

The World of E. G. White

And the End of the World

by Jonathan Butler

“When Protestantism shall stretch her hand across the gulf to grasp the hand of the Roman power, when she shall stretch over the abyss to clasp hands with spiritualism, when under the influence of this three-fold union, our country shall repudiate every principle of its Constitution as a Protestant and republican government, and shall make provision for the propagation of papal falsehoods and delusions, then we may know that the time has come for the marvelous working of Satan and that the end is near.”¹

While teaching at Union College, I was asked to preach the Sabbath sermon in Marysville, Kan. Inquiring Sabbath morning in the town of 3,500 as to the location of the church, I was sent successively to a Kingdom Hall, a perplexed Mormon for directions, and on to an Assembly of God meeting-house. Larger American cities are no more aware of who we are. The one-in-twenty New Yorkers who have heard of Seventh-

day Adventists commend us for our fine choir in Salt Lake City. A public this casual about our identity hardly feels threatened by Adventists. Where we are known at all — usually for our schools or community hospitals — we enjoy growing respectability, hardly qualifying us as potential targets of religious persecution. It sometimes strikes even Adventists as incredible that their American neighbors would violently chase them into the hills. And that is only one aspect of our eschatology that gives us pause.

How does the Americanness of Adventist eschatology serve outside of the America from which it emerged? The world, of course, now includes much more than the “Christendom” of Ellen White’s time. It takes in the non-Westerner and the non-Christian. Do we expect, as only one example, that the “whole world” wondering after the beast of popery will include Maoist Chinese or Soviet Russians? How will Adventists, equipped with scouting reports on a nineteenth-century beast, detect and identify twentieth-century enemies with their modern, more sophisticated weaponry?

Within contemporary American society Sabbatarianism is simply not a national issue that polarizes the major political parties as it

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did the nineteenth-century electorate. For most Americans, let alone people in other cultures, the Sabbath is really not a topic of concern at all. How, then, can the seventh-day Sabbath become the final issue of our time on the basis of which humanity decides its destiny?

Much of the Adventist understanding of the end of the world comes from Ellen White. The growing interest in exegetical, historical and theological analysis of her writings marks the fact that we now sense our cultural distance from Mrs. White and that we need these scholarly disciplines to fully appreciate her. In her illustrious 87 years (1827-1915), Ellen White virtually personified the Protestant period of American culture, and her writings offer a perspective on every major issue and event of the era.

Indeed, in the nineteenth century, it required little faith in Ellen White as a prophetess to believe the eschatological scenario in *The Great Controversy*. The book was written for a non-Adventist public, and much of its argument was familiar to evangelicals of the time. In the twentieth century, one must believe in Ellen White as a prophetess *before* one can accept many of the particulars in her eschatology. One must take *her word* for it — by faith — in a way that was not necessary 100 years ago.

Like other prophets, Ellen White made primarily contemporary comment and protest. Prophesying for Mrs. White was not crystal-ball gazing into a remote future. Her message proved compelling to so many people because she addressed herself to the issues and events of her day and pronounced a prophetic judgment on them. She preached the imminent end of the world around her. American Protestantism gone to seed would harvest the Apocalypse. The end of her era would bring the end of the world.² Ellen White remains an “other worldly” figure for us, then, not only because of her spiritual intensity, but also because she was warp and woof of that *other world* — Victorian Protestant America.³

What Victorians found distinctive about their age was change. Every era experiences

change, but Victorians were the first generation to take such notice of it, to describe their age as an *age of transition*. The “darkness” of the Middle Ages had been dispelled. The beast of Roman Catholicism had received the “deadly wound” at the time of the French Revolution. Modern intellectual and technological developments had a profound impact on everyone. These startling advances were considered “signs of the times,” indicating a shift not only from past to future but also from this world to another world. Thus, millennialism flourished. Unlike the twentieth century’s frequently blasé attitude toward change, Victorian Protestants, like Ellen White, interpreted their changing times in nothing less than eschatological terms. The immense developments in their world signaled that the world was about to end.

The age of transition produced doubt and uncertainty among Victorians. Old dogmas were called into question. The very idea of creeds proved unpopular to many. Yet, Victorians remained confident that “the Truth” could be ascertained. Science and religion were seen as a harmonious whole, especially early in the Victorian period. True religion could stand any investigation, including the scrutiny of true science. If Victorians discarded the old dogmas as superstition, they still believed in absolutes. The strong rationalist strain in Ellen White and other early Adventists, the assurance that truth — *the Truth* — could be sought and found, proved to be typically Victorian and remains a Victorian legacy among Adventists to this day. In society at large, however, the emergence of sciences like anthropology, sociology and history undermined Victorian certitude about possessing “the Truth.”

