

# Contemporary Adventism and the Crisis of Belief

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## I

Some definitions will explain, I hope, what I mean by the somewhat formal title of this essay.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, if I clarify and justify the title, my task will be more than half done.

*Contemporary* is a word that can have, here at least, three meanings, two of which I want to disavow. There is an obvious meaning, which is as trivial as it is obvious: a *chronological* meaning. Thus *contemporary Adventism* would simply be a collective designation of all Adventists who happen to be currently alive, including the General Conference committee, the most recent converts, and all the rest of us.

There is also what I think is a misguided meaning: a *conative*, "intentional" meaning. In this sense, "contemporary Adventism" would refer to that part of the church that is deliberately trying — and trying hard — to be modern. What is misguided about this is not so much the modernity, but the trying. Whenever Christians have tried hard to be something other than Christian, they have ended up with a distorted Christianity. An example of this may be seen in some of the Christians of the second and third centuries, who turned out to be Christian Gnostics. Another example is the liberal Protestantism of the nineteenth century, which came to look astonishingly like an optimistic humanism. What happens in such cases is that Christian understanding is forced into another mold — that is (to change the metaphor), it is cut to fit other criteria than its own.

What I mean by contemporary, then, has to do neither with chronological coincidence nor deliberate modernity. Rather, the significant meaning

of this term is *cultural*, or sociological, so that “contemporary Adventism” designates that kind of Adventism that takes seriously its need both to understand the world that is its intellectual environment and also to understand itself and to be true to itself *in* the present world of ideas, knowledge, and belief. To attempt to live in any world other than the present one is to become irrelevant, and perhaps even neurotic, for it is to deny reality. And in many cases it probably cannot be really done anyway: none of us can be in touch with the world without breathing the contemporary intellectual atmosphere — any more than we can live in Southern California without breathing its air. In short, “contemporary Adventism” means Adventism related to its culture, neither denying it nor baptizing it, but trying to understand it and live creatively and responsibly in it.

The title of this paper ends with the crucial word *belief*, which points to one of the ingredients of faith. Ellen White observed that “faith includes not only belief but [also] trust.”<sup>2</sup> The distinction here between belief and trust is important: belief is *what you hold to be true*, what you think is the case; trust is a *response of self-commitment* that makes your well-being dependent on the integrity of another. In religious experience, both belief and trust are essentially involved: religious belief without trust is an empty conceptualism; and trust without belief is in one sense impossible, in another sense a fraud, and in a third sense a kind of rational suicide.

While trust is largely volitional — a result of choice, a decision to give oneself to another in this kind of relationship — belief is largely *non-volitional*: we do not in fact *choose* to believe that something or other is the case.<sup>3</sup> Belief — as we are thinking of the word here — is often a result of a rational consideration (including, for example, the recognition and interpretation) of evidence. Belief differs from knowledge here only in that the question of validity remains open. It seems perfectly proper to say, “He believed it, but it wasn’t true,” whereas there is something odd about saying, “He knew it, but it wasn’t true.” Belief may be invalid. Some of the pertinent evidence may be unrecognized; or the evidence that is recognized may be misunderstood, misinterpreted. Yet the fact remains that belief is essentially a rational process rather than a volitional one. In other words, there is a sense in which “seeing *is* believing” — and this sense is an important one for an understanding of “the crisis of belief.”

The word *convince* derives from the Latin *convinco*, which means to overcome, to conquer. To be convinced is to be conquered by the available evidence, so that you cannot believe otherwise. Conversely, some things are, in the strict sense, “incredible,” for the available evidence makes belief in

them rationally impossible. They are not live options. No matter how hard you try, for example, you just cannot believe that the earth is in the shape of a pyramid or a cube. You can *choose to behave* irrationally (that is, contrary to belief or knowledge), but you can hardly *choose to believe* irrationally. The closest you can come to this is to choose to ignore evidence when its implications are disturbing. But this procedure involves the well-known psychological mechanism of repression, and it has all sorts of undesirable consequences; besides, it is often quite unsuccessful, for repressed knowledge has a way of expressing itself, often pathologically.

