

Adventism from the USA to Scandinavia

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BIBLICISM, APOKALYPTIK, UTOPI: Adventismans historiska utformning i USA samt dess svenska utveckling till o. 1939

BIBLICISM, APOCALYPTIC, UTOPIA: The historical development of Adventism in the United States and in Sweden to about 1939

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The stated purpose of the author is to present as "broad and objective a picture of the Advent movement as possible" (p. 17). For this reason the sources must be examined critically from their political, sociological, theological-dogmatic, and psychological aspects, and the "church historical method" must be employed (p. 17). With this objective in mind, Lindén takes distance from other treatments of the subject. Some of these have been limited to a treatment of the Millerite movement, or to some aspects of it.¹ Other studies have focused on Adventism but are either mainly descriptive² or written from a confessional or an apologetic viewpoint.³ Only one of these investigations, that of Everett N. Dick, is complimented with "an obvious striving for objectivity" (p. 15).⁴

Though these later works have influenced the understanding of the Adventist movement in the 1840s (Nichol), and cannot be passed by in an investigation of the Millerite movement (Froom), they must be read "critically" because of their apologetic nature (p. 15). This is particularly so with regard to Nichol and Froom, who portray Adventism "more or less in a deterministic way, as the result of a transcendental event, sovereign and far above the factors which affect the making of religious movements" (p. 15).

I

Having thus laid the competition safely to rest, Lindén sets himself to his task of describing the early history of Adventism in the United States. The story of Adventism begins with the story of the Millerite movement. That movement was notable, first, for biblicism, mainly in its preoccupation with the books of Daniel and the Apocalypse. Second, the movement was thoroughly apocalyptic, proclaiming the imminence of the end of the world, an event that would take place at the parousia sometime in 1843 — subsequently postponed to 1844. Third, the movement was distinguished by utopian ideas, particularly through its concern with antislavery and tem-

perance. However, the Millerite movement was "more of a normal event, typical of its time, than has been admitted by many earlier scholars who themselves have not studied the primary church historical sources" (p. 59).

The Albany conference in 1845 brought the Millerite movement to the realization that it had run out of time, but it also led to the crystallization within that movement of a radical (left-wing) minority group which understood the 1844 event as one that closed the door of God's grace to the world. It is within this group that the birth of Seventh-day Adventism is to be sought (p. 67).

The early history of Seventh-day Adventism cannot be understood, Linden recognizes, without attention to Ellen G. White (referred to throughout his book as EGW). And since study of EGW has thus far not been comprehensive, or "scientific," Linden turns to this task (p. 101).⁵ EGW's relationship to Adventism is seen in two ways. First, she was a product of her time. Visionary religious leaders fostered in isolation from the established churches and in the biblical apocalyptic imagery belonged in the "utopian optimistic milieu" of the American frontier culture (pp. 108-109). EGW was a visionary whose ecstatic messages, if viewed phenomenologically, were distinctive of frontier religion (p. 110). Linden takes exception to common explanations of the visions: hysteria, epilepsy, hallucinations, mesmerism, etc. (p. 115). However, he describes the visions as cataleptic-like conditions and cites the opinion of William S. Sadler, a physician, that the end of the "open visions" in her middle life should be associated with the menopause (p. 111).

Second, EGW was intimately related to the rapid development of the left-wing Millerites into what became the Seventh-day Adventist church. Thus, in the 1840s EGW followed the radical Millerites' so-called "Shut Door" theory (1844 meant the end of God's saving grace to anyone who rejected the proclamation during the months before the October 1844 date). Here Linden takes strong issue with Nichol's interpretation of EGW's visions of this period, especially his conclusion that she had no visions supporting the abortive Shut Door theory (pp. 74-84).⁶ This conclusion may be coupled with another, namely, that EGW commonly made new views or methods (viz., the Sabbath, p. 86; tithe, p. 121; health, p. 147) legitimate through her testimonies based on visions. Since the Shut Door theory was abandoned by EGW and by Adventism in the 1850s, Linden concludes that EGW's positions, though based on visions, could at times be overruled by herself and her followers, as in the case of the Shut Door theory. This conclusion is rejected by those who consider all her visions to have been a gift of the Holy Spirit.

The exclusive Shut Door view of Adventism was abandoned by EGW as early as the 1850s (p. 128), and was positively rejected in her books *Steps to Christ* and *The Desire of Ages*, which reflect both the internal religious experience of Christians such as the Moravians and the Methodists and the imitatio-Christi-theology of perfectionism found in her *Testimonies* (pp. 132-133). By her influence on the 1888 Minneapolis conference and through the two books mentioned, Adventism came to express its affiliation with the theology of the American evangelical churches rather than exclusively with apocalyptic and utopian ideas (p. 135).