What made nineteenth-century America so different religiously from our time and place is the fact that then the nation could still be described as a “Protestant America.” In his book, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities*, Robert Handy records the effort of evangelicals to make America a “Christian nation,” which for them meant a “Protestant America.”⁴ By and large, Handy finds the Protestants actually achieved their goal, and the Supreme Court in 1892 could speak of America as a “Chris-

tian nation.” Handy further argues that the America of the 1930s entered a post-Protestant era.

Under a different rubric, William Clebsch reaches the same conclusion.⁵ He shows that American politics, education, morality and nationality were once the religious impulses of a “sacred America,” while they came to realization “outside the temple,” in the realm of a “profane America.” For example, what used to be a “Protestant” public school system, with *McGuffey Readers* as a kind of Presbyterian catechism, now operates as a post-Protestant institution. As a nineteenth-century prophetess, Ellen White presupposed the sacred, Protestant America of her time. In *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation*, Mrs. White outlined the role of Protestant America in a “Christian dispensation.”⁶

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The disestablishment of religion and the separation of church and state led Protestants (in the nineteenth-century evangelical era) to Christianize America through persuasion rather than coercion. The post-Civil War was not just a period of defensiveness and retrenchment for evangelicals in the face of evolution and biblical criticism, social and industrial changes. Evangelicals also took the offensive in the notable and notorious crusades for a Sunday-Sabbath and prohibition, as the beginning of their attempt to Christianize an American civilization. Issues of personal morality, such as dishonesty, profanity, gambling, dancing and smoking, also preoccupied the Protestant churches.

The remarkable success of this drive to Christianize, really Protestantize, American life was not greeted with enthusiasm by everyone. Because Protestants were committed to the principle of religious freedom and to the voluntary method, they failed to see how coercive their thrust to make America Christian appeared to those, like immigrant Catholics, who did not entirely share their opinions. In fact, the Catholics at this time, and not the Adventists, were the real objects of Protestant intolerance.

Ellen White saw Adventism as a remnant of Protestantism, a true, unadulterated Protestantism. In her view, far from being non-Protestants, Adventists were super-Protestants. History was a popular vehicle for conveying theological ideas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and *The Great Controversy* serves as an example of this genre. The book celebrated the achievement of church-state separation in America as a legacy of Protestantism, and displayed a Protestant predisposition for strict Sabbath observance, temperance, law, order and morality. The Adventist prophetess diverged from nineteenth-century evangelicals regarding *which* Sabbath should be strictly observed only because she sought to carry out fully the logic of Bible-based Protestantism. Moreover, she protested the coercive measures to enforce Sunday observance as a departure from religious liberty. Mrs. White’s eschatology, then, anticipated that the evangelical dream of Protestantizing America would succeed in an oppressive way in regard to the so-called Christian Sabbath. This Protestant American achievement would actually snuff out the spirit of Protestantism in this country and trigger the Apocalypse.

In the twentieth century, however, changes in the religious situation have made the effort of Protestantize America seem increasingly unlikely. With the 1930s, the voluntary effort to maintain a Protestant America failed, illustrated by the failure of prohibition. The Protestant establishment of the nineteenth century, that at best only tolerated minority groups, passed through a

“second disestablishment.” What resulted was the religious pluralism of a Protestant-Catholic-Jewish America, or an even more variegated pattern that might be understood to include secularists.

There remain Protestant Don Quixotes, to be sure, tilting at windmills, and hoping to reintroduce the code and ceremony of a bygone era. Many of the contemporary problems treated under the church-state heading are carry-overs of the earlier Protestant America. Laws relating to the Sunday closings, for example, are largely an inheritance from the Puritan and evangelical phases of American history. Prayer and Bible reading in the public schools, the fitness of candidates for public office based on religious affiliation, and numerous other questions are really anachronistic remnants of a Protestant era. For Handy writes:

Since 1935, the debate over the relation of church and state has often been clouded by lack of clear recognition that the Protestant era of American history has indeed come to an end. If some Protestants continue to think and work as though the virtual identification of their religion and American civilization is still viable, or that with a little more effort America will become a Christian nation in their terms, they will be seriously hampered in playing a creative role for human good that a religious movement can exercise in a modern cultural situation.⁷

Insofar as historical realities call for a revision of Protestant aspirations, they also affect Adventist concerns. For if it is true that Protestants can no longer hope to Protestantize a pluralistic America, if WASPish Sunday legislation on a national scale is no more likely, say, than the return of national prohibition, then Adventists need to understand their eschatology in the light of realities.

