

Vocational Schizophrenia and the God of Creation

51

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What relation do you see between your profession or field of study and your religion?

Many conscientious Adventists have asked themselves this question since high school days, when they were wondering, "What am I going to be when I grow up?" In college the question may have taken another form: "What does my church commitment, just deepened and refreshed in this week of prayer, have to do with the excitement I feel about my new class in physiology . . . or economics . . . or Civil War history?" In graduate school the probing continues: "What meaning does this specialized education — this enormous time, this concentration, this expenditure of energy — have for my conversion experience?"

When the professional person finally begins his chosen work, the wondering may continue — especially if the field is theoretical mathematics or nineteenth-century German poetry. "How do I justify my work from the religious viewpoint? Does my field have anything to do with being an Adventist?" Those who are involved in the education of ministers, doctors, or teachers enjoy honored places in the work of the Adventist church. But what about those who are engaged in scholarly research or whose time is spent inspiring students to create abstract art or to write short stories? What relevance does such activity have to the mission of the Adventist church?

I

Some answers I've heard go like this: "I'll always be an Adventist. But to tell you the truth, I'm not overly pious." Or, "I'm in mathematics because I

like it. I'll be a member of whatever church is close by, but I'm not cut out to be religious all the time."

Many do not answer this way, of course. Most Adventist teachers who teach in Adventist schools do so because of religious conviction. When I ask them why they are teaching students to become architects or physicists or concert pianists, they may answer: "How many Adventist concert pianists are there? Come on — how many?" I have to admit not many. "There's your answer!" they respond. "If I teach students to go into this new area of concert performance, they will go out into the world and rub shoulders with many people who would never enter an Adventist church or attend an Adventist evangelistic campaign. If the students I teach lead good Adventist lives, they will be asked why they are Adventists. Then my students will be able to share their faith — which may lead to Bible study and eventually to new members for the church."

I nod. I agree. Bringing people to a "decision for Christ" is transcendently important. Nothing is more crucial. While we are conversing about religion, I notice that my friend is sober, serious. But when our conversation shifts and we begin talking about music, his eyes light up. His hands move. His voice brightens. He knows he should be enthusiastic about religion too. But he loves music. Vocationally he is an Adventist schizophrenic.

He is not alone. Hosts of Adventists occupied in education will work mathematical or scientific problems at great length, excitedly comparing notes with colleagues. These same persons are also conscientious about their religion — stopping work to go to religious services or to witness in share-your-faith meetings. To them, work and religion are two separate activities.

Now — if these Adventists feel that their own lives are split, why are they surprised or hurt when they discover that many others in the church share their schizophrenia about the significance of education? They should not be surprised when visiting preachers ask about the relevance of basic research to giving the gospel. Their own self-doubts are only being expressed bluntly in the questions of pastors and conference administrators: "What does the history of baroque art possibly have to do with 'saving souls'?"

II

The split that troubles many Adventist students and professional practitioners — between their specialization on the one hand and their religion on the other — derives from their not seeing God as active in their work. It is easier to see God in the Sabbath school class, the evangelistic meeting, the worship service. God seems more *visible* in the clergyman's activities.

God is in conversions. Or God may *seem* more “present” in vocations (other than the ministry) where conversations with colleagues or students are about religion. But it may seem that God is not directly involved in teaching people to prepare nutritious meals, to design beautiful buildings, or to cultivate farmland.

Yet, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.”¹ “This is my *Father’s* world,” we sing.² We must not stop at saying that God created the heavens and the earth — in the beginning, back then. We should not be so detained by our controversies about how things started that we fail to continue exploring the meaning of the doctrine of creation. We must not limit God’s creation to a single past act — as though the world has limped along on its own, forsaken after the Fall. We must not abandon life on this earth to Satan — or to the absurd.

If we leave God back at the beginning, we are like the deists, who said that God started the creation but has let it run by itself ever since. The deistic evolutionist also believes that God started the world and then let it improve on its own. Too many Adventists are cryptodeists — saying that God started the world, but since then it has been out of his control, steadily getting worse.