Yet one more thing needs to be said about belief, which I am using here to mean that which someone holds to be the case in regard to some aspect of reality. Belief may be characterized by any of a whole continuum of degrees of generality. That is, a particular belief may refer to a very small part of reality — my typewriter, say, or (even more specifically) its color. Or, on the other hand, a belief can refer to the nature of all reality in general. In other words, a particular belief may involve a specific fact, a limited generalization (such as Charles' law about the temperature and volume of a gas, or your understanding of the character of a neighbor), a broader generalization (the Second Law of Thermodynamics, or the basic insecurity and egocentricity of human nature), or some total generalization about the nature and meaning of being.

A "crisis of belief" is a "critical moment" in belief — a moment that is highly significant for the future of belief because it means a possible change of belief. From what I have been saying, it follows that a crisis of belief is likely to involve a *loss of the ability to believe* that which has formerly been believed. Ordinarily, a change of belief is called a "crisis" only if it involves at least a moderate degree of generality. For much of my early life, I believed that Christopher Columbus was the first European to come to America; now that idea seems highly dubious. But this is, for me at least, not a matter of crisis, because it involves a rather simple matter of fact.

A crisis of belief — an inability to believe — may be an individual affair, or it may be a shared experience. An individual crisis of belief occurs, for example, when it becomes impossible to continue believing in the integrity of someone who is personally close to you. This is a real crisis, and sheer agony. Religious belief (or disbelief) is more often shared, because it involves a high level of generality, and because this kind of belief is heavily dependent on what Peter Berger calls "the social construction of reality." For better or for worse, we are social beings, and our "sociality" includes what we think and believe about the world. Most of what we believe we

have taken on the authority of others, and it is only as others continue to confirm this belief that it continues to be plausible to us. Conversely, the plausibility of belief that is not socially confirmed but instead is challenged by our fellow men, is imperiled — not only in our dealings with others, but also in our own minds.<sup>4</sup>

There seem to be two principal reasons for the development of a crisis of belief. Either, on the one hand, there may be a change in the understanding of the relevant evidence, resulting from a discrediting of the evidence which seems both decisive and irreconcilable with the previous belief. Such a change in the understanding of evidence was responsible for the crisis of belief in which Galileo was caught — and it was a crisis not merely because of the facts concerning the relationship of the earth and the sun, but because of what these facts implied (or seemed to imply) concerning the position of man in the universe. Or, on the other hand, there may be a shift in perspective, with the result that a belief becomes simply irrelevant, and there is no longer any reason to take it seriously. The existence of witches, for example, has not been (and cannot be) disproved, and they continue to be a logical possibility. But we do not believe that witches now exist in America, because such a belief is not useful; it serves no function.

Whatever the reason for a crisis of belief, if it involves an erosion of the ability to believe, then to respond to it by *exhortations* to believe is utterly futile. The only proper response is to show as clearly as possible that the matter in question is in fact believable — and this is a process of dialogue and education, not denunciation and exhortation.

## II

It is apparent to even the most casual observer that the current crisis of belief in American Christianity is focused on the question of the reality and relevance of God. The crisis has a variety of names: in the context of American culture it may be called “radical secularism;” in theology it may be called “the death of God;” in history of ideas it may be called “the loss of transcendence.” Although the little group of younger theologians sometimes called “the death of God boys” has passed from the journalistic limelight and also from most serious theological discussion, and although their announcement of the demise of deity contained a good bit of nonsense, the question that these theologians made explicit remains a first order of theological business: Is it possible for contemporary man to make sense of the idea of God? Is it rationally possible to believe that God is real?

When once this question becomes central, there is a crisis of Christian

belief that is as profound as any can ever be; for if this question cannot be answered affirmatively, there is not much point in worrying about any other Christian doctrine. On this question, furthermore, the old familiar theological "sides" seem unimportant, for now everyone is in the same boat. For Catholic and Protestant, for liberal and conservative, the question remains: In a modern world does it make any sense at all to believe in God?