Our pluralistic and more secular America simply does not embroil itself in the theological issues of an earlier Protestant America. “Every functioning society,” points out Robin M. Williams, Jr., “has to an important degree a *common* religion. The possession of a

common set of ideas, rituals and symbols can supply an overarching sense of unity even in a society riddled with conflicts.” Williams further comments that “men are always likely to be intolerant of opposition to their central ultimate values.”⁸ In nineteenth-century America, the Sunday-Sabbath, along with temperance, morality and a number of other Protestant concerns, corresponded with America’s “*common* religion.” And it was here the Protestants were “likely to be intolerant of opposition.”

In the twentieth century, on the other hand, Will Herberg tells us, “No one who knows anything about the religious situation in this country would be likely to suggest that the things Americans are ‘intolerant’ about are the beliefs, standards, or teachings of the religions they ‘officially’ acknowledge as theirs. Americans are proud of their tolerance in matters of religion: one is expected to ‘believe in God,’ but otherwise religion is not supposed to be a ground of ‘discrimination.’ ”⁹ In our time, contemporary political ideology rather than traditional religious orthodoxy is apt to involve one’s “central ultimate values.” Today’s “heretics” are not so much religious groups but communists, pacifists, ethnics or homosexuals. Religious groups, as such, are not pursued as scapegoats even in time of national crisis and disorder. Religious concerns, like Sabbath observance, are not viewed as vital to the nation’s destiny.

Quite the contrary was more nearly the case in a nineteenth-century Protestant America. Josiah Strong, a well-known Congregationalist contemporary of Mrs. White, provides a window into the thinking of that time. He wrote a best-selling book entitled *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Present Crisis* to raise funds in support of the American Home Missionary Society, for which he served as president.¹⁰ In the book, he depicted the America of the mid-1800s in a present crisis. Most of the perils which disturbed Strong threatened in one way or another the Anglo-Saxon Protestantism in which, he argued, not only America’s, but also the world’s hope lay. The new immigration was the major peril, for it overran the country with Catholics, and struck both reli-

giously and ethnically at the foundation of American civilization. Strong worried that the Pope would possess America and make America Catholic. The influx of the Catholic immigrants opened a Pandora's box of intemperance, lax Sabbath observance, urban growth, and, among ex-Catholics, socialism and anarchy. Strong believed the vast accumulation of wealth and the resultant labor-management tensions caused a further problem. The exhaustion of public lands and a vanishing rural America concerned him, as did frontier Mormonism. Strong viewed this American crisis in eschatological terms. Linking the American destiny to the future of civilization, he said, "My plea is not, Save America for America's sake, but, Save America for the world's sake."

Ellen White described the American crisis in much the way Strong did. According to Mrs. White, Americans were being polarized by the very forces Strong had identified in *Our Country*: temperate and intemperate, labor and management, country-dweller and urbanite, republican and anarchist, Catholic and Protestant. While Mrs. White was more pessimistic than Strong — for her, the crisis in America augured an impending Apocalypse — prophetess and churchman agreed in identifying the American destiny with the fate of civilization at large. In the 1880s, Mrs. White hoped to save America, only a short time, for the world's sake. For both Strong and White, to lose either Protestantism or republicanism was to destroy America and, in turn, to end the world.

In the world of Ellen White and Josiah Strong, civilization itself seemed threatened. In *Our Country* and in *The Great Controversy*, such problems as anarchy and riot aroused apprehension. In 1877, the first earthquake of labor disorders had led to mob violence and bloodshed with the halting of railroads throughout the country. Labor upheavals followed shortly after the publication of each book. After the 1886 struggles with Jay Gould, came the Haymarket riot and a series of other disorders in the early 1890s. Immigrants, the cities, monopolies, poverty, alcoholism and lawlessness were blamed for

the precariousness of American civilization.¹¹ Ellen White believed that the Ten Commandments had a civilizing effect on the world. With God's law then in disrepute, civilization showed signs of deterioration. The Bible upheld America as a Protestant and republican nation, but with the Bible under fire from higher criticism, the nation itself was weakened, just as France had been for denying the Bible and God during the Revolution. Thus, Ellen White, like Josiah Strong, identified the problems of American civilization as spiritual problems, and in this case both still operated within the context of a sacred America.

The Protestant solution to the American problems came by means of a pietist brand of politics. Through political legislation Protestants hoped to eliminate the sins of intemperance and Sabbath desecration and, through the public schools, socialize the children of the "sinners" into a "righteous" value system.¹²

To Protestants, Catholics threatened American civilization at two points: temperance and Sabbath observance. Hard-drinking Catholic laborers were suddenly invading American city life, with their more permissive continental Sabbath unsettling Protestants reared on the ideal of American Sabbathkeeping. The Protestant crusade for stricter Sabbath observance was an effort to retain the Puritan strain within Protestantism, while the prohibition issue was largely new, a pietist nineteenth-century contribution of Protestantism to religious history.

