

# Where Are Historians Taking the Church?

by Benjamin McArthur

We are witnessing the first great age of Adventist historical revisionism. Although there has been but a scattered handful of articles, unpublished papers and a single book thus far, their impact has been felt far beyond their number.\* Ronald Numbers' *Prophetess of Health* has particularly aroused passionate debate. This paper will *not* be a critique of these works, however; there is no intention of discussing the merits or shortcomings of their arguments. I will assume a familiarity with them on the part of my readers. But to briefly summarize what I see as the unifying argument running throughout these works, I would say that their authors all share the belief that the cultural milieu in which Ellen White lived and worked to a large degree shaped her writings on history, prophecy, health and, by implication, every other topic

\*Besides the work of Numbers, I am thinking of articles in SPECTRUM by William Peterson, Gary Land, Eric Anderson, Donald Casebolt and Jonathan Butler.

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she discussed. At issue, then, is the nature of her inspiration and thus her authority in the church. My purpose is not to arouse passions, but to shed some light on the impulse to revise the tradition that has defined Ellen White and Adventism first by considering some of the sociological factors at work, and second, by suggesting what the new scholarship's impact on the Adventist Church will be.

The dilemma of the Adventist historian fits into the wider problem of the intellectual in the church. A movement that was originally peopled by folk of modest means and education has grown into an institution composed of many who are highly educated and whose field of specialization leads them into areas ripe for doctrinal conflict. One thinks immediately of those Adventists in the physical sciences, such as geology, whose research has important implications for the church's view on creation and the age of the earth. Here, the evolutionary presuppositions Adventists must work with in their discipline conflict with church dogma. This conflict between science and faith is one with which Adventist laymen have long been familiar. The threat to faith of the historical

science, however, has broken upon church members unexpectedly. That this should be so may be explained by a failure to appreciate the central role of the historian in any community.

In their most traditional function, historians are the guardians of tradition. They record the words of its wise men and the great deeds of its heroes; they carefully select and edit the material that will compose the society's view of its past, and by extension, define the meaning of its present. History is the chief means of binding people into a cohesive and self-conscious unit. This has been true from the earliest days of humanity when tribes gathered around a fire to hear the ritualistic telling of their origins, to the twentieth century Marxist historians' attempts at building working-class solidarity through their particular brand of revisionism. Nineteenth-century American historiography partook of this same kind of community-building. Bancroft, Parkman and Weems wrote histories that developed a sense of nationhood, that created heroes for generations of children to emulate.

But the deeply nationalistic historical writing of the last century has fallen out of favor in recent times, giving way to a new ideal: that of dispassionate analysis. For example, the celebration of the American experiment, though not repudiated by all historians, has been replaced by a systematic questioning of old truths, exposing fraud and prejudice alongside altruism and tolerance. Instead of being guardians of tradition, historians have become social critics. This change of attitude and function accompanied the professionalization of historical writing in the late nineteenth century. Graduate education instilled the practitioners of Clio's art with the value of scientific objectivity; sentimental attachments to cherished figures and institutions could not stand in the way of the pursuit of truth. In this spirit, influential and iconoclastic books appeared, such as Charles Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913), which dared suggest that America's pantheon of Founding Fathers might have been motivated by self-serving ends. From that day on, no American hero has been safe from unflattering revisionism.

Adventist historiography has followed a pattern of development similar to that of the historical profession as a whole, albeit with a time lag of many decades. Histories of the Adventist Church have always been apologetic. Loughborough, Olson, Froom, Nichol, Spaulding and Maxwell used history to inspire confidence in God's leading among members of the church and to refute the charges of outsiders. Lines of causation frequently led to an underlying providential guidance. To a striking degree, the church's history was divorced from its social matrix. Above all, the apologias accepted unquestioningly the inspiration of Ellen White's pen, thus making the search for historical influences not only unnecessary but also threatening.