Two further topics are given attention. First, *health reform*. In the early years of her ministry EGW had little interest in it. She is quoted as claiming around 1850 that

praise to God, loud shouting, and anointing with oil would secure healing for the sick (pp. 146-147). However, after an 1863 vision she gradually adopted a variety of health reform programs (p. 147). Although influenced by the health reform leaders of her time, she added her own eschatological ideas, perhaps ascetic motives, and a measure of moderation (pp. 153-154). Second, *eschatology*. The eschatology of EGW must be understood in the light of the apocalyptic movements of her time (p. 163) and of the social and political conditions (Sabbath persecutions in the South) of the 1880s and 1890s (pp. 162-163).

The conclusion to be drawn from Linden's treatment must be that the influence of EGW in the Seventh-day Adventist church is the result of long development, that the content of her guidance did not spring full grown, and that she was affected (perhaps unconsciously) by many traceable influences on her messages to the church through visions and written testimonies. No matter what one thinks of her visions, this way of looking at EGW tends to produce an attitude at variance with how her life and work are portrayed by the Ellen G. White Estate in Washington, D. C. The official view, Linden feels, has a tendency to idealize EGW, and in some cases it has been removed from historical reality (pp. 166-167).

II

In the second section of the book Linden treats Adventism among the Swedish people. Swedish immigrants, particularly Baptist congregations, became interested in the ideas of Seventh-day Adventism. Later (1905), a powerful Swedish department was established in the General Conference (p. 189). This dynamic department insisted on working exclusively for Swedish immigrants and their descendants (p. 191), and it came to influence the development of Adventism also in the homeland.

Seventh-day Adventism was brought to Scandinavia by a converted Danish immigrant, John G. Matteson (b. 1835). Because of initial opposition in Denmark, he made his headquarters in Oslo, Norway, and from there the movement spread to Sweden. The Scandinavian Adventist church is discussed from the outset as an American church seeking entrance and adjustment in a different geographical, political, and cultural situation. Is there such a thing as Swedish Adventism? If so, how does it differ from the parent church? The correct answers to these questions would hold tremendous implications for Adventism's self-understanding.

Linden points out that Matteson's theology was influenced by his "individualistic exposition of Adventism" (p. 221). For example, his sermon collection did not include one sermon on EGW as the charismatic leader of Adventism, a fact that Linden relates to Matteson's recognition of a "negative disposition toward an American prophetess which was prevalent in Norway" (p. 225). This attitude developed into a mistrust between EGW and her son William C. White, on the one hand, and Matteson on the other: "Ellen G. White's critical disposition toward Matteson was complemented by his distrustful attitude toward her" (p. 226). Matteson is also supposed to have been introduced to Uriah Smith's unofficial view of the "Spirit of prophecy" in the 1880s by Smith himself (p. 226). "It is obvious," says Linden, "that Matteson attempted to suit Adventism to the Scandinavian religious ecology, viz., his view of EGW" (p. 227).

In Sweden, eschatological and apocalyptic ideas preceded the arrival of Seventh-day Adventism from Norway (pp. 232 ff.). It was introduced through the usual methods of literature distribution, revival meetings, and the work of itinerant lay preachers. Again, the nucleus of the Adventist congregations came from the Baptists. The energetic offensive (prepared by Adventist literature) began in 1880, and by 1886 ten congregations had been established, with 250 members and an additional 73 Sabbathkeepers (p. 258).

The work in Sweden had the special interest of the American church leaders — including EGW, who was present in 1886 at the important Orebro conference where the ties between the Swedish and American Adventists were reaffirmed (pp. 276-278). She emphasized the importance of kindness and courtesy in Christian work; plans were laid for added efforts in the literature work and the revival meetings; the ethical and theological principles of the church were drawn up; and the church headquarters were moved to Stockholm. Fourteen years later, at the turn of the century, there were 756 church members in Sweden, of whom 176 lived in the capital (p. 297). Though the author considers Scandinavian Adventism an acclimatized form of the parent church since the time of Matteson, he credits the American influence and its more aggressive methods with having done much to further the progress of the movement in Sweden.

That progress was seen especially in the health work. The emphasis on health has its roots in the utopian tendencies in the Millerite movement, in the scientific (notably the biological) interests of the 1800s, and can be related to an "immanent eschatology" in line with the theories in vogue at that time. Moreover, it introduced Adventism to scientific work (p. 300).

Before discussing the impact of the health message on Scandinavia, Linden examines in some detail the conflict between John Harvey Kellogg, founder of Adventism's health program, and the church. He portrays it as a struggle over the role of the medical work of the church, not over theology, and thus over the future direction of the church (p. 337).