The cause of temperance was advanced in behalf of Protestant American civilization over against late nineteenth-century challenges to it. "The rural, native, American Protestant of the nineteenth century respected Temperance ideals," writes James Gusfield. "He adhered to a culture in which self-control, industriousness, and impulse renunciation were both praised and made necessary. Any lapse was a serious threat to his system of respect. Sobriety was virtuous and, in a community dominated by middle-class Protestants, necessary to social acceptance and to self-esteem." By the 1830s and 1840s, abstinence became "a symbol of

middle-class membership and a necessity for ambitious and aspiring young men,” says Gusfield. “It was one of the ways society could distinguish the industrious from the ne’er-do-well; the steady worker from the unreliable drifter; the good credit risk from the bad gamble; the native American from the immigrant.” In the late nineteenth century, temperance activities were among the ways in which middle-class, Protestant America reacted to the development of a larger number of underprivileged, low-status Catholic laborers and unemployed in the society. “The Eighteenth Amendment,” writes Gusfield, “was the high point of the struggle to assert the public dominance of the old middle-class values. It established the victory of Protestant over Catholic, rural over urban, tradition over modernity, the middle class over both the lower and the upper strata.”¹³

By aggressively supporting the temperance forces, Seventh-day Adventists, and Ellen White in particular, displayed a strong commitment to Protestant America. Indeed,

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Adventists showed their capacity to out-Protestant the Protestants on matters of temperance. While Adventists expected the failure of Protestant America to usher in Armageddon, they did their best to postpone the inevitable—another example of the Adventist genius for mixing otherworldly and this-worldly concerns.

For Ellen White, on the stump as a temperance speaker, the temperance issue was vital to the future of a Protestant America. She wrote: “The honor of God, the stability of the nation, the well-being of the community,

of the home, and of the individual, demand that every possible effort be made in arousing the people to the evil of intemperance. . . . Let the voice of the nation demand of its lawmakers that a stop be put to this infamous traffic.”¹⁴ And with the election year successes of prohibition in 1918, C. S. Longacre, editor of *Liberty Magazine*, exclaimed, “Let democracy triumph everywhere and in all things pertaining to civil relations, duties, and obligations.”¹⁵

In the nineteenth century, evangelical Protestants believed the Sunday-Sabbath to be an even more important factor than temperance for the future of American democracy. Writing on the Christian Sabbath in 1834, a college professor made Sabbathkeeping an act of patriotism. “Let every man who would lay claim to *patriotism* and be thought a *good member of civil society*, keep back his foot from polluting the Sabbath,” wrote John Agnew. It is clear “that the Sabbath-breaker strikes at the root of all that is peaceful and orderly, and opens the way for the spread of irreligion, infidelity, and moral death.” Agnew identified Sabbathbreaking as a kind of anarchism in writing, “The man who by his example weakens the pervading sense of obligation to God, and overthrows the authority of a Divine institution, does so much toward the ruin of his country, and is one of its worst enemies.” Here Agnew added, “He may not feel himself to be so, but he is so in reality.” Sabbathbreaking is “sapping the foundations of republican government,” and it is “laying the axe at the root of (the) country’s brightest hopes.” In short, “. . . republican government cannot exist without the pervasion of moral principle secured by the Sabbath.”¹⁶

In the 1860s, the great church historian Phillip Schaff commented on the importance of the Sunday-Sabbath in both religious and civil terms. Typically, Sunday blue laws in the South were upheld on a religious basis, whereas in the North they were supported in civil or secular terms. In Schaff’s view, the Sabbath was essential for public morals and the self-preservation of the state. It was commonly held at this time that the decline

of Sabbath observance could be blamed for the Civil War.

Evangelicals envisioned a Christian civilization comprised of a free, literate, industrious, honest, law-abiding, religious population. An inviolate Sabbath, where Protestant churchmen could hold captive an American audience, where evangelical preaching and programs were promoted, seemed vital as a means to fulfilling this Christian vision for society. In 1888, the year *The Great Controversy* was published, Senator H. W. Blair presented his forceful national Sunday legislation before Congress, and he returned with it again in 1889. About 1900, one Episcopal clergyman spoke “for the sanctity of our American Sunday” as “the palladium of our liberties, our government, our English civilization.”¹⁷ Many evangelicals were quite willing to rely fully on voluntary means in working toward a Christian commonwealth that worshipped on a “Christian Sabbath,” but there were a number who sought guarantees of the nation’s Christian character by constitutional amendment. The National Reform Association, formed in 1864, spearheaded this drive, and it was this right-wing movement that particularly disturbed Mrs. White and other Adventists.

