

A History of Adventist Views on Church and State Relations

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Although in general the Seventh-day Adventist church has remained separatist in its views on church-state relations, the practice has been pragmatic rather than absolute. Three matters in particular have affected the church outlook and actions: the educational establishment and its relation to the United States government, the proper role of the state in legislating for the welfare of its citizenry, and the effect of the seventh-day Sabbath observance on relationship to the government. This essay treats the two latter issues.

I

Historically, the Adventist church began with a definite distrust of government. Most members were Millerites, "allergic" to legal church organization, in expectation of Christ's return shortly. Many members had been expelled from their former churches. With a reading of religious history that indicated powerful churches in the past had used governmental authority against religious minorities, Adventists disliked any relationship between the state and the church. Besides, if Christ were returning soon, what was the need of governmental recognition? Reliance on the civil arm of the state constituted the "fornication of Babylon with the kings of the earth" to many early Seventh-day Adventists. Yet, for a number of reasons, increasingly it became essential for the Adventists to organize.

Lack of recognized leadership was hurtful in a number of ways. It was hard to restrain the growing independence, and even fanaticism, of a number of church workers. Important undertakings essential to the church missionary program could not be financed. No one was appropriately responsi-

ble for church properties. These issues came to a crisis when James White, editor of the *Review and Herald*, refused to be personally responsible for its books and properties.¹

The controversy following White's forthright action indicated the reluctance of some members to assume any kind of relationship with the federal government. After organization was effected in May 1863, the problem of how male church members should relate themselves to the Civil War arose. The church was critical of President Abraham Lincoln's position that he wished to save the Union rather than to free the slaves. Practical considerations took precedence over theoretical ones, however, and noncombatant arrangements satisfactory to both the state and the church were made. Adventist inductees entered alternate forms of national activity suggested by the War Department and this avoided the taking of life or the violation of the Sabbath.²

Acceptance of the Sabbath bequeathed to the church a particular theological understanding. To observe the seventh day as Sabbath was nothing unusual for Christians. Throughout Christian history, individuals and groups had recognized its significance. Adventist integration of the Sabbath and the sanctuary doctrines, together with belief in an investigative judgment, however, led to emphasis on the immutability of God's law — and consequently the need to observe the Sabbath appointed by God rather than by man. Adventists reasoned that not the state, nor a dominant church, nor human custom could rule that the Sabbath should be celebrated on another day. Two years before the church organized, John Nevins Andrews wrote his *History of the Sabbath and the First Day of the Week* to demonstrate that the change in the day of observing the Sabbath came from man and not God.

Once organized, Adventists found the Sabbath-Sunday question to be an immediate problem. The founding of the National Reform Association in 1863 created an interdenominational union determined to place in the United States Constitution a religious amendment, to be followed with national laws reflecting God's moral laws. To this new society, Sunday enforcement was fundamental — important evidence of the nation's determination to atone for the tragedy of slavery and the Civil War.

Adventist leaders recognized the effectiveness of the public campaign launched by the National Reform Association. Protestant Americans — who already viewed with mounting dismay the increase of intemperance and secularization spawned by the war — feared that "liberals" were dechristianizing the nation. Their Protestant sensibilities and patriotic pride were

irritated by the immigration from Ireland and central Europe of an avalanche of Roman Catholics who observed the "Continental Sunday." After attending Sunday mass, these new Americans spent the rest of the "sacred hours" drinking in saloons, singing popular songs, and destroying a "proper" Sunday atmosphere. The solution offered by the National Reform Association — to close the saloons on Sunday — appealed to many legislators, senators, house representatives, judges, and educators. With the support thus provided, the Association worked to secure Sunday laws carrying severe penalties for violation.³

At first these reformers were unsuccessful. Their bill aroused not only the reaction of Congress but also the distinct interest of the public in religious liberty during 1874 and 1875. President Ulysses S. Grant demanded in 1875 that church and state be kept separate; both political parties included important resolutions on religious freedom in their respective campaign platforms; and Senator James G. Blaine unsuccessfully attempted, on December 14, 1875, to capitalize on the public enthusiasm by sponsoring a constitutional amendment bill designed to place the first clause of the Bill of Rights on the state scene. The National Reform Association waited, prepared, consolidated. Four years later it began a new campaign for a national Sunday bill: regional secretaries spoke at national conventions, wrote press articles, preached sermons, lobbied among eminent citizens, and visited seminaries and universities. As a result, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, and New Jersey passed Sunday laws carrying stiff penalties for violation.

