

Concepts of Church and State

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Contemporary thought on relations of the church and the state is increasingly concerned with the present impact of governmental activity on the life and work of the church. The practical and social problems of our highly complex era have brought the government into every sector of the national life. Welfare-state philosophy, American confrontation with global communism, civil rights controversy, antipoverty programs, increasing crime rates, civil disorders, and spiraling costs of education occasion greater interference by the federal government in the state and local scene. As areas of governmental activity frequently overlap zones of church concern, Christian denominations that formed their church and state views in a much simpler age of American past are now finding it necessary to rethink or rejustify their attitudes in the circumstances of this changed situation.

One danger occasioned by increase in government action is the potential threat to religious liberty, and this has disquieted some churches. They have looked for feasible means to cope with the problem, but they disagree as to the best way to accomplish this aim. The principal difference of opinion lies between transformationists and separationists.

Transformationists tend to emphasize the church's "prophetic" role in society, believing that the role of the church includes influencing the state to fashion public order into as close harmony as is possible, in relation to the Christian understanding of the revealed will of God. They believe that by exerting the right influence on the government, the church can secure responsible rule that both preserves liberty for all citizens and solves grave social problems in Christian fashion. Thus they hold that the church should exercise greater moral leadership to influence the government toward assuming a vital role in dealing with the social and moral issues of

our time. The alternative, as they see it, is decreased Christian influence on the government, with the consequent possibility that the secular state may dominate the religious as well as the civil life of the country.

Separationists, on the other hand, believe that the present extension of government influence has further strengthened the case for "complete" separation between church and state.

Seventh-day Adventists are among the most separationist-minded of Christian groups. Our doctrinal, and especially eschatological, interpretations have kept us apart from other Christian churches and have prevented us from favorably regarding contemporary ecumenical developments. Although the General Conference did not state its official position on church-state theory in any definite way until the 1948 Autumn Council, the religious inheritance of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, derived from its Millerite origins, ensured adherence to a policy of separation of church and state.

Yet our religious philosophy does not assume that the state is demonic. We recognize a proper function of the state when that body is rightly administered. We do assume, however, that the state will ultimately become demonic when crime and depravity reach the place where they destroy the possibility of good government. We believe that both biblical prophecy and present trends indicate that this tragic situation will eventually be realized. Yet at the same time that we have expanded our membership and scope of activity, we have increased our contact with the government and its officers, and this fact has tended to "liberalize" our relationship with the state.

I

An initial factor affecting the Seventh-day Adventist concept of the relationship of church and state is the Millerite background. For several reasons, the Millerites were opposed to any relationship with the state. In the first place, many of them had been expelled from their own churches, and this gave them a distaste for legal church organization. Second, they regarded the major church bodies as apostate; and they considered that if they formally organized, their attention might be drawn away from spiritual realities to earthly considerations. Third, their expectation of the imminent return of Christ made formal organization seem unnecessary.

Many of these attitudes were inherited by the early Sabbatarian Adventists. At the same time this growing sect was so soon confronted by problems of property ownership and financial administration that, although many of the group remained opposed to any relationship with the government, the commonsense counsels of the core of leadership ultimately prevailed.

When the Seventh-day Adventist Church was formally organized in 1863, the religious patterns of the thought of the new denomination continued to give shape, coherence, and significance to its church-state theory. Although our theology is Arminian in emphasis, we have always believed that the state's impact on history has been evil when it has been closely allied with the church. Similarly, we have held that attempts among religious groups to create a superchurch, using the state as a tool, have led to apostasy in the church and persecution in the world. We have consistently viewed the true church of Jesus Christ as a "suffering" church. A minority body, persecuted by the unified power of religion and statecraft, this church relies on its own inner discipline and personal commitment to achieve true discipleship.

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This concept of the church, held by Anabaptists and other minority groups through the centuries, became important for Seventh-day Adventists because Roger Williams, partly through Anabaptist influence, promoted the separation of church and state in America. When this theory was supported by religious pluralism and Enlightenment thought, America became the supreme example of church and state separation.

Shortly after the end of the American Civil War, the outstanding problem facing our denomination was the revival of state Sunday laws, leading to attempts to secure federal Sunday enforcement legislation. Various Protestant agencies and reform societies were involved in this activity, but an interdenominational movement called the National Reform Association was the chief initiator and early organizer of the development. Powerful groups such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the American Prohibition Society, and the American Sabbath Union Party later joined the National Reform Movement; and from this time on, Sunday labor prosecutions of Seventh-day Adventists became particularly intense.