What this radical secularism, this loss of the sense of the transcendent, this "death of God," means is that modern man tends to be exclusively interested in the present world. This does not imply materialism, however, or hedonism; for great importance may still be given to aesthetic and moral values, and there may be profound human concern for other persons. The point is that these values and concerns are likely to be this-worldly, having no transcendent dimension, no ultimate significance, no eternal meaning.

In this frame of mind, the only reality is the reality of this world. Real knowledge is based on tangible, empirical evidence — the facts, thank you, and nothing but the facts. Real problems are those that can be treated scientifically — overpopulation, hunger, pollution. If we haven't made much headway with such things as interracial conflicts and international hostilities, the reason is that the social sciences aren't quite scientific enough yet; but don't worry, they're getting there. Real values are those that make a difference here and now, not those of some far-off, pie-in-the-sky heaven that lies above and beyond the continuum of history.

Another implication of this radical secularism is that man is the master of his fate — if fate is to be mastered at all. What power there is to control nature is man's power — and he has done a great deal to tame his environment — to make night as good a time to work as day, to make the desert flourish, to control raging rivers, to reduce the destructiveness of bacteria and viruses. And what man cannot control, he can at least prepare for. He knows that he is not immortal, and that, in spite of the best that medical science can do for him, he will one day die. So he prepares for the inevitable. But even here, as he anticipates his exit from this world, his first concerns remain in it. "Preparation for the inevitable" does not mean confessing one's sins, but rather purchasing adequate life insurance to take care of the family and (if we are to believe the commercials) making "pre-need arrangements" with the friendly folks at Forest Lawn.

And mankind is felt to be autonomous. Man may — and must — "create his own values, set his own standards and goals, and work out his own salvation. There is nothing transcending man's own powers and intelligence; so he cannot look for any support from beyond himself, though, equally,

he need not submit himself to any judgment beyond his own or that of his society.”<sup>5</sup> Of course he still goes to church — but his reasons for going are not really religious reasons. He wants his children to know that God is part of their cultural heritage, and he wants them to have the moral and ethical education that the church provides. Besides, going to church, and making modest contributions to its support, is part of the contemporary life-style of his community.

This radical secularism of our world has not always characterized man. At other times man has had a lively sense of the transcendent; he has structured his existence around his awareness of the supernatural. But not now. Of the many factors in the rise of this modern secularism, I suggest just two.

The most powerful factor is surely the elevation of science to a position of dominance in Western civilization. This development seems to have two historical roots: One of these roots is, perhaps surprisingly, the biblical doctrine of Creation, according to which the natural, material world is neither sacred (and therefore untouchable) nor illusory (and therefore unreal). Rather, the natural, material world is the product of God’s creative activity, and man’s vocation is to be its steward, and to use it. The other ideological ancestor of the scientific attitude and enterprise is the classical spirit of inquiry — a spirit which is perhaps first seen in Aristotle’s observations of nature but which practically disappeared during the Middle Ages until its re-discovery in the Renaissance. Thus, with the understanding of the material world as being placed at man’s disposal, and with the spirit of inquiry into the structure and working of things, Western civilization became the cultural ground in which science could flourish.

What has made the influence of science dominant in the modern mind is the overpowering impressiveness of its technological consequences. One can imagine a conversation between some scientists and theologians. “Well,” says an astrophysicist, “my colleagues and I have just put a man on the moon. What have you theologians done lately?” An agronomist says, “With newly developed varieties of wheat and rice we have doubled, tripled, and quadrupled food supplies in countries ravaged by starvation. Has belief in God ever done that much?”

This is not to suggest, however, that the dominance of the modern consciousness by science is the result of a diabolical plot by scientists. To be sure, there are some scientists who seem delighted with their reputation as the great discoverers of the truth about reality. But I suspect that professional scientists generally are rather less impressed than the rest of us by the accomplishments of scientific endeavor. In any case, it would seem that,

given the accomplishments of science, its installation as kind of the intellectual mountain was inevitable.