In California, the issue became so serious that the Adventists allied with the League of Freedom (representing liquor dealers, saloon owners, and a diverse body of immigrants) to defeat pending Sunday measures sponsored by the Home Protection Society. This temporary partnership seemed to be necessary because the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the Prohibition Party (which also sought Sunday enforcement legislation because long working hours prevented sustained drinking on most days of the week and only on Sunday could workers drink their fill) had joined the National Reform Association to make a powerful temperance alliance. The Adventist entry into California's political arena with these strange allies proved effective. Using all available media, in 1882 the Adventists helped the League of Freedom to defeat the Home Protection Society at the polls.⁴

Sunday arrests in Arkansas and Tennessee marked the continuation of the planned Sunday offensive. Arkansas courts arrested and convicted five Seventh-day Adventists. Tennessee courts sent others to the chain gang. In

this year, 1885, the General Conference debated measures to be taken to combat these new perils. By publishing the *Sabbath Sentinel*, and later the more successful *American Sentinel*, the Adventist church so publicized the Arkansas cases that freedom was restored to the imprisoned Adventists. Less successfully in Tennessee, the case of R. M. King, a farmer, was brought before a federal court. Admitting that Tennessee had punished King unjustly, this court emphasized that Tennessee's Sunday law was both impractical and unjust. On the basis of this ruling, the Adventist church proposed to take King's case before the United States Supreme Court. Unfortunately, King died, but publicizing the case convinced many Americans that Sunday enforcement was basically wrong. King's death aroused much indignation. The popular press agitated public opinion and created an effective opposition to the future activities of Sunday promotion groups.

Recognizing that the public had been alienated, the National Reform Association and its allies now emphasized their desire to prevent the exploitation of working people who were compelled to labor on Sunday. This pleased the trade unions and ensured some measure of support from them, as illustrated by the Blair bill. Representatives of the WCTU persuaded Senator Henry W. Blair to sponsor a bill designed to prohibit Sunday mails, Sunday trains, and both army and navy Sunday parades. Developing strong and coherent support from major churches (including the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal church, the Baptist Home Missionary Society, the Presbyterian General Assembly, and other important religious groups), the bill's supporters stressed their keen interest in the measure as deriving from their concern for the industrial laborers. Thus the bill gained so much popular favor in 1888 that Ellen G. White wrote of its danger.⁵

The Blair Sunday legislation failed during the Fifty-first Session of Congress. Although the immediate danger had passed, the bill provided a foundation for a reactivated Sunday movement. Supported by strong political, social, and religious interests, Sunday law supporters continued to advocate Sunday enforcement in its new social guise. By 1889, the influence of the movement had become so strong that Cardinal James Gibbons, articulate primate of Baltimore, endorsed it. This endorsement came as a surprising change of attitude for the Catholic cardinal, who had previously been a leading spokesman for the "Continental Sunday" and an opponent of the "Puritan Sunday."⁶

The massing strength of Sunday enforcement support alarmed the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, and the church formed press committees to alert Americans to the new threat to their religious freedom.

These committees formed a basis for the Religious Liberty Association, later to become an important department of the General Conference.

Sunday law supporters now introduced a legislative bill calling for prevention of Sunday labor within the District of Columbia. The bill was benevolently worded — stressing protection for the workers' interests and including an exemption clause for those observing a different Sabbath — but its real force was to provide the initial step for Congress on the road of Sunday religious legislation. The passage of such a bill for the District of Columbia could precipitate similar legislation on a national scale. Introduced by Representative John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky and supported by representatives from the Knights of Labor, the bill failed because Congress decided, despite all protests to the contrary, that it was religious.⁷

