

The Rise of a New Adventist History

Review by Ronald D. Graybill

The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America
edited by Edwin Scott Gaustad
Harper & Row, 329 pp., \$12.50

This book on *The Rise of Adventism* could have significance far beyond its contents. It is one indication of the possible emergence of a "New Adventist History."

The first phase in Adventist history was represented by James White and J. N. Loughborough. What they wrote might be called providential history. It was designed to demonstrate the direct and active leadership of God in Adventist experience. It ignored almost totally the general political and social history of the times which it covered.

LeRoy Froom and F. D. Nichol led the next wave of Adventist history writing. They wrote apologetic history, designed to defend Adventism against its historical and theological critics. Their histories were more conscious of historical context, more rigorous about sources, but still primarily defensive.

Both providential and apologetic history have a useful role to play in the church's life. However, if the New Adventist History can live up to the promise of *The Rise of Adventism*, its primary effort will be to place the record of the Adventist people and the Adventist church in the mainstream of historical scholarship. Those

who write this history should strive to make Adventist history useful and credible to non-Adventist scholars. They will doubtless report the convictions of the pioneers concerning God's providential leadership; they will probably defend whenever defense is necessary for purposes of clarity and understanding; but primarily they will attempt to apply the best canons of historical scholarship to their religious heritage. They will attempt to write history that will be seen as a part of the general quest for the understanding of the past, not an outgrowth of purely Adventist interests.

It is not enough that this history strive to be dispassionate and objective. It must also be interpretive in the way that the essays by Ernest Sandeen and Jonathan Butler are interpretive in this volume. Sandeen attempts to show how Millerism *was* consistent with the needs and anxieties of the times in which it arose. Butler attempts to explain the shift in Adventism from a totally apolitical pessimism to a more accommodating political position. He sees the expansion of mission activity, changes in American politics, and the rising social status of American Adventists as factors in the shift.

The Rise of Adventism symbolizes what the New Adventist History could and should be in a number of ways. Non-Adventist scholars, experts in their fields, are, in this book, contributing information on the historical context in which Adventism rose. The book, published by a major publisher, has received favorable reviews in a number of scholarly journals. At the same time, it has been approved for sale in Adventist Book Centers. This latter factor is of no mean importance. If the New Adventist History is to succeed, it must continue to draw on the support and contributions of all members of

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the church, as well as interested scholars outside the church.

The lecture series which lay behind *The Rise of Adventism* was originally the brainchild of Professor Ronald L. Numbers. Numbers' more recent work has aroused a good deal of controversy, but he should not be denied credit where credit is due—and a great deal of credit is due him for this book. Vern Carner, an Adventist scholar whose ideas and talents have sometimes run ahead of the rest of us, was responsible for actually organizing and bringing the lecture series to fruition. Carner, along with Sakae Kubo of Andrews University and Curt Rice of Aurora College, was also responsible for the enormously valuable bibliographical essay which occupies the final 110 pages of this book.

The content of *The Rise of Adventism* is more than just symbolic, however. John B. Blake's essay on Health Reform is a classic brief account of that subject. Timothy L. Smith's discussion of motivation in history is an important caution to those interested in Adventist history, where questions of motive are often so intriguing. Adventists have talked a lot about the theological implications of Spiritualism, but have paid almost no attention to its historical significance. Here R. Laurence Moore's essay is a valuable introduction.

Each essay has its contribution to make, but Jonathan M. Butler's is perhaps the most important one on Adventist history *per se*. Butler can sometimes let the creative richness of his language interfere with what he is actually trying to say, but in this essay he manages to sail smoothly through some rather troubled waters. He points to painful paradoxes, but he does it with such grace that the tension becomes a tonic rather than an irritant.

The promise of a New Adventist History, represented by *The Rise of Adventism*, the growing success of the journal, *Adventist Heritage*, the expanding research facilities of the church, and the number of scholars, both Adventists and others, who are willing to take Adventist history seriously, is a promise which may be broken. It can be broken if those engaged in it lose their trust in each other or in the value of the quest for a better understanding of our past. But if it is not broken, the next decade should be an exciting one indeed for the church's historians.

The following is a companion review, by Sidney E. Ahlstrom, a non-Adventist scholar, of the same volume.

The Editors

The ten chapters which constitute the heart of this volume," writes its editor, "were delivered during 1972-73 in the University Church of Loma Linda University in southern California." Since that university is a Seventh-day Adventist institution, the book's title would lead one to expect a unified focus on the rise and triumph of Adventist ideas and institutions. Quite the contrary, however, it is the subtitle which best describes the contents. What we have is a thoughtful, scholarly and provocative book on a momentous period in the life of American Protestantism. Since it appears during the bicentennial era, one should also note that several of these essays deal with movements and events that are crucial to the American patriotic tradition which fervent evangelicals were then reshaping.