Ellen White shared the evangelical idea that the Sunday-Sabbath was crucial to the future of civilization. Only, she turned the concept on its head by declaring that the enforcement of a Sunday-Sabbath would destroy America and civilization at large rather than improve the world. Like other evangelicals, she ascribed cosmic significance to the Sunday-Sabbath, but in a negative rather than a positive sense. The real confrontation between her and evangelicals on the sabbatarian issue involved the question of whether to protect the American republic and Anglo-American civilization with a national Sabbath or without it. Again, Mrs. White and other Adventists hoped to preserve a Protestant America by staving off Sunday legislation. In 1888 and 1889, an anxious Adventist minority contributed to the defeat of Blair’s Sunday legislation to prevent a Protestant apostasy and national ruin. As a prophetic people, Adventists used their voice to sustain the republic as long as possible,

borrowing time to preach Adventism throughout the world. Paradoxically, they wished to delay the end in order to preach that the end was soon.

In looking back, then, on nineteenth-century sabbatarianism, we see Protestant supporters of a sacred America identifying a spiritual problem — namely, Sabbathbreaking — as the albatross of American civilization. In this context, it was not so farfetched for Mrs. White to predict that *seventh-day* Sabbathkeepers would be “denounced as enemies of law and order, as breaking down the moral restraints of society, causing anarchy and corruption, and calling down the judgments of God upon earth.”¹⁸ Reflecting the thinking of her evangelical contem-

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poraries on the Sunday-Sabbath, Mrs. White wrote, “It will be declared that men are offending God by the violation of the Sunday-Sabbath; that this sin has brought calamities which will not cease until Sunday observance shall be strictly enforced; and that those who present the claims of the fourth commandment, thus destroying reverence for Sunday, are troublers of the people, preventing their restoration to divine favor and temporal prosperity.”¹⁹ Mrs. White offered further evidence that she was part of a sacred America that could blame a religious minority even for natural catastrophes. “There are calamities on sea and land,” wrote Mrs. White, “and these calamities will increase, one disaster following close upon another; and the little band of conscientious Sabbath-

keepers will be pointed out as the ones who are bringing the wrath of God upon the world by their disregard of Sunday.”²⁰

Ellen White provided numerous clues to the fact that she was witnessing *in her own time* the breakdown of Protestant America. The American Protestant mimicry of Catholicism, the Protestant compromise of its earlier anti-Catholic attitude, troubled Mrs. White.²¹ In 1870, a landmark of interfaith history was achieved with the publication of *The Church Idea* by William Reed Huntington, an Episcopalian, setting forth a possible basis for Christian unity. While America’s early visions of church unity usually excluded the Catholics, by the 1880s Catholics such as Cardinal Gibbons supported Protestants in regard to Sunday legislation. Backing Sunday laws helped Catholic laborers and showed Protestants that Catholics could Americanize as well as anyone.²²

Writing for her contemporaries, then, in the *present tense*, the prophetess said, “In the movements *now in progress* in the United States to secure for the institutions and usages of the church the support of the state, Protestants are following in the steps of papists. Nay, more, they are opening the door for the papacy to regain in *Protestant America* the supremacy which she has lost in the Old World.”²³ Or again Mrs. White wrote, “Since the middle of the nineteenth century, students of prophecy in the United States have presented this testimony to the world. *In the events now taking place is seen a rapid advance toward the fulfillment of the prediction.*”²⁴ More generally, she wrote, “Romanism is now regarded by Protestants with far greater favor than in former years.”²⁵ Here the Oxford movement, Anglo-Catholics that emphasized ritual within Anglicanism, provided an illustration. And she continued, “There has been for years, in churches of the Protestant faith, a strong and growing sentiment in favor of a union based upon common points of doctrine.” So that eventually, she said, “Protestant America will have formed an image of the Roman hierarchy, and the infliction of civil penalties upon dissenters will inevitably result.”²⁶

Not only Catholics and Protestants were merging at the expense of the Adventist minority, but also another force as well loomed upon the scene — Spiritualism. From the time the Fox sisters arrived in New York City in 1850, Spiritualism enjoyed a phenomenal vogue in America. By 1870, it had reached its peak, and certainly could have been reckoned as a third force in Christendom.²⁷ Spiritualists claimed in many cases to be Christian, as Mrs. White indicated in her reference to their “nominal Christianity.” But the prophetess criticized Spiritualism because it was non-Protestant and unbiblical. Its use of the immortality of the soul belief contributed to the final eschatological conspiracy.