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All attempts to secure national Sunday legislation had failed. However, in the closing months of 1891, Sunday legislation advocates chose the upcoming Chicago World Exposition as the occasion to introduce to the House a further legislative measure requiring that the Exposition be closed on Sundays if it accepted an appropriation from Congress. The bill was further strengthened by a Supreme Court ruling of February 29, 1892, in which Chief Justice David J. Brewer delivered a Court majority decision in *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States* to the effect that a federal law banning alien contracts did not nullify the right of a Christian church to employ a foreign pastor. Of significance to the pending bill was the Court's reasoning in reaching this decision. America, the Court stressed, a "Christian nation" from earliest times, could not victimize a Christian church. This theocratic emphasis nullified in principle the whole idea of church-state separatism. Not surprisingly, both the Senate and the House accepted the Sunday proposals for the Chicago Exposition; and on August 5, 1892, President Grover Cleveland signed the bill into law.⁸

Alonzo T. Jones, leader of the Religious Liberty Association, argued that this Sunday law demonstrated the great pressure that combined religious groups could apply to Congress. He believed that other national Sunday laws would follow. But, despite the great momentum the Sunday question reached during the 1890s, in the last years of that century it lost the compelling and frightening dimensions it had once held. The Religious Liberty Association continued to defend Seventh-day Adventists accused of Sunday violation, but gradually the temperance societies recognized the folly of prosecuting individuals for observing a day other than Sunday. Intolerance, the societies realized, weakened their influence on the public. Besides, working hours were shorter, and merely to close saloons on Sunday no longer was

an effective temperance program. Rising public interest in temperance had developed when, in 1908, Will Irwin and Arthur Gleason wrote a series of articles in *Collier's* exposing the corrupt alliance of liquor interests, commercialized vice, business, and politics. To attack the whole liquor traffic now seemed the best policy.⁹

II

This new strategy of the temperance bodies enabled the Adventist church to change its policy. Adventists recognized the value of an increasingly favorable climate of public opinion as a background for health evangelism work. Church reorganization in 1901 had provided a broader General Conference structure that included physicians and other lay professionals. This restructuring placed Adventists in a situation where they could mount a temperance educational endeavor to accompany the prohibitionist effort to secure national legislation that would close the liquor trade.

How far was the Adventist church's point of view on prohibitionist legislation consonant with its concepts of church-state separatism? The Presbyterian church, to avoid appearance of violating separatist theory, operated through such voluntary societies as the Prohibitionist Party and the WCTU. Adventists did not take this position. Rather, they considered that liquor dealers had no right to tempt individuals into vicious, habit-forming customs and that the state and the nation had no right to interfere with religious practice on the basis of their welfare powers. Governing bodies could justly legislate, however, to protect the citizen from physical danger. Adventists believed that the church had the right to lobby to save the public from the dangers of alcohol.

In other respects also Adventists have not followed a strict view of church-state separation. When the South Africa Land Company offered a free tract of land in Rhodesia, the Adventist church accepted it. The Religious Liberty Association leader, Alonzo T. Jones, insisted that the South African Land Company was an agent for Great Britain. However, Ellen White, then in Australia, wrote to General Conference leaders in Washington and advised them not only to accept the land, but also to accept tax-exemption privileges for church institutions. Her letter stressed that practical realities, rather than doctrinaire theory, should govern decisions in such situations. If no principle is violated, the church should act on the merits presented.¹⁰

During prohibition hearings in 1908, Seventh-day Adventist temperance leaders admitted that Adventists opposed temperance legislation when it

was associated with Sunday enforcement. But, since intemperance vitally affected the well-being of the individual, society, and the nation, legislation designed to prevent its spread fell within the proper scope of government; and the church would do all it could to secure such legislation.

Adventists played a major part in the prohibition drive. War shortages compelled Congress to assist the prohibition effort by forbidding the use of grain in the production of distilled spirits. Later legislation limited the amount of foodstuffs that could be used for the manufacture of beer. Prohibitionist endeavors, combined with these external factors, brought the passage of the Volstead Act. Referring to this act, Charles S. Longacre, strong Adventist temperance and religious liberty leader, commented on the greatly improved image of the Seventh-day Adventist church because of its role in the campaign.

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This public image served the church well in years to come. During two world wars, Adventists developed excellent relationships with the government and learned how to work with state officials. During World War II the church instituted a General Conference War Service Commission to help ensure that Adventist draftees would receive noncombatant status and sabbatical rights and to train chaplains to serve in the armed forces.