The revolution in Adventist historiography has been a function of graduate school education. To be sure, ever since Everett Dick pioneered the history Ph.D. in the 1930s, a number of Adventist historians had pursued higher education. But the usual path to the doctorate had been via academy teaching, with graduate school being taken in bits and pieces, during summers and infrequent leaves, often extending the degree program for years. Some of the best historians of our

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denomination had to follow this circuitous route. But it necessarily kept them from becoming full participants in the very special culture of graduate school. By contrast, the reformulators of the Adventist tradition all went through nearly uninterrupted history graduate programs (and one in English) at an early age and at prestigious institutions. They felt full force the impact of the critical

methodology which lies at the heart of graduate training, and when they brought these intellectual tools to bear on their own ecclesiastical tradition conflict was inevitable.

There has been created, in effect, a new class of intellectuals within the church, bound together by their common educational heritage, whose function is to offer critical examination of the church's tradition. The Adventist Church has not known such a group before and is having trouble accepting its legitimacy. Criticism, in the worst meaning of the word, had always come from dissidents, from the Canrights; understandably, then, even the most gentle questioning of dogma could easily be confused with disillusioned quibble. Yet, in a deeper sense, church leaders are rightfully concerned about this "unattached" intellectual class, for its members' unequivocal loyalty to orthodox belief can no longer be taken for granted.

But uneasiness about their new role characterizes the historians as well as church leaders. They are caught between the tug of religious nurture and institutional loyalty on the one hand, and adherence to the creed of their professional discipline on the other, which demands that they follow the logic of their evidence wherever it leads. The discipline's insistence on finding causal explanation within the temporal realm heightens the problem, for it seemingly counters the assumption that God acts directly in the affairs of humanity. The problem is not that the Adventist historian lacks faith in God's providential leading, but that there is no way for them to include it in historical explanation. Thus, discussions of Ellen White's writings are bound to lead to her reliance on other historians, or on reformers, or on the prevailing social climate of her time. Ultimately, Adventist historians will have to come to terms with the contention of Van Harvey and others that orthodox belief and critical historical judgment are incompatible. Does a presupposition of belief necessarily preclude sound historical judgment?

Perhaps more important than the causes of revisionism is the question of its impact on

the church. Will the qualifications of Mrs. White's inspiration truly become the "new orthodoxy," as Eric Anderson maintained in a recent discussion of McAdams' work (SPECTRUM, Vol. 9, No. 3)? And more to the point — should it?

Only future historians can answer the first question, as the ramifications have not yet been worked out. But literalist readings of Mrs. White are so much a part of Adventist belief that any change could only come with great difficulty, possibly at the cost of schism. As long as revisionist writings remain either unpublished or unread by the rank and file membership, their long-range effect may be negligible. Much depends, of course, on the openness of church leadership, especially regarding the editorial policies of the *Review and Herald*, *Ministry* and the Sabbath School quarterlies. The church's publications, along with ministerial influence from the pulpit, probably shape attitudes concerning the Spirit of Prophecy more than anything else, and it is extremely unlikely that liberalization will occur in either of those places. Yet, the influence of Adventism's intellectual class should not be minimized. The work of one historian has gained a sympathetic hearing from General Conference leaders and White Estate administrators, indicating that they are willing to consider new points of view if approached in a conciliatory fashion. The greatest influence would come, in fact, from a deliberate working within the institution to change attitudes rather than firing revisionist salvos that would only invite counterattack.

But what if ministers no longer cited Ellen White as authority and the *Review and Herald* conceded that her writings were historically conditioned? What would be the effect on the church if that became the prevailing attitude among church members? Some would argue that not a great deal would be lost. One could still accept Mrs. White's prophetic function, even while modifying the level of her writing's inspiration. From this point of view, Mrs. White would serve in the same way that many Old Testament prophets did: to encourage and build up the community of faith. Her writings solidified the body of believers in her time and can still be of great

devotional benefit today, but they offer the modern reader no inspired revelation concerning history or health or any topic about which we can know more than she. This reformulation of the meaning of Mrs. White's inspiration has the attraction of retaining her status as a prophet of the church (albeit one reduced in authority), while removing the ground for conflict with the historical-critical method. Yet, such a tactic removes the propositional heart of her writings, reducing them to either pages of historical interest for students of nineteenth-century religion or, as mentioned, eloquent devotional messages.