The alleged conspiracy of Catholic, Protestant and Spiritualist that Ellen White monitored in the 1800s very soon dissipated. In 1895, the Pope forbade further participation by American Catholics in interfaith congresses, and after 1900, he spoke out against this sort of activity as “Modernism.” For decades to come, Catholicism would express itself in terms of traditional orthodoxy, and “Americanizers” and interfaith types would refrain from the activities that had so alarmed Mrs. White prior to 1895.²⁸ Spiritualism, for its part, experienced an earlier decline than Catholic-Protestant interfaith gestures. By the mid 1870s, Spiritualists had clearly failed to win the endorsement of the scientific community, so necessary in its attempt to make religion an empirical science. Liberal clergymen still supported Spiritualism in the 1890s. Spiritualist groups did not necessarily reduce their numbers. Ecclesiastical opposition to Spiritualism continued to take it seriously to the end of the century. But R. Laurence Moore, the most recent historian of Spiritualism, has concluded that “‘spiritual philosophy’ ceased to have a significant influence on American religious thought sometime around 1875.”²⁹ Twentieth-century ecumenism surely has not included the successor to Victorian Spiritualism of parapsychology. The occult phenomenon of our era, quite a departure from either Spiritualism or parapsychology in its anti-scientific rather than pseudoscientific stance,

should be labeled post-Christian and seldom, if ever, “nominal Christianity.”

In the 1880s, however, it was still plausible for Ellen White to project that “when *Protestantism* shall stretch her hand across the gulf to grasp the hand of the *Roman power*, when she shall stretch over the abyss to clasp hands with *spiritualism*, when under the influence of this *threefold union*, our country shall repudiate every principle of its Constitution as a Protestant and republican government, and shall make provision for the propagation of papal falsehoods and delusions, than we may know that the time has come for the marvelous working of Satan and that the end is near.”³⁰ Certainly, this testimony was “*present truth*” for any Adventist in the 1880s, as the end seemed near, even at the door. To be sure, Mrs. White’s eschatology included the *future* as well as the *present tense*, but it was the *near future*. Her predictions of the future appeared as projections on a screen which only enlarged, dramatized and intensified the scenes of her contemporary world.

Mrs. White was herself a Protestant American whose biography offered an abridgement of America’s Protestant era. From her early days as a Methodist New Englander, she invested her considerable energies in the nineteenth-century Protestant concerns of millennialism and sabbatarianism, anti-Catholicism and antislavery, temperance and education. When *this* Protestant world began slipping away, Mrs. White was aghast. She saw the Victorian Protestant America declining in the face of religious and ethnic, intellectual and social changes. Mrs. White’s eschatology envisioned the end of *her* world.

With Victorian Protestant America on the wane, Mrs. White preserved in the Adventist community many aspects of its world. Anthony C. Wallace has defined a millenarian group like ours as “a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture.”³¹ Seventh-day Adventist beliefs and attitudes on the Second Coming, the Sabbath, health, education, social welfare, church and state, big labor and the cities all show Adventism to

be a Victorian Protestant subculture sustaining itself long after the larger host society has disappeared. In the twentieth century, then, Seventh-day Adventists form a “cognitive minority” that holds on to an earlier, religious worldview in a new, more secular and pluralistic world.³² Nothing accounts for Adventist distinctiveness in this new era quite so much as the continuing impact of Ellen White on Seventh-day Adventists. Hence, if Victorian Protestant America has ended, Adventists continue to illustrate the remarkable vitality and human significance of that earlier vision. And, while the Second

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Coming has not yet materialized, the Adventist culture provides an example of a kind of “realized eschatology” from which the world may benefit in our time.

What Seventh-day Adventists must fully acknowledge here, however, is the element of *prophetic disconfirmation*. The prophetess predicted that Protestant America would end with the passage of Sunday legislation, the repudiation of constitutional government, the persecution of the Saturday-keeping minority, resulting finally in the Second Coming. And in a sense, Ellen White was right. Protestant America *did* end, marked by the fact that no Sunday bill comparable in strength to Blair’s has appeared in Congress since the 1880s (due in part to the effectiveness of the Adventist lobby), and by the further fact that prohibition was repealed in 1932. The waning of Protestant America, however, did not end American democracy, nor did it precipitate an Adventist pogrom. It clearly did not lead immediately to the Second Coming.

Within her own lifetime, Mrs. White allowed for the *conditional nature* of prophecy. Christ might have come “long ere this,” she remarked. He might have come in the Civil War era when slavery was the sign of a failing democracy and an imminent Second Coming.³³ He might have come about 1888 when a beleaguered Adventist minority in Tennessee chain gangs and jails indicated America’s doom and the world’s demise. In both cases, the prophetess spoke eschatologically with one eye on the morning newspaper. She inspired a sense of relevance or “present truth.” Like other prophets before her, Mrs. White implied the conditional nature of earlier prophecies by making more current applications. This continual reapplication of Adventism of new times and places was vital to her prophetic ministry, and remains absolutely essential to the life of the movement since her time. This is the way the “*Spirit of prophecy*” operates in every era.

