

REVIEWS

Christianity and Society

GARY LAND

THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE OF THE EVANGELICAL

By Sherwood Eliot Wirt

New York: Harper and Row 1968 177 pp \$4.95

75

"Why does the move toward social involvement seem to require a rejection of biblical Christianity?" asks Sherwood Eliot Wirt, the editor of *Decision* magazine (p. 41). Although he explains the historical background of this problem, Wirt's real answer is that the situation does not need to exist. Pointing to the social commentary of such Old Testament prophets as Isaiah and Jeremiah, to the Magnificat of Mary, and to Jesus' injunction that we show our love for God by loving our fellowman, Wirt finds a strong biblical basis for social concern. He points to the fact that the social gospel began with the evangelical churches, although they lost its leadership by the time of the Civil War. Thus, by recovering its social conscience, conservative Protestantism is really going back to its historical tradition.

Wirt does not feel that a belief in the second coming of Christ excuses the Christian from social concern. The whole problem of the evangelical's social conscience, he states, is bound up in the word "meanwhile." Commanded by Christ to love his fellowman, the Christian loses much of his testimony if he fails to express his love in existential situations. "Evangelism is presenting Christ to men in the power of the Holy Spirit. Social action is an effort to apply Christ in finding solutions to human problems" (p. 129).

Having established the theological basis for social concern, the author probes the various complex social problems of race, environment, war, and freedom, in an attempt to articulate the manner in which the Christian may apply Christ's love to his society. Characteristic of his conclusions is the statement that if the Christian "does not join the Negro marches, he had better make sure that it is because he has found a more effective way to contribute to the racial struggle" (p. 88).

Wirt's book, however, is only a starting point. Rather than being an exhaustive study, it is written as a popular appeal to the Christian conscience. Time after time, the author indicates that Christians have much work to do in exploring the meaning of the gospel's social dimension. Although one may not agree with his specific analyses on certain matters — the Vietnam war and capital punishment, for example — Wirt has made clear the principles that should inspire and guide Christian social action.

Although Adventists, as the evangelical churches, once had a lively social conscience, the Seventh-day Adventist church also fell to interpreting its social responsibilities in a very narrow vein. Seventh-day Adventists, particularly those in positions of leadership, should read this book. Surely, with their emphasis on the whole man,

Adventists can make a significant contribution to reawakening the Christian social conscience through both scholarship and social action. As Wirt says, "There is no escaping responsibility. Christians are to work, to plant, to build, to pray, and to bring men to God while it is day, for the night cometh when no man can work" (p. 112).

A Pilgrim's Progress

BRIAN S. BULL

76

A SEARCH FOR MEANING IN NATURE

By Richard M. Ritland

Mountain View, California: Pacific Press 1970 320 pp \$2.95

Bernard Ramm has pointed out that there are two traditions in the study of the relationship between Scripture and science. "There is the ignoble tradition that has taken a most unwholesome attitude toward science and has used arguments and procedures not in the better traditions of established scholarship. There has been and is a noble tradition in Bible and science, and this is the tradition of the great and learned evangelical Christians who have been patient, genuine, and kind and who have taken great care to learn the facts of science and Scripture."¹

A Search for Meaning in Nature by Richard Ritland is, above all things, patient, genuine, and kind — too patient and perhaps too kind for Adventists, who are accustomed to polemics in their science and to facile and spectacular answers. This is a most unusual book on science to have come from an Adventist publishing house: it is undeniably Christian, but nowhere is it identifiably Adventist.

Ritland is a thoroughly professional scientist. His areas of expertise, though broad, are not universal. His choice of subject matter seems to indicate that he feels most comfortable in the scientific disciplines of geology and comparative anatomy. *A Search for Meaning in Nature* is a "pilgrim's progress" of one man in his search for cohesiveness and order. In addition, however, it is a fascinating ramble through nature in the company of a competent naturalist who is a born teacher. Thus the book may appeal to readers on two levels. Read superficially, it will appear as a commentary on selected interesting and unique natural phenomena, a selection without obvious unity. Readers who have wrestled with problems similar to the ones that perplex the author, and who identify with his intense need for satisfying answers, will appreciate the caliber of his scholarship and the agony and soul-searching that this book represents.

Ritland opens with a brief historical sketch of why Darwinism swept the world. He lays much of the blame, and rightly so, at the feet of sincere but misguided clerics. (With friends like these, who needs enemies?)

Chapter two is an investigation into the limitations of knowledge. This discourse is fundamental to the remainder of the book, since it clearly delineates the approach that Ritland has taken to the "facts" he later quotes. The reader must appreciate the