This linking of Sunday enforcement legislation with temperance activity was especially vexing to Adventists, because they found themselves associated with saloon owners and liquor dealers in their opposition to the activities of the religious and reform associations seeking to develop the Prohibitionist-Sunday enforcement movement. As a result of these problems, the church formed the Seventh-day Adventist Religious Liberty Association, which attempted to defeat Sunday bills, to help imprisoned Adventists, and to awaken the American public to the constitutional dangers involved in this type of legislation.

Combating Sunday enforcement legislation and its effects remained a major Seventh-day Adventist concern until the end of the nineteenth cen-

ture. With the changing social and national mores of the twentieth century the situation eased. The church became more conscious of the need to improve its own public image; its leaders had noted that wherever local Adventist groups were persecuted, it was because most churchmen and people in these areas had disliked and distrusted them.

Particularly important to our public relations activity in the two early decades of the twentieth century was the development of a strong temperance program. In the context of the Progressive epoch, this was an effective way to remove from the denomination's reputation the slur that it was associated with liquor interests, merely because both it and they were opposed to Sunday legislation.

While this was not the primary cause for Adventist prohibitionist activity in this period (for from its inception the Adventist Church had clear views on the subject of temperance), it certainly was an additional reason for the church's enthusiasm in assisting other prohibitionist groups to achieve the enactment of the Eighteenth Amendment.

Developments arising from the New Deal and the later war mobilization vastly increased the scope of American government. This disturbed many Adventists, but they were still more alarmed by the increased importance of the Roman Catholic Church; and Adventists joined other Protestant groups protesting the appointment of a United States representative to the Vatican. By the close of the Second World War, the Roman Catholic Church was still more significant on both the national and international scenes.

In attempting to establish ambassadorial relationships with the Vatican, both President Roosevelt and President Truman seemed to be giving force to the arguments of Roman Catholic apologists who endeavored to present their church as a rallying point against the growing Communist threat. Giving force to these Adventist apprehensions was the success throughout western Europe of political parties whose affiliations with Roman Catholic interests enabled them to form close, though varying, relationships with the Holy See. Many Seventh-day Adventists at this time believed that they were witnessing dangerous, albeit anticipated, alliance between the United States and the Papacy in reconstructing Europe.

This threatening international situation seemed to be matched by Roman Catholic strength in America. Catholic endeavors to secure state aid for the church's parochial school system aroused Adventist fears that Roman Catholic interests already sought to destroy the historical church and state separation that provided the basis for American religious liberties. Encouraged in their opposition to Roman Catholic efforts by the emergency

of POAU (Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State), Adventists in various conference sessions throughout 1948 and 1949 passed resolutions affirming allegiance to principles of separation of church and state.

Maintaining this principle seemed the more important at this time because of the significance of Roman Catholic support of a renewed emphasis on Sunday law enforcement. Catholic action organizations during the late 1950s united with business interests and trade unions to exert considerable pressure on state legislatures to enact stringent Sunday laws.

But the adverse reaction to prosecutions under such laws finally compelled the United States Supreme Court to hear a group of test cases. The Court's majority decision was significant: it ruled that Sunday laws are no infringement of the separationist principle, since this type of legislation had long since lost its religious significance; these laws must therefore be considered as a normal exercise of the state's constitutional police power to protect its citizens and community.

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II

All of these factors — the new significance of Rome, the resurgence of Sunday laws, attacks on the issue of separation of church and state, and ecumenical developments in both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism — reawakened Seventh-day Adventist speculation as to the possible imminence of the great events which the church's eschatological understandings had long taught it to expect. At the same time, however, a number of other factors were working in different directions.

Chief among these were the problems facing the denomination's educational system. However much we might resist Roman Catholic endeavors to save their own parochial school system at state expense, hard pressed Adventist educational administrators were facing similar problems. They also recognized that state aid might save them from future financial crises; and choosing between eschatological anticipations of church and state union and possibilities of financial relief, many Adventist leaders preferred the possibility of present gain to that of future problems. They were willing to take any form of state aid that the church could justifiably accept without yielding control of its own institutions.

This raises the question of the consistency of our church and state policy in regard to financing our educational system. We have accepted certain types of state aid: Hill-Burton funds to rebuild and repair our hospitals, available surplus properties, and a number of research grants — all of these

having been taken on the basis that the church has been fulfilling a public service of reciprocating value to the government.

Ever since the Solusi affair, the church has accepted tax exemption in a number of areas. Most recently, with some stress of mind, the church has seen Loma Linda University accept major government grants; but since the grants are related to medical and kindred educational programs, this acceptance is consistent with the present church rationale. Certainly many of the educational leaders have wished that the church had taken far more than it has.

Current discussion of the Solusi affair illustrates the varying positions taken by Adventists today. Some of the arguments on this subject seem somewhat puerile. For all practical purposes, Cecil Rhodes was the British government representative in South Africa. He was anxious, and through him the British government was anxious, to provide all possible facilities to national groups under British colonial rule. The Adventists had an excellent program of missionary intentions which could well fulfill much of this need. Rhodes was impressed.