But most Adventists continue to read Ellen White in the belief that they are learning the *true* facts of the Reformation, that her counsels on health owed nothing to contemporaries and were based on eternal principles, and that her statements on the eschatological role of the Catholic Church transcend their 1880s' origin, to name three issues of contention. The belief that Mrs. White provides us with timeless and irrefutable knowledge of

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heaven and earth goes to the core of Adventism, for it seems to offer the greatest evidence that we are God's chosen church. Her body of writings form the central tradition of the American Adventist Church, supplying the very definition of Adventism for a large percentage of the church's members. Widespread doubt about her writings' inspiration, therefore, would transform the church, requiring the creation of a new tradition. Some may question this judgment, pointing to the Adventist Church in other parts of the world where Ellen White's messages play a less vital role without inhibiting piety or growth. But

analogy fails here, for among American Adventists, a reliance on the Spirit of Prophecy for definitive answers on all religious questions has been engrained through generations and is a characteristic trait.

**M**ore appropriate than a comparison with non-American Adventists may be a glance at the nineteenth-century Jewish experience, where the impact of the historical-critical method on the Jewish tradition suggests possible results of Adventist historians' tampering with tradition. The Jewish community was very similar to the Adventist Church in its strict adherence to extrabiblical tradition; in its case, the commentaries of the Talmud. For centuries, from generation to generation the traditions were passed on, with additions and reinterpretations, but always with a firm belief that the unfolding truth came from God himself, thus possessing a binding authority. This set of religious norms encompassed far more than strictly doctrinal matters. Like the writings of Ellen White for the Adventist community, they set down the total way of life. The historical community of the Jews was made possible by this devotion to their tradition.

In the early nineteenth century, the Jewish people experienced the same revolution of historical consciousness that Adventists are beginning to experience now. In what was called “the science of Judaism,” Jewish scholars like Leopold Zunz and Solomon Steinheim undertook historical and philological investigations of various aspects of Jewish history. Their assumptions and methods resembled those of modern Adventist scholars: first, in their endeavor to maintain total objectivity in their research, free from any prejudicial theological preconceptions; and second, in their consciousness of the distance between the world they studied and themselves. Their guiding assumption, and one also shared by Adventist revisionists, was that however else the tradition might be understood, it must be studied historically, by examining the temporal conditions framing the origin of every practice and belief. This approach had a secularizing effect on Jewish tradition undercutting the

tradition's normative authority, for it could no longer be seen in the same way as God's revelation.

With tradition no longer capable of serving as a binding force for the major segment of Judaism, the Jewish community faced the prospect of losing its identity. Through the rest of the nineteenth century, certain Jewish scholars, notably Nachman Krochmal and Heinrich Graetz, took up the task of isolating the essence of immutable Judaism and separating that from the impermanent products of historical development (again, similar to the hopes of some Adventist historians). But the Jewish thinkers never again achieved a consensual basis for a new Judaic tradition, and their community splintered into the various parts that we know today. The nearest approximation to a unified tradition came with the Zionist movement of the late nineteenth century, but even the new hope of a homeland failed to revive the vibrant tradition they once knew.

I would certainly not lay all the blame for the fragmentation of the Jewish community on a handful of scholars; the powerful tug of assimilation into gentile society, which itself encouraged the historical revisionism, was the primary force at work. Moreover, parallels between the Jewish and Adventist experience can easily be overdrawn. Nevertheless, the impact of the historical-critical method on the Jewish tradition should give Adventist historians occasion to reflect on the potential effects of their own work. Like the Jewish people of the nineteenth century, Adventists face ever greater temptations to lower the barriers of distinctiveness between themselves and the world. In the past, this threat was always met by recourse to the Spirit of Prophecy, whose counsels ended argument and safeguarded standards. But, if Mrs. White's writings are shown to be historically conditioned, they will lose their traditional authority. Without the tradition to rely on, secular challenges will be difficult to turn back. Adventist identity itself will be threatened.