Christians should affirm not only that God created them “in the beginning,” but that he continues to create. Moment by moment, God sustains the world with his power. If his Spirit did not continue to move “on the face of the waters,” there would be none. If he did not continue to “let there be light,” it would vanish. Without his power, the creatures of the field could not “be fruitful and multiply.”

No wonder we praise the Lord “in his mighty firmament.”³ No wonder “all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres.”⁴ No wonder Ellen White repeatedly says that God speaks to us in his second book of nature. Because God not only began the creation but continues to sustain it — giving it order and coherence — that creation is God’s. By involving ourselves in it, we follow God’s footsteps after him.

III

What does this mean for Adventists who wonder about the relationship between their work and their religion? A great deal. The Christian understanding of creation leads a physicist to understand that he is part of God’s work, not only by his participation in church activities, but also by his investigations in the laboratory to learn how God sustains creation. The biologist need not feel guilty if he is as thrilled by what he sees under his

microscope as he is by giving an offering or by reading a religious piece of writing. For the Christian who is a scientist, studying the molecular structure of life is to glimpse God at work. Indeed, every scientific discovery can be a religious experience.

The mathematician uncovering the formal structure of thought can regard the elegance that pleases him as a reflection of the Creator of such elegance. He can see a relationship between the simplicity and beauty he may find in his work and the God he praises as a God of harmony and unity.

But what of Adventists whose careers do not involve either religious activities or the natural sciences? What of musicologists, artists, literary scholars, historians of ideas, poets — those who claim the humanities as their field? How can they believe that they are a part of God's work? They spend their time studying, analyzing, and commenting on *human* activity — for it is humans who create art, literature, music, philosophy.

But humans are sinners — cast from the Garden, alienated from God. How can students of humanity — persons who focus their attention directly on this sinful creature — presume to be ennobled by what they learn? We may be prepared to admit that a scientist is cooperating with God by poring over the findings seen under his microscope. But what can we say about an artist or a playwright?

Let us remember that man was part of God's original creation, that man lives now because he continues to be part of the creation God sustains. No man would be here if God did not continue to give him breath. We are all God's — directly, moment by moment. This earth that is the Lord's is also a human world. Men are as much God's creation as are rocks or trees or clear mountain streams.

God created man masterfully — with intelligence, with freedom, with a sense of beauty and fitness. Although man misused his freedom and marred what God created, he retains some of the image of God. Ellen White says:

Man at his creation bore the image and superscription of God. Though now marred and dim through the influence of sin, the traces of this inscription remain upon every soul.⁵

In the beginning God created man in His own likeness. He endowed him with noble qualities. . . . To bring him back to the perfection in which he was first created is the great object of life — the object that underlies all others.⁶

Furthermore, it is because man possesses intelligence and freedom that he is held accountable to decide for or against God.

Paul believed that man still has part of the image of God: "When the Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, . . . they

show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness.”⁷ Man still has intelligence and freedom. Through the working of the Spirit this freedom can act to glorify God. Perhaps this is why Ellen White steeped herself in *Paradise Lost* and *Pilgrim’s Progress*, which are, after all, the works of humans.⁸ Was it the religious content alone that attracted her? Surely not. The religious ideas in the two works can be found elsewhere. Ellen White must also have been attracted by the powerful artistry she found in the writings of John Milton and John Bunyan, her fellow human beings.

Are we going to turn our backs on the great oratorios produced by sinful mortals — or on the symphonies of Beethoven, which exalt the spirit, although they are not explicitly religious? Will the humanity glimpsed in a Rembrandt portrait be rejected because the subject was human or because the artist was sinful — as we all are?

What of the sociologist or the anthropologist whose lifework is the collection and study of data about humanity? Are such pursuits ennobling? Not always. But the anthropologist may learn how God, through his Spirit, has been able to move men (who sometimes may not acknowledge him) to bear hardship with resourcefulness, to meet tragedy with dignity. When the anthropologist, with faith in God, looks at what even sinful man can achieve, he praises the Creator’s goodness and power.