Adventists on the spot were quite clear that the land offered by the company on Rhodes' direct intervention should be accepted. Theorists at home in America were not. Fortunately, church leaders received excellent advice from the one person capable of impressing them to reverse themselves and to accept the grant: Ellen G. White told them to accept the land the company was offering and also to accept tax exemption for institutions; she even suggested that this might be a way to preserve religious freedom.

III

The most logical conclusion about the Adventist church and state policy is that it has generally been a practical one within the framework of the actual principles accepted by the church. We have not allowed doctrinaire considerations of "separationism" to interfere with a number of our working policies. Alonzo T. Jones, religious liberty representative at the time of the Solusi land grant, demanded a refusal of the Rhodes offer on the grounds that to take it would be a violation of the principle of separation of church and state. But the church finally took the land on the grounds that it was sensible to do so under the circumstances.

Adventists never questioned the constitutionality of influencing the government toward prohibitionist legislation. While it is true that this legislation did not interfere with the religious principles of any citizen, it was certainly a case of the church trying to influence the state to secure social

objectives. And when the spiritual needs of young Adventist men demanded chaplains, the church reversed its earlier positions and refused to allow separationist theory to interfere with the training of military chaplains.

In the hesitation about accepting many forms of aid to Adventist educational institutions, the real consideration has not been separationist theory but the justifiable fear that the church might surrender its control over its own institutions.

This point emerges very sharply in a position paper presented by Roland Hegstad, editor of *Liberty*, to an audience of educators, church administrators, and Religious Liberty Association representatives at the North American Division Quadrennial Council for Higher Education at Andrews University on August 22, 1968.

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Hegstad's main argument against receiving state aid for Seventh-day Adventist higher educational institutions was based on his personal conclusion that two factors, which he called "the pitfalls of public policy" and "the snare of secularization," prohibit Adventists from assuming this kind of relationship with the government. He rested his case on the decision of the Court of Appeals of Maryland that one Methodist college and two Roman Catholic colleges were not eligible to receive grants because they were church-related.

Examining the criteria used by the Court for determining whether these schools were church-related in the sense that affected the constitutionality of the grants, Hegstad emphasized that no Seventh-day Adventist institution could possibly qualify if compelled to meet these criteria. Stressing that the Court's ruling was a justifiable one, Hegstad urged the view that the church must expect that government policy or public policy rather than Adventist policy will control its institutions if the church should accept government money.

Only by secularizing its school system, he affirmed, could the Adventist Church qualify for the grants, and if it did this, the schools would cease to fulfill the function for which they were created. Since that time a further Supreme Court decision has given to any American citizen the right to sue any religious organization unconstitutionally accepting government aid.

Perhaps a proper Adventist position on church and state issues is best summarized by stating that the real principle at stake is *religious liberty* rather than separation of church and state. It is certainly doubtful whether complete separation has ever existed; and in the present complex age it is impossible to conceive it in any absolute sense. This is not to say that the separation in the sense of the First Amendment is not important. It has

been basic to recent Supreme Court decisions that are vital in protecting principles of religious liberty. But it is a form of church and state polity that needs to be continually interpreted from the standpoint of religious freedom, which it was designed to protect.

If separation of church and state is seen as an expediency or a policy, then we have respected its deeper significance. Most Adventist departures from it in the literal sense have been intelligent ones, quite justified under the circumstances. But in these increasingly complex times, more consideration needs to be given to the importance of public relations in prolonging religious liberty.

While the church, because of the uniqueness of its message, cannot join the ecumenical developments of our time, as individuals we need continually to cultivate an irenic spirit toward people in other churches. We expect that ultimately a superchurch will control the state and demand uniformity in matters of conscience. But at this present time nowhere has the note of religious liberty sounded more emphatically than from leading ecumenicists.

Dr. Carrillo de Albornoz, Secretary of the Religious Liberty Chapter of the World Council of Churches, has called on all churches to define their views on the basis of religious freedom and proper relations of church and state. Religious liberty has been expanded in many areas as the result of the work of both Protestant and Roman Catholic progressives. Religious truth is more important than religious unity, but with this one essential provision: love and amity between men and churches is of vital importance.

Religious dialogue within the proper framework is as significant to Adventists as to other Christians. We must not so apply our knowledge of prophecy as to change it into a deterministic system. Men and institutions have the right to be evaluated in terms of their present actions. Although we do anticipate a future world apostasy, we also expect the greatest Christian revival of all time. The essential task of the church, therefore, is to present the positive truths of its message in such a way as to commend its love as well as its truth to the world.