The Scandinavian equivalent of Kellogg was a Danish physician named Carl Ottosen, who studied under Kellogg at Battle Creek for a time and who later returned to Denmark and founded Skodsborg Badesanatorium, a Battle-Creek-like institution near Copenhagen. He was a good physician, a great lecturer, and an able administrator. Like Kellogg, he also fell into conflict with the church. Linden quotes a complaint made in 1905 by Arthur G. Daniells before William C. White about Ottosen: "I brought him into my room, and we spent many hours in conversation concerning these questions. He asked many questions which led to the most penetrating discussion of the whole situation. We separated without me knowing anything about the position he holds. *Therefore I cannot escape the suspicion that he is very sympathetic towards Dr. Waggoner and Dr. Kellogg*" (p. 346).

Unlike Kellogg, however, Ottosen added to his roles as physician, author, administrator, and lecturer, that of "Adventist pastor." He participated in church work on the Sabbath (p. 345). Like Percy T. Magan, he was able to navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis in the "treacherous denominational politics during the Kellogg crisis" (p. 346). Thus no open split occurred between the two spheres of Adventism

in Denmark. That was also true of the medical work in Sweden, which developed along the lines it took in Denmark, though on a much smaller scale.

Without giving any explanation, Linden skips the development of the Swedish Adventist church during the years 1900-20. The story is resumed with a church isolated from the United States, its progress slowed by excessive administration and by evangelistic methods that were no longer effective (pp. 384-385). Why Linden says nothing whatever about these significant developments is puzzling.

The years 1920-39, on the other hand, are marked by a revived American influence on Swedish Adventism, and by Swedish reaction to it. The new American influence on Swedish Adventism is centered in the administration of Gustaf E. Nord, Swedish-American pastor and principal of Broadview College. In 1920 Nord became leader of the Adventist church in Sweden, and his leadership brought a regeneration to Swedish Adventism. He and his associates renewed the emphasis on Adventism's peculiar position in Christendom: its relation to the Reformation; its opposition to the Roman Catholic church; its emphasis on the law, the Sabbath, and eschatology (p. 401). The American approach to evangelism, reinforced by American gospel songs, brought results. From Nord's meetings in Stockholm, 35 members joined the church in 1922, 19 in 1923, and 24 in 1925 (p. 395).

Parallel with this "Americanization" of Swedish Adventism, another trend of home-born Swedish "moderate" (but not schismatic) Adventism appeared — differing from Swedish-American Adventism not in doctrine but only in method and style, notably in public evangelism and in its relationship to other Christian churches (p. 405). The leading voice in this development, Carl Gidlund's (p. 402), did not stress that which separates the Adventists from other Christians but stressed that which unites all evangelical Christians (p. 403). Gidlund emphasized the authority of the Bible for Christians and made no reference to "EGW's 'inspired' writings" in his public meetings, though he certainly gave them a place in the congregation and in the baptismal classes. "To read EGW in the light of her own history can be said to be a sign of European Swedish Adventism during this period" (p. 403). Also, the interpretation of 1844 removed this event from the act of atonement understood to be completed at the Cross (pp. 403-404). These developments diminished Adventism's isolation in Sweden and furthered ecumenical relations with other churches (p. 404).

The reaction to the American influence was completed in the 1930s. By 1936 Nord left his position as principal of the college. Though the Swedish-American pastors continued their work, 1939 saw the end of their offensive (p. 434).

The description of these developments in Swedish Adventism from 1920 to 1939 raises the question of Christianity and culture within the framework of Adventism. One gets the impression that Linden feels that Adventism must take cognizance of the culture around it (cf. p. 387). At the same time this chapter of the book appears less persuasive than some others. Some lines seem to be overdrawn, and one is left to wonder about the accuracy, not to mention the objectivity, of the author. This uncertainty is not put to rest by the chapter notes, which date many interviews in March 1971. Since the book was apparently published in April or May 1971, the impression that this last chapter is still in the making is hard to resist.

A book as large as this one, and covering such a scope of material, cannot avoid

containing weaknesses — and this one does have some. In places it reads like a survey, but elsewhere it reveals scrutiny of the sources and thoughtful insight. Unfortunately there are intolerably many typographical mistakes.

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 - 4 Everett N. Dick, *The Adventist crisis of 1843-1844* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin 1930).
 - 5 See E. Schick, *Ekstase in Protestantismus*, in Theodor Spoerri's *Beitrage zur Ekstase* (New York: Karger 1968).
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 - 6 See Nichol, *Ellen G. White and Her Critics*, pp. 202-238.