The humanities and the social sciences — both dealing with man — are no farther away from God’s creation, then, than are the natural sciences. All see God working in and through his creation. For them, as for the psalmist, the trees wave before the Lord; the hills clap their hands. But not only trees and hills wave before the Lord; people do too. There is the good wife who is far more precious than jewels (Proverbs); the wise son who makes the father glad; the friend who was to David “my brother Jonathan,” whose “love to me was wonderful.”⁹

For the man who knows that God’s power permeates the whole creation, that “the earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof, the world and *those who dwell therein*” [italics added], all life pulsates with God’s power, all events burst with meaning. He greets the world, knowing that he will find God’s presence there.

IV

Does all our talk about creation mean that the Adventist will cherish redemption less? Does it mean that an appreciation of God the Creator and Sustainer of the world will lead the Adventist concert pianist to devote him-

self exclusively to powerful music, to create beautiful scores, and to eventually lose interest in asking his colleagues, "Have you met Christ?" Will he fail to care whether or not his fellow musicians are "saved"?

Not at all. The dedicated Adventist pianist wants his fellow musicians to know God. He knows the inner tranquility they will experience by shaping their actions to fit into a larger pattern of meaning. He knows they cannot be released from preoccupation with themselves unless they use their freedom to acknowledge that God is Lord in their lives. In short, the Adventist musician wants his friends to know Christ as their Redeemer.

What is this redeemed condition? Who is this Christ to be known as a personal Saviour? If we remember that the Christ who died for us was "in the beginning . . . with God," and that "all things were made through Him,"¹⁰ then we will not be surprised at Paul's description of the death and resurrection of Christ as being the restoration of God's creation.

When Christ died and rose again, he did not offer man a secret rapture. He did not provide individuals with a means for escaping creation. Instead, as one of the great hymns of the Christian Church says, Christ has

delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption. . . . He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities — all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. . . . He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead. . . . For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven.¹¹

That is the meaning of redemption: God reconciling the world to himself, restoring all things in creation to their original order. The Christ that we encounter here is the cosmic Christ who is the Lord of creation. To know him as Saviour is to acknowledge him as Lord — not only over our own lives, but over *all* life.

Through this Christ our schizophrenia can be healed — the schizophrenia that plagues far too many Adventists, the schizophrenia that divides the Adventist church. Adventists should not think that they will find God only in religious activities, that they must justify their existence solely on the basis of how many "religious" acts they perform *in addition to* their regular jobs. Those religious acts are important. Religious instruction, Sabbath school classes, and prayer meetings are opportunities to reveal, clearly and penetratingly, the meaning of life. Worship services are irreplaceable experiences of God's holiness.

But God is also to be found in the job, in the vocation, in the discovery of

knowledge. To create moving art is to be a part of God's action. To unlock the workings of chromosomes is a way of making clear God's gracious activity in the world. The scientist as scientist and the artist as artist can help us know God.

Christians are obligated to share with their professional colleagues the pleasure of recognizing Christ as Lord. Conversion is the *beginning*, not the end, of Christian experience — the entrance into abundant life. Adventists in professional life have a great opportunity to share with their associates the exciting awareness of God's glory flashing through all of human experience.

The distinctly religious activities of life will merge with the occupational activities through the Christ who redeems by restoring creation. Adventists in myriad professions will be agents for reconciling the world to its Lord. Adventist institutions of higher learning are, and should be, places where Adventist Christians can find God in all activities.

Christians who see God in his fullness will hear God both in the pulpit and also in song and symphony. God will speak both in ancient texts and in contemporary poetry. He will be present both in sacred revelation and in ordinary life. Adventists need not feel guilty or apologetic about the value of their studies and work. They can have a sense of participating with God in his work. They can have the solemn but exhilarating knowledge that as they walk through life in this world they step on holy ground. Any bush may burst into flame. Any voice may be God's voice. The earth is the Lord's.

REFERENCES

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- 5 Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1909), p. 163.
- 6 White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1958), p. 595.
- 7 Romans 2:14, 15 RSV.
- 8 John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1972).
John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House 1973).
- 9 2 Samuel 1:26.
- 10 1 John 1:1, 3.
- 11 Colossians 1:13-20 RSV.