

Graduate Studies ‘Outside’

by Jonathan A. Glenn

For a variety of reasons, whether financial or academic, many Seventh-day Adventist students choose to attend non-Adventist graduate schools. When I chose to study at the University of Notre Dame following my graduation from Walla Walla College in 1977, reactions among my friends ranged from the inane (“You mean they do something there besides playing football?”) to the well-meant, however ill-conceived (“Isn’t that a *Catholic* school?”). One friend expressed concern regarding my adjustment to a society of drinkers, smokers and swearers; another urged me to beware of Sabbath problems. These sorts of difficulties, however — primarily social, and easily dealt with — have not ultimately been of real import. My experience here at Notre Dame — a Christian school — and that of my friends at secular institutions suggest, rather, that for the Seventh-day Adventist graduate student the problem of the non-Adventist graduate school is essentially one of fellowship and isolation. Will the student invoke the ancient watchword, “In the world but not of the world”? If so, how will he interpret it?

The Seventh-day Adventist graduate student, having newly arrived at his non-Adventist graduate campus, typically finds his life abruptly dichotomized. Once-a-week church simply does not take the place of the warm womb of the Seventh-day Adventist college community, where, though many students do not share an equally confirmed commitment to the Adventist faith, most students do share a relatively homogenous

cultural background, at least in terms of religion. Obviously, the cold outside world of the non-Seventh-day Adventist graduate school is not, and does not attempt to be, such a community. A friend recently wrote to me: “. . . among all the other changes any student going to any graduate school experiences, the SDA student going to a non-SDA graduate school suddenly finds himself in an environment in which his spiritual activity is totally disjoint from his scholastic pursuits. This is especially apparent in the form of his peers and professors, but it is just as extant in the total tone and direction of the campus.”

At the same time, not all is well back in the womb of Adventist culture; even there a split exists. Though the phenomenon is by no means an exclusively Seventh-day Adventist one, the split between “the people” and the intelligentsia (even our own terminology dehumanizes us) seems wide in the church. Certainly, there is little enough sympathy for areas of interest such as mine (Old English poetry) in any average group; a Seventh-day Adventist group will additionally assign eternal demerits to what it sees as a waste of temporal talents — that is, to what it believes not to have any immediate practical importance (or, perhaps, to what it does not understand).

An additional problem exists not in the church and not in the world of the graduate school, but in the graduate student himself — the problem is that of *mission*. My friend writes: “The fact that I ran into successful people who had strong personalities and held radically different basic assumptions than mine really caused me to wonder about mine. Not so much whether or not they were good enough for me, but whether or not they were good enough for them. You see, I came [to graduate school] somewhat as a mission-

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ary to the heathen intellectual. I had much more to learn than to teach, however.” Though I myself did not come to Notre Dame thinking of myself as “a missionary to the heathen intellectual,” I do think that one of the basic assumptions trained into young Seventh-day Adventists is the mission-directedness of the church and, hence, of each church member’s life. The problem, here, lies in the fact that active proselyting and honest intellectual pursuits (*as pursuits*) are not compatible.

Such problems are not, of course, without their solutions, and these solutions do not consist of retreating into the womb, for such a retreat is a retreat from reality: as far as a person rests in such absolute security, just so far is he unaware of himself as a human, of his church as a human institution, and of his God as one of whom it can be said, “Clouds and darkness are round about him. . . .” (Ps. 97:2) The seventh-day Adventist graduate student can find some neonatal comfort, however, in the discovery that the cold world affords opportunities for fellowship just as rewarding as those of the illusory womb. I have found no basic spiritual concern of mine as an Ad-

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ventist that cannot be discussed reasonably with non-Adventist graduate students. Certainly, the terms of such conversations must be different from those of a discussion taking place within the Seventh-day Adventist coterie — one talks in Christian or human terms rather than in Adventist terms. Yet, is not such a recodification good? Adventist terms, it seems to me, have come to consti-

tute Adventist spirituality; under normal circumstances, they automatically produce the appropriate response — on a prereflective level. Conversation with those not of the coterie allows one to escape the conditioned responses, to reflect without the predetermination of reductive assumptions.

Additionally, one must deal with the problem of mission. If one sees his mission as one of proselyting — *e.g.*, for the Seventh-day Adventist Church — he cannot, it seems to me, maintain a responsible scholarly commitment. Though we may more often use the term “witnessing” for our proselyting, the two generally suggest the same activity: the attempt to convince another person of the truth of some position, almost always fixed. It is this fixity of position which invalidates the entire process, for the responsible thinker cannot assume an absolute stance. He does, certainly work from a position, but his own position constantly bears the same scrutiny other positions must; otherwise, he creates, again, the illusion of the warm womb, effectively isolating himself, if he is a graduate student, from the community of peers, professors and ideas with which he should be involved. The graduate student’s “mission,” then, cannot be one of proselyting for any fixed position, not even that the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Does the Adventist graduate student, though, have a mission on the non-Adventist campus? Yes, I believe; it is the human mission, the Christian mission, if you will, of realizing in himself and in his relationships with other human beings the continual completion of God’s creation. “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground . . .” (Gen. 2:7): God creates by combining constituents, by building consistencies. Man’s mission is to create thus, to form (from a Christian position, perhaps — not fixed, not rigid, not brittle, but considered) that consistency and wholeness which make him man.

I have found, thus, that I must deal with the problem of fellowship and isolation not by entrenchment, but by involvement; not by stasis, but by growth.