Winthrop S. Hudson begins his opening essay with an account of John Quincy Adams, filled with fears over the advent of Andrew Jackson in the nation's capital. In essays that follow, there are cogent studies of Jacksonian America and the tumultuous religious events of the 1840s and 1850s, during which the notion of a redeemer nation's manifest destiny, in the North at least, grew ripe and succulent on the American tree of knowledge. On the other hand, by what seems to be a conscious intention, there is very little—almost no—emphasis on the South or on the winds of advocacy that during these years were bringing the old Federal Union to its dark and bloody end. Yet we know that story (more or less) and are thus benefitted by having our attention called to other controversies and visions—even dreams of a perfect realization of God's kingdom in America.

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In other words, we are given a clearer image of that age of innocence to which Henry James referred when he described the complex world with which postbellum writers had to deal. We are reminded again of the degree to which that was indeed an age of faith, a time of rejuvenated evangelicalism, when the rising claims of natural science were being shunted aside and the rational cosmopolitanism of the founding fathers was being lost from mind amid the clamor of conflicting eschatologies and apocalypses. Above all, we are reminded of the inescapable centrality of Protestant thinking for the life of the nation.

Perhaps the best way of accomplishing the difficult task of reviewing a composite work such as this is to take brief note of each contribution.

Winthrop Hudson, as already indicated, opens the volume with an animated and convincing survey of "A Time of Religious Ferment." John B. Blake then provides one of the best brief accounts of "Health Reform" and of the age's revolt against the purgings and bleedings of medical orthodoxy that I have yet seen. Of equal value is John C. Greene's analysis of "Science and Religion," in which, after a brief survey, the antiscientific biblicism of Taylor Lewis is studied with special care. Robert V. Hine's overview of communitarian experiments is extremely brief for so complex a subject, yet it is balanced and useful.

R. Laurence Moore's account of spiritualism then sets new standards of excellence in an area where lurid and uncritical studies abound; he sees the American movement losing its force and significance during the 1870s. In his essay on millennialism, Ernest Sandeen carefully places William Miller in the context of older, primarily British, speculation on last things and stresses the degree to which the Millerite movement fits more comfortably into the biblicistic atmosphere of the day than earlier historians were inclined to believe. William G. McLoughlin, in his essay on revivalism, provides an important synthesis of his own numerous writings on what is "one of the most original . . . contributions to Christian thought and practice made by the American people." He quite rightly sees revivalism to be so endemic and pervasive as to be

almost inseparable from the American Protestant tradition as a whole.

The remainder of the volume is devoted more specifically to Millerism, premillennialism, and the Seventh-day Adventist tradition, David T. Arthur dealing with the first subject and Jonathan M. Butler with "Adventism and the American Experience." Of special significance to American scholarship in this field is the final portion of the book, a 110-page "bibliographical essay" compiled and written by Vern Carner, Sakae Kubo and Curt Rice. This work by scholars and librarians in Seventh-day Adventist institutions is a contribution of lasting significance. It provides an extremely fitting final portion to a carefully planned, excellently edited, well-printed scholarly volume.

Omitted from my discussion so far has been an essay by Timothy L. Smith on "Social Reform," an area in which his own contribution has been very large. On this occasion, however, he chose to contribute a ruminative essay in which he discusses his own relationship to the major works that have appeared in this field, and in so doing pays an important and worthy tribute to the elder Arthur Meier Schlesinger's immense contributions, in his own work and through the many students he inspired. Smith confesses to a larger concern for consequences than for motives as he ponders the great stream of visionary and perfectionist aspiration that guided evangelicals in their labors. He closes with a quotation from William Sloane Coffin, Jr., that "the ethics of perfection have become the ethics of survival," and confesses that he now sees that observation as more penetrating than when he first heard it in 1967.

To a reviewer like myself who was reading this book during the last days of the American war in southeast Asia, the same basic question that troubled Coffin and Smith rose like a spectre. What are we to say of this whole long process of "Israelization" of America, this notion of a nation's divine election that stretches from Governor Winthrop's Arbella Sermon of 1630 down to the overkill reflexes of the Mayaguez incident in 1975? Even in this interrogative mood, however, one must return to praise the ways in which the essays of this volume inform and stimulate the inquiring reader.