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Another less potent, but nevertheless interesting, factor in the development of contemporary secularism is deliberate and official establishment of religious pluralism in America. One reason for the separation of church and state, and for the prohibition of religious qualifications for holding a political office was the Enlightenment conviction that religion was not really vital to the welfare of the nation. And it is surely easier to be tolerant of religious differences if you think of all religions as pretty harmless — something like the Lions' Club, the Rotary, and Kiwanis. In any case, whatever the reasons for the exclusion of religious interests from the concerns of government and the quality of all religious beliefs before the law, the inevitable implication is that religion isn't very important, at least insofar as the nation as a whole is concerned. It is perhaps significant in this regard that Americans are much more tolerant of religious aberrations than of political aberrations; people are much less disturbed by the advocacy of Shintoism than by the advocacy of socialism.

Now I am no more opposed to, or disappointed by, the Constitutional separation of church and state and the principle of religious toleration than I am opposed to or disappointed by the accomplishments of science. But the fact remains that both religious freedom and scientific progress have contributed to contemporary secularism, and thus to the loss of a sense of transcendence, and the decline of the ability to believe profoundly in the reality and relevance of God.

What has happened in Western culture, then, is a shift in perspective. It is not that belief in God has been discredited, or that counterevidence has been discovered. It is rather that belief in God has become irrelevant to modern man, because it seems unrelated to those things which concern him most. Contemporary man seems existentially to echo the famous (if not certainly authentic) words of Laplace, who propounded to Napoleon a nebular theory of the origin of the earth. The emperor is supposed to have asked why the activity of God was not mentioned, and Laplace is said to have replied, "Sir, I have no need of that hypothesis."<sup>6</sup>

### III

This brings us to a crucial question: To what extent, and in what ways, is there a crisis of belief in contemporary Adventism? The sociality of belief would suggest that there probably is some such crisis, and there seems to be evidence that the suggestion is correct.

For one thing, we *are* part of the modern world, and therefore, whether we like it or not, have modern minds. We are twentieth-century men, not first-century or medieval men, or even nineteenth-century men; and this unavoidable fact influences our understanding of ourselves, our world, and God. In particular, the fact that we are modern men means that we are scientifically oriented. We know, for instance, that lightning is a discharge of atmospheric electricity from one cloud to another, or perhaps from a cloud to the ground, and is a result of a certain combination of natural forces; we do not understand it simply (or even primarily) as an act of divine revelation of judgment — although we may believe that in certain cases it also has this kind of significance. Again, if a wife is distressed over an apparent inability to become pregnant, we are likely to advise her not just to pray (as did Hannah in the Hebrew temple at Shiloh) but also and (significantly) especially to consult a competent gynecologist. And in planning for the proclamation of the gospel we are concerned not only about the presence of the Holy Spirit but also about public relations and advertising; and if our efforts are less effective than we had anticipated, we are more likely to review our communications techniques than to search our lives for sin.

Our modernity also means that we are secular men — at least in the sense that we have important (to us) this-world concerns; we own cars and houses; and we are interested in social, economic, and political issues. For a variety of reasons we *are* concerned about inflation, crime rates, and the quality of public education. The point here is neither to bewail nor to defend our modernity, but to acknowledge it as a fact of life that, whether we like it or not, influences the way we understand the reality of God.<sup>7</sup>

But this is all inferential, supposing that in the church as well as in the culture, modernity and secularity threaten belief. There also may be some more direct evidence that suggests a less than vigorous belief in the reality and relevance of God. There may be, for example, an absence — or a decline — of the “behavioral consequences of belief,” the sorts of things that you ordinarily do if you believe. The behavioral consequences do not prove belief, for they may be artificially generated; but absence of these consequences would seem to be *prima facie* evidence that our belief is in trouble.

It is interesting, for example, to observe our homiletical preoccupation with experience, with the existential. This takes several forms: sometimes the emphasis is psychodynamic, with attention given to our anxieties and hostilities; and sometimes the concern is with interpersonal relationships, as we try to learn how to get along with people. But relatively rarely, it seems, is there a ringing affirmation of belief.