One hopes that David Stannard’s provocative analysis of the decline of Puritanism will not apply to Seventh-day Adventism: “. . . if in a given situation social structure continues to change without complementary changes in a particular group’s cultural life, that group in time becomes anachronistic, its cultural institutions lose their potency, and a sense of profound loss may well set in.”³⁴ There must be an ongoing interaction between the Adventist community and the changing social order for Adventism to remain viable. The prophetess stimulated this interactive process in her own time. It would be only sadly ironic if her writings were now used to stultify the creative process they once stimulated. This would be to retain the “letter” while losing the “*Spirit of prophecy*.”

From our survey of Ellen White’s eschatology within its cultural context, we see the main thrust of her message. It becomes clear that Mrs. White viewed the world from an *apocalyptic* perspective. In the current events of her time, she saw the rapid fulfillment of prophecy. The end was aborning. The Adventist prophetess did not look forward to another decade for the end to materialize. Her own decade held all the ingre-

dients of the Apocalypse. She expected the Lord’s *imminent* return. Without a knowledge of the cultural setting in the 1880s, the immediacy of her expectations cannot fully be appreciated.

In our time, Adventists embody the spirit of Ellen White’s message by preserving her sense of urgency. The heart of her message continues to be “the end is soon.” Here, Adventists take into account the new context, and preach that Christ could return in this new time. An apocalyptic people — to remain *Adventist* — must prophesy the end of the present world, not a past era or a remotely future one. From one generation to another, particular prophecies may fail or prove conditional, but apocalypticism is not a failure if it continues to provide a worldview for those living in the new generation. What we suggest here on a theoretical level many Adventist evangelists practice in *ad hoc* fashion as they continually rewrite sermons on “the last days.”

To lose Ellen White’s sense of immediacy is to lose the essence of the Adventist message. One hears the argument that a Protestant America no longer hovers menacingly over us as it did in the 1880s, nor do Adventists appear threatened as a religious minority in the way they were a century ago, but *sometime* in the future this could *conceivably* happen. With this, it seems to me, one abandons the *sin qua non* of apocalypticism — a sense of the *now*. By insisting on only the “signs of the times” of an earlier Adventism, one may actually weaken belief in an imminent end in our time. (One thinks of those lapsed Adventists who plan to return to church when a Sunday law reaches the floor of Congress.) If a message meant to inspire urgency now actually encourages lethargy, the essential ingredient of apocalypticism has been lost.

The sabbatarian persecution of southern Adventists and the Blair bill before Congress in the 1880s no longer serve as a sign of our times. However, the Sabbath as a symbol of human dignity should continue to find application, for wherever human dignity suffers, there the meaning of the Sabbath has been violated. Wherever religious freedom has been denied, there the Sabbath has been

snuffed out of man's weekly existence. In this sense, the spiritual destiny of mankind remains linked to democracy. For without human dignity, without freedom, in other words, without the meaning of the Sabbath, man faces the most Orwellian of futures.

After Solzhenitsyn's interview with the BBC in March 1976, on totalitarianism and a weakened, vulnerable West, William F. Buckley, Jr., put the question that ". . . if in fact you project the technology of totalitarianism along the same graph it has followed during the past century, mightn't it be predictable that even 10, 15 years from now such a phenomenon as Solzhenitsyn could not be permitted to exist?" Malcolm Muggeridge disagreed, and said the fact that he exists now shows "that technology can never wholly conquer man." Muggeridge then added that ". . . if you encased the earth in concrete there would still be a crack in that concrete, and through that crack something would grow."³⁵ Here one could add, totalitarianism is the "concrete" that apocalyp- tists have protested from the Apostle John to Ellen White. The "something" growing up through the crack is the meaning of the Sab- bath.

In our time, the democracies of the world certainly can be described as an en- dangered species. And it is the end of democ- racy in the truest sense that disturbs — and fills with expectancy — the Seventh-day Ad- ventist. Ellen White interpreted the perils that threatened democracy in anti-Catholic terms. In a Third World area like Latin America, Adventists now read *The Great Controversy* as though it were the morning newspaper. The cultural upheaval and change in these developing nations, the dom- inant presence of the Catholic Church, recalls the nineteenth-century American experience to which Ellen White addressed herself. However, the more ferocious enemies of democracy are totalitarianisms on the politi- cal right and left. How tragic that Seventh- day Adventists in the Germany of the 1930s identified only Catholicism as a beast and either ignored or supported Nazism.³⁶ The

history of evangelical prophetic interpreta- tion has shifted from an anti-Catholic framework in the nineteenth century to an anti-Communist one in the twentieth cen- tury, and as a result Hal Lindsay inspires his contemporary audience. As a matter of fact, George McCready Price in the last book he wrote, entitled *The Time of the End*, moved in this direction for an Adventist audience.³⁷ From this perspective, the beast of persecu- tion may not be WASP America, but Soviet Russia or Marxist Mozambique, or perhaps may include all three.