Many argue that Mrs. White's writings are overused and abused in the American Ad-

ventist Church, and that revisionism may lead to healthier, if less extensive, application of her gift. This may be true. But I would question the feasibility of such a middle ground. If one is going to have a prophet, the risk of misuse probably cannot be fully removed. Again, it comes down to whether one wishes to retain the normative authority of Mrs. White's writings and accept the occasional abuse with which we are all familiar, or to state categorically that her writings must stand the scrutiny of historical investigation before they will be accepted. The objection may be raised here that I am positing a false dichotomy, that it is not necessarily an all or nothing proposition. Why cannot we, based on reasonable investigation, determine those writings grounded in nineteenth-century understanding that no longer apply today, and those that bear the mark of prophetic inspiration and continue to compel respect? But this solution, I believe, would inevitably cast a pall of tentativeness on all of Mrs. White's writings, which is inimical to the very notion of prophetic utterance.

I am not in any way questioning the faith or good intentions of those historians involved in the revisionistic enterprise. They are responding not only to the demands of their profession, but also to the strain of rationalism that runs deep in the Adventist mentality. Our tradition has always stressed that the truth can stand the closest scrutiny, that our belief has nothing to fear from careful examination and should, in fact, be rigorously tested. In a sense, Adventist historians are only carrying out that dictum to its logical conclusion. Nor should their attempt at an objective analysis of Mrs. White's books be interpreted as a dispassionate quest. They care deeply about certain problems they see in the interpretation of her work, and their writings, at least in most cases, are an attempt to resolve the problems.

Perhaps a more appropriate question than whether reinterpretation is a good thing is whether we have any alternative to a critical examination of our church's traditions. Have we reached that stage in church development when the kind of theological reformulations our church has always known must also be matched by historical self-examination? The

General Conference's commissioning of Richard Schwarz to write a denominational history textbook, a history intended to be nonapologetic, indicates that such needs are felt among church leadership. Although the presuppositions and conclusions of leadership may be far from those of the revisionist historians, both church leaders and historians share a sense of the importance of having analyzed the church's history in a complete and intellectually respectable manner; both want a tradition fully congruent with historical truth. But once the Pandora's box of history has been opened, there can be no recalling the disturbing facts that will escape. They can change a church's historical understanding of itself, and a change of that type is very difficult to reverse.

In essence, the church is experiencing a clash of values. The older value of traditional authority is being challenged by those of the academy, which stress an intellectual approach to problem solving and believe that all truths should be thoroughly tested. There are no clear sides in the issue, for everyone concerned has a degree of loyalty to both sets of values. But can the church hold both? This dilemma, common to nations and institutions undergoing modernization, afflicts

Adventists with particular acuteness because of the belief that there should be no disjunction between faith and reason.

The point should be made once again that the revisionistic history may make no lasting impact on the church's view of the Spirit of Prophecy. Prevailing attitudes may be more resilient than some might think, and one should avoid the fallacy of inevitability. Yet, the experiences of other cultures that have suffered the pangs of modernization suggest that these issues rarely go away of their accord nor are they easily resolved. Tradition and secular learning have proved incompatible bedfellows. There may be no way to avoid the kinds of questions being posed by Adventist historians. If so, there will almost surely follow a change in our understanding, and subsequently, in the authority of the prophetic gift. The challenge of such a change is clear. It could, on the one hand, enervate the Adventist community. But taking a more hopeful view, it could also result in a rethinking and renewal of the Adventist faith. It could encourage a faith based not upon prescriptive authority but upon reflective consideration of what the Christian life demands in the morally complex situations of day-to-day life.