There also seems to be a lack of financial involvement. In the Sabbath school that I regularly attend, the average weekly offering is pathetically small; and this is but an acute instance of a church-wide situation. Jesus is reported to have said that "your heart will always be where your riches are;"<sup>8</sup> and the automotive hardware parked outside Adventist churches on Sabbath morning indicates that there may well be a crisis of belief somewhere. This supposition is strengthened by our preoccupation with immediacy rather than ultimacy. Among Adventists who are not ecclesiastical functionaries (that is, who are not paid to sound religious) — how often is there serious talk of ultimate values? There is probably no better index of our own secularism than the subject matter of our informal, spontaneous discourse. The conclusion seems unavoidable that contemporary Adventism, as part of the modern world, has not, and probably could not, escape the crisis of belief.

But we need not wring our hands and weep; for there are important resources which we may use in responding to this crisis of belief within the church. In the first place, the church itself can function as a kind of counterculture, affirming the reality and relevance of the transcendent. Our much-deplored tendency to live in "Adventist ghettos" may in fact be an instinctive endeavor to seek the support of such a "counterculture" in maintaining a view of the world that is at odds with radical secularism. There are limits, of course, to this function of the church: on the one hand, it can become an escape from the world; and, on the other hand, the church has its own problems with secularity.

In the second place, the church can devote some of its energy to showing the meaningfulness of belief by identifying those elements of human existence that point beyond it to that which is transcendent — the experience of existential wonder and the awe of self-consciousness, human rationality and the concern for "truth," moral freedom and obligation, the threat of ultimate emptiness, the refusal to be imprisoned by the finite, and the grace of goodness and creativity. This will not make anyone a believer; but it will help to make belief a live option.<sup>9</sup> And, in the third place, the Sabbath rest is an occasion for the kind of reflection that enables one to recognize these experiences as symbols of transcendence. For all of our interest in establishing the seventh-dayness of the Sabbath rest, we have just barely touched the experiential possibilities that are here.<sup>10</sup>

## IV

I have tried to make these four points:

1. Contemporary Adventism at its best is Adventism in touch with its intellectual environment, attempting to understand itself and its relation to that environment.

2. Belief — in the sense of what you hold to be the case about reality — is not something you can freely choose, and thus a “crisis of belief” is best understood as an *inability* rather than a *refusal* to believe.

3. The current crisis of belief in American religion is a result of the prevailing secularism of our culture; and the main contributor to this secularism is science and its impressive technological accomplishments.

4. Finally, contemporary Adventism cannot escape this kind of crisis; but it has within it the possibility of responding to the crisis constructively.

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### REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 This paper was presented at the 1970 fall retreat of the Southern Pacific Region of the Association of Adventist Forums.
- 2 Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1958), book one, p. 389.
- 3 The reason the New Testament sometimes sounds as if belief were a matter of choice is that the Greek word for *believing* also means *having faith*, which includes the volitional element of trust. The word is *pisteuo*. Sometimes it means simply believing that something is the case, as in James 2:19: “You believe that there is only one God? Good! The demons also believe — and tremble with fear.” And sometimes it includes the idea of self-commitment, as typically in the Fourth Gospel, which says (3:16) that everyone who believes in God’s Son has eternal life.
- 4 Adapted from Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company 1970), p. 6.
- 5 John Macquarrie, *God and Secularity* (volume three of *New Directions in Theology Today*; Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1967), p. 48.
- 6 This anecdote appears in many popular discussions of science and religion, including C. F. von Weizsäcker, *The Relevance of Science* (New York: Harper and Row 1964), p. 25; and Ian A. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall 1966), p. 58.
- 7 Most of the two preceding paragraphs appeared previously in the essay *Affirming the Reality of God* in *The Stature of Christ: Essays in Honor of Edward Heppenstall*, edited by Vern Carner and Gary Stanhiser (Loma Linda, California: privately published 1970), pp. 13-14. Reprinted by permission.
- 8 Matthew 6:21.
- 9 See *The Stature of Christ*, pp. 17-18, for a brief elaboration of these elements of transcendence.
- 10 A very useful introduction to this aspect of the Sabbath is provided by Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Harper and Row 1968).