**Centralizing Control of Adventist Philosophy of Education**

At the end of the twentieth century, the General Conference Department of Education again took steps to create its own accreditation facility. This time it was narrower and its mission focused to safeguard the “Adventist philosophy of education” from the secularist and naturalistic worldviews that were creeping into the schools of higher education. Educators were aware that the widespread acceptance of scientific objectivity could weaken the place of religion in the academic life in Adventist institutions as it had in liberal Protestant universities during the last half of the 19th century (Benne 2001). Hence the stated objective of the Adventist Accreditation Association (AAA) was to evaluate not only “conformity to threshold standards of academic quality” but also “evidence that the school is comprehensively achieving success in the spiritual domain and that it is truly ‘Adventist’” (Beardsley 2008:16).

Citing the Bible and Ellen White’s writings, the AAA maintains that genuine revelation and wisdom must be understood in light of the clear teaching of these two sources; this means that Adventist instruction is not to be subordinated to external “evidences” or influences, or to scientific authorities that challenge the doctrines of the church. The context for this ambition is the “great controversy between Christ and Satan … [and placing] certain values and how these values are taught, thereby helping to shape the current world view and future world view of our students” (GCCHE 2005:3).
The AAA is not recognized as an accrediting agency with the United States Department of Education. As a result, the AAA is not bound by policies established by Congress under the Higher Educational Act or other government regulations. In practice, the AAA operates its evaluation programs with similar processes as those in secular accreditation agencies: for example, self-study tools, site visitation, and peer review. The site visitation teams are devoted to revealing the religious strengths and weaknesses of an Adventist institution and are composed of educational professionals selected only from other Adventist institutions.

On occasion, competing demands and constraints compelled by external accrediting bodies or partnership arrangements with non-Adventist universities can create situations that are difficult for the AAA to resolve against the backdrop of Adventist theological dogma and belief systems. In the case of the review of the biology program at La Sierra University (Willey 2012), decisions by the two accrediting agencies—the AAA and the WASC—illustrate the conflict between the goals of differing accrediting agencies. The AAA shocked the university with its determination that the university had “deviated from the philosophy and objectives of Seventh-day Adventist education” (Dwyer 2011). This was followed by the WASC’s formal “Notice of Concern” that certain governance issues be resolved by changing the bylaws and taking steps to ensure the autonomy of the university as an educational institution separate from and supported by the Church. The WASC also requested an update on the work of the faculty to address the controversy over teaching scientific biology (WASC 2011).

**Denominational Considerations Trump Secular Accreditation**

The position of the Adventist Accrediting Association (AAA), should a conflict arise between its own philosophy of education and the findings of an outside accreditation or government agency, is clear. A strict interpretation of this position places the AAA in a higher standing than the secular accrediting agencies.

It is understood that accreditation and governmental approval can also be important to the ongoing health and credibility of educational institutions. These institutions must consequently work within the requirements and parameters of the local and national policies, while recognizing the higher calling to be true to the mission of the church. (AAA 2011:1-6)

Among other critical issues, the AAA definitely has an interest in determining how well “scientific theories of the origin and nature of the universe in light of the biblical doctrines of God, Creation, and Fall” are taught by the faculty. Is the scientific classroom “truly Adventist” and does it “promote a biblical worldview?” (Beardsley 2008).

The Church cannot afford to lose accreditation from the outside either. Not only are monies from the government important, but also students wanting to enter professional training at Adventist institutions such as Loma Linda University or elsewhere cannot be accepted unless they come from an accredited institution. The pressure to strengthen or reorient Adventist higher education is coming from many different directions.

As for evolution, it is not the official position that evolution should not be taught in Adventist schools. Rather, the emphasis is that the curriculum should prepare students to go on to further academic work prepared to “cope” with evolution. In this light, it is not unusual
to hear that the biology faculty is expected to use the scientific method to belittle and discredit evolution by pointing out inconsistencies in theories and models, faults or conflicts within the scientific literature, discontinuities in the geologic column and fossil record, and problems with dating methods.

There is a long history of using this approach in the past to support the Church’s creationistic viewpoint. But this is changing. As Adventist academic institutions seek highly trained individuals as professors and researchers to support science programs and thus compete with other colleges and universities, they also attract more professionals whose training emphasizes modern, secular scholarship. This gradual secularization presents a long-term challenge to the influence of doctrinal positions (GCCHE 2005:8). Furthermore, the acceptance of both non-Adventist teachers and students into these schools has also changed the distinctive characteristics of Adventist education; all of which continues to be an engine for secularization.

**Conclusion**

This overview of Adventist education shows that it is a balancing act to work in an Adventist institution as a biologist or other scientist, especially in areas that relate to creationism and evolution. As the recent events at La Sierra University show (Willey 2012), the conflict is rooted not only in the training of these faculty, but also in their professional growth as scholars whose work is accepted in their disciplines. In order for scientists to advance in their careers, they must conduct research and publish in peer-reviewed journals. If they publish work based on the evolutionary science disavowed by the church, they can face criticism and discipline from the institution or its sectarian accrediting body.

Faced with conflicting pressures from secular and Adventist accrediting agencies, LSU found its status as an accredited institution at peril in both realms. The AAA expressed concern that instruction in biology might not be meeting the sectarian goals of the church. The WASC expressed concern that standards of governance, institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and professional practice were not properly guaranteed at LSU: “The recent forced resignations, which were obtained through the actions of the board chair, reinforce concerns about institution autonomy because of the multiple roles that the board chair has in the University and in the Church” (WASC 2011:2). The WASC views the General Conference as a being outside the institution’s governance arrangements because La Sierra University is a separate non-profit 501(c)(3) California corporation, and it is not owned by any of the Adventist organizations: the Pacific Union Conference, the North American Division, or the General Conference.

So far, neither accrediting agency has found that LSU was meeting all of the standards and objectives established by the accrediting commissions. In the intersection, LSU tried to pick between the two competing sets of compliance demands, with the result that the institution found itself in danger of having their carefully constructed pathway between the two come crashing down on them ... as it did for the Egyptians pursuing Moses and the Israelites through the Red Sea.
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About the Author

T Joe Willey received his PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, in neuroscience. After graduation, he taught and conducted research in neuroscience at the Loma Linda University School of Medicine. He was a postdoctoral fellow at New York University in Buffalo with Nobel laureate Sir John Eccles and at the Brain Research Institute at UCLA.

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