The appointment of military chaplains was a significant departure from earlier Adventist views. In the September 18, 1890, issue of the *American Sentinel*, Alonzo T. Jones had written approvingly of a Baptist sermon that argued that church appointing of chaplains, with military concurrence, to entry into the armed forces struck at "the very first principle of free government."¹¹ However, for eminently sensible reasons, the church now recognized the value of securing army and navy officers able to protect young Adventists' constitutional rights during military service. Summarizing this change in church thinking as to its relations with the federal government, Francis D. Nichol, *Review and Herald* editor, stressed that Adventists were wartime *cooperators* with the state while continuing their essential work of Christian witnessing and healing.¹²

III

The increased influence of the Roman Catholic church after the close of World War II led to a renewal of the Sunday enforcement threat. During the nineteenth century, Roman Catholics had generally supported the "Continental Sunday." Now the Catholic church changed its position and became a leading advocate of Sunday enforcement legislation. This new stance was more ominous because of Catholicism's increased power. Adventists became

deeply conscious of that power when President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Myron C. Taylor as his personal representative to the Vatican. The Adventist church protested that nomination, as did other Protestant groups and persons, including Charles Clayton Morrison, the eloquent editor of *Christian Century*.

This relationship between the United States and the Vatican presaged a new role for the Catholic church in the rebuilding of war-torn Europe after the Second World War. As Communism swept in from eastern Europe, threatening to play a decisive part in both Italy and France, Roman Catholicism constituted the only religious, political, and ideological force capable of stemming its onrushing tide. Catholic-oriented political parties developed in Italy, France, Austria, and elsewhere in western Europe. The uniting of American financial and economic aid with Catholic political activity seemed the best hope for shattered Europe. Even "Protestant England" maintained important diplomatic contacts with the Papacy.

Catholic significance abroad was matched by its influence at home. Because of the rising significance of Catholic votes, Alfred E. Smith, even though he lost the presidential election in 1928, gained a preponderance of support over Herbert C. Hoover in American urban centers.¹³ These Catholic votes became even more important after World War II, as demonstrated by John F. Kennedy's victory in the 1960 presidential elections. Roman Catholicism exercised considerable influence both in trade unions and in governmental offices and thus compelled even city governments to consider its political strength.

Fears that this growing Catholic strength might now affect many church members were shared by Adventists and other Protestant groups. In 1948, Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (POAU) organized to oppose Roman Catholic encroachments on the educational scene. Disliking attempts by Catholic leaders to gain government funds for the Catholic parochial education system, Seventh-day Adventists joined POAU in resisting what they regarded as violation of the First Amendment.

Particularly concerned by the new developments affecting church-state matters in the United States, Adventist leaders discussed the church's views on this subject at the Autumn Council of 1948. For the first time the Adventist church formulated an official position on church-state relations, stressing a belief in strict separatism. But in practice, the Adventist position remained separatist only to the point where a risk might develop to the church's control over its institutions.

During the 1950s Adventists continued to oppose American presidents' practice of maintaining close relationships with the Vatican. But it was the revival of public interest in Sunday enforcement laws that was of particular concern. Initially this new interest stemmed from the superficial religious revival of the period. Fear of an uncertain future, the possibility of atomic destruction of civilization, the threat of Communism in the cold war, and the increase of crime in society caused many Americans to return to the churches. Lax Sunday observance seemed a plausible symbol of the materialism of the time. Recognizing the new interest in Sunday enforcement, religious leaders again supported the Sunday movement.

But now the movement seemed potentially more dangerous than it had in the 1890s. Many Americans were moving to the suburbs, even to rural districts. Businesses followed, utilizing rural locations that lessened land costs for building and parking. Discount stores discovered that they were able to sell more on Sundays than on all weekdays combined. American families welcomed the new urban shopping centers, which freed them from downtown traffic and parking problems. Naturally these new advantages took business away from downtown merchants, who then became ardent supporters of the Sunday closing movement. Trade unions also supported the Sunday program because it would provide free weekends for union members. And the Roman Catholic church placed its powerful influence on the side of Sunday law advocates.