In conclusion, then, *The Great Controversy* interpreted history in terms of a cosmic battle between God and Satan, good and evil, which would reveal ultimately "Good News" about God. She was concerned with history only as it illuminated the spiritual drama of "meta-history" (in Berdyaev's phrase). In every era of history, "the great controversy" has taken shape in its own par- ticular way. From one era to the next, there are continuities in the historical struggle and there are dissimilarities. In Mrs. White's time, the polarization of good and evil oc- curred with its own singularity, and the prophetess pointed up with great specificity the nature of the struggle. What matters now is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ be com- municated with a similar degree of applicabil- ity to our time.

Only if *these times* are addressed with the message will Christ provide an answer to *our* problems. Communism, nuclear arms, en- ergy shortages or ecological disorders may be among the "beasts" and "signs" unantic- ipated by Mrs. White and other early Advent- ists. A prophetic message for those living near the end of the world should involve just that — the *world* — not simply the United States or the West. And issues like ecumenism or sabbatarianism should be viewed in the light of these post-Protestant and post-Christian times. The title of our discussion lends itself to a double entendre: when Mrs. White heralded the end of the world she spoke of the end of *her* world. Since Ellen White provided an eschatological perspective for her own time, in her spirit it is now up to us to provide one for our time.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), V, 451.
2. See a fuller discussion of this point in Jonathan Butler, "When Prophecy Fails: The Validity of Apocalypticism," *SPECTRUM*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 7-14. In this connection, I take exception to the tract published by the White Estate entitled "Forecast and Fulfillment: Ellen G. White Prophecies Fulfilling in the 1970s." In most cases, the quotations cited from Mrs. White were not intended as forecasts at all, but were contemporary cultural comment, frequently in the present tense. Certainly, there are parallels between her situation and ours, but pointing up these parallels does not illustrate prophetic predictions "fulfilling in the 1970s."
3. For a classic characterization of Victorianism, see Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957). For a more recent study, see Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).
4. Handy, *A Christian America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).
5. *From Sacred to Profane America: The Role of Religion in American History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).
6. *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1888).
7. *A Christian America*, p. 5.
8. Quoted in Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, Anchor Books, rev. ed., 1960 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), p. 74.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Strong, *Our Country* (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1885).
11. See Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Harper, 1949).
12. According to recent quantitative histories, ethnic and religious factors were salient in nineteenth-century American politics, cutting across clans and occupational lines. See the following: Ronald P. Formisano, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827-1861* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); Michael Fitzgibbon Holt, *Forging a Majority: The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848-1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969); Richard Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1871); Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics 1850-1900* (New York: The Free Press, 1970).
13. *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement*, paperback edition, 1972 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963), pp. 4, 5, 7.
14. *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1905), p. 305.
15. *Liberty*, 13 (First Quarter, 1918), P. 23.
16. *A Manual on the Christian Sabbath, Embracing a Consideration of Its Perpetual Obligation, Change of Day, Utility, and Duties* (Philadelphia: Key & Biddle, 1834), pp. 134-137. emphasis his.
17. Quoted in *A Christian America*, p. 147.
18. *The Great Controversy*, p. 592.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 590.
20. *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 61 (March 18, 1884), 177.
21. Ellen White herself concentrated more on the errors of the Pope than on Catholicism in general. The Pope's "Syllabus of Errors" in 1864 and the dogma of papal infallibility in 1870 had long since disturbed her sensibilities. See her chapter on "Aims of the Papacy," *The Great Controversy*, pp. 563-81.
22. Francis P. Weisenburger, *Ordeal of Faith: The Crisis of Church-Going America, 1865-1900* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).
23. *The Great Controversy*, p. 573, emphasis mine.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 579, emphasis mine.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 563.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 444-445.
27. Laurance Moore, "Spiritualism," in Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974), pp. 79-103; Also see Moore's *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology and American Culture* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1977).
28. Weisenberger, *Ordeal of Faith*, p. 209.
29. *The Rise of Adventism*, p. 100.
30. *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948) V, 451, emphasis mine.
31. "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist*, 58 (1956), 265.
32. For the development of this useful concept, see Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Anchor Books edition, 1969 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967).
33. See Jonathan Butler, "Adventism and the American Experience," in Gaustad, ed., *The Rise of Adventism*, pp. 184, 193ff.
34. *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 137.
35. "Firing Line," Transcript of program telecast on PBS, March 27, 1976 (Published by Southern Educational Communications Associations), p. 10.
36. See Erwin Sicher, "Seventh-day Adventist Publications and the Nazi Temptation," *SPECTRUM*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 11-24.
37. *The Time of the End* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1967). I am uncomfortable with some of the right-wing political implications of Price's eschatology.