Earlier, the Catholic church had endorsed the "Continental Sunday," because at that time most of its members were from Europe and were accustomed to their way of observing Sunday. Now, opposition to Communism in the cold war, dislike of the prevailing secularism, and the new standing of Catholics in American society altered American Catholicism's viewpoint. As Dean M. Kelley, church historian and commentator on religious issues, put it, Catholic officials supported Sunday laws because Rome constituted herself as "arbiter and proprietor of all legislation concerned with moral and religious issues."¹⁴

New pressures for Sunday enforcement laws brought varying decisions from federal courts. In Pennsylvania, one court supported the strict Sunday closing law vindicated by the state supreme court. Another federal court reversed the decision of the Massachusetts Supreme Court when it substantiated earlier Sunday law decisions. Thus the United States Supreme Court was forced to take several Sunday law cases under constitutional review.

Various religious and economic interests were involved in the cases to be reviewed by the United States Supreme Court. A Massachusetts case con-

cerned the Crown Kosher Supermarket, a Springfield Jewish firm that closed on Saturday for religious reasons. To recoup, it opened on Sunday to serve a large Jewish community. In Pennsylvania and Maryland, the principal plaintiffs were discount stores that opened on Sunday for economic reasons alone. These stores also claimed that Sunday laws violated the First Amendment, by establishing a religion, and the Fourteenth Amendment, by denying equal protection of the laws. The Adventist church entered an *amicus curiae* brief, stating that Adventists opposed Sunday enforcement laws as violating the First Amendment. But merchants such as the Retail Dealers International Association Union also filed *amicus curiae* briefs asking the Supreme Court to uphold a "community day of rest" acceptable to all Americans.

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The decision of the Warren Supreme Court stated that Sunday closing laws operate like other health, welfare, or safety laws imposed by state governments. These laws, designed for the benefit and protection of the community, carry an incidental religious relationship. This relationship is unfortunate, but such laws are within the legitimate powers of the state. Dissenting statements by some of the Supreme Court justices opposed this interpretation, but the majority opinion established the long-sought position of advocates of Sunday enforcement laws that such laws are not religious in character.¹⁵ Even more significant to the Adventist church was an accompanying ruling by the Court that exemptions on a one-day-in-seven basis are not satisfactory, since they undermine the government's desire to provide a rest day free of commercial noise and activity.

At first the thrust of this 1961 Supreme Court ruling was softened. Cities and districts that depended on tourist trade fought for a relaxation of enforcement because the bulk of their trade was on Sunday. People must be able to buy beer and ice cream, even if mothers were forbidden to purchase milk. Judges, too, differed in their enforcement of Sunday laws. Where courts were overloaded by such cases, judges refused to take additional Sunday cases, because more significant crimes required their attention.¹⁶ In some states (for example, Massachusetts), Roman Catholic newspapers played an important part in forcing a rigorous Sunday code. *The Pilot*, for instance, forced state senators to reverse their vote on an exemption for observers of another day than Sunday.¹⁷

IV

The Sunday situation today remains similar to what it was after the 1961 Supreme Court decision. However, many Seventh-day Adventists wonder

whether the fuel crisis will provoke new legislation of Sunday laws. This view seems plausible, since legislative bills have in fact attempted to close most stores and gas stations on Sunday. Adventist religious liberty representatives are conscious of this situation, but consider that at this time they have insufficient reason to believe that the Sunday movements they anticipate will be the result of the present crisis. Even so, the Sunday movement is far advanced. An increasingly "religious" climate in society may bring important developments.

What should be the attitude of Adventists today? As this essay demonstrates, the church has been consistent in opposing combinations of church and state that could take from it control of its institutions or deprive members of free exercise of religion. With its specific mission in the world, the Adventist church hopes to promote the cause of religious freedom. History shows that when religious liberty ceases to be sufficiently valued, the democratic and Christian advantages resident in that liberty are quickly lost.

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- 13 John D. Hicks has pointed out that Hoover, in the 1928 presidential election, consistently stressed what he called "the American system," while Alfred E. Smith, who was both a Roman Catholic and a product of the cities, made his appeal to the urban population. The result of the election demonstrated the new importance of the urban masses. See John D. Hicks, *Republican Ascendancy 1921-1933* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers 1960), pp. 204-212. Probably these facts have a bearing on the rather consistently Republican flavor of Adventist "politics" in America. Certainly this was a continuing phenomenon in American political life.
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