

From Apologetics to History: The Professionalization of Adventist Historians

by Gary Land

The first decade of the Association of Adventist Forums has been an eventful period for Seventh-day Adventist historians. When I entered graduate school in 1966, there was no perceptible movement among Adventist history teachers. With few exceptions, they saw themselves as teachers rather than researchers. At most colleges, Adventist history had long since been consigned to the religion department. Little serious discussion addressed the problem of a philosophy of history; even less effort was made to publish scholarly work.

As I look at Adventist historians now, however, a considerable change has taken place. Several Adventists have published scholarly articles and books. An interest in Adventist history has developed, resulting in books, essays in *SPECTRUM*, the journal *Adventist Heritage* and a belated attempt to draw courses in Adventist history back into the history departments. Some members of the profession are seriously discussing philosophy of history. The historians have formed the Association of Seventh-day Adventist Historians—such groups are a sure sign of professionalization—and are meeting together at least once a year and publishing a newsletter. And, for good or ill, the growing activity of Adventist historians has posed some challenges to traditional Adventist thinking, with the result that the profession is beginning to share the controversy formerly monopolized by scientists and theologians.

The most significant development of recent years has been the emergence of a schol-

arly approach to the Adventist past. Earlier SDA “history” had been primarily of three kinds: memoirs, apologetics and story books. Only twice had professional historians contributed, Everett Dick in *Founders of the Message* and Harold O. McCumber in *Pioneering the Message in the Golden West*¹, but both of these works had been considerably popularized. In the late 1960s, though, scholarly books began appearing alongside the more traditional kinds of Adventist history.

In the traditional approach, several significant works of apologetics came from denominational presses. One major topic that they addressed was righteousness by faith. Ever since R. J. Wieland and D. K. Short had written a paper² in the 1950s arguing that Adventists had rejected this doctrine after its presentation at the 1888 General Conference, denominational leaders had been seeking avenues of response. One such means was via history. In 1962, a theologian, Norval F. Pease, had sought to trace historically Seventh-day Adventist teaching on the subject in *By Faith Alone*.³ But A. V. Olsen’s 1966 work, *Through Crisis to Victory*,⁴ gave more thorough coverage of the 1888 General Conference and its aftermath. Drawing upon material in the White Estate, Olsen argued that no action was taken against the doctrine in Minneapolis in 1888 and that many of those who had opposed it there, such as G. I. Butler and Uriah Smith, accepted it within the next few years. Ellen White, he said, had fully supported both the doctrine and those who defended it, and the church itself had accepted righteousness by faith by 1901.

A few years later, LeRoy Edwin Froom took up the issue in *Movement of Destiny*.⁵ First, he argued that Seventh-day Adventist doctrines came from the Bible rather than

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Ellen G. White. Second, he stated that the debate over Arianism had ended by the 1860s in favor of the full deity of Christ. And third, in contrast to both Pease and Olsen, he concluded that while the 1888 General Conference had set in motion denominational concern over the doctrine of righteousness by faith, advance toward full acceptance of the doctrine had been uneven until the 1930s. That latter period, however, proved to be a turning point, as denominational leaders studied the Bible and writings of Ellen G. White. The triumph of this doctrine made possible, he concluded, the discussions with members of the evangelical community that led to the publication of *Questions on Doctrine*.⁶

In addition to these clergymen, two professionally trained historians also contributed to this apologetic literature. Jerome L. Clark, who chaired the history department at Southern Missionary College, sought in *1844*⁷ to place the Millerite movement within its social and cultural context. Basing his three volumes almost entirely on secondary sources and providing no general interpretive framework, Clark offered a series of descriptive chapters on such topics as Millerism, antislavery and the temperance movement. What little interpretation he did venture was theological, as when he asserted that the Millerite movement was “ordained of God”⁸ and that evolution arose in the mid-nineteenth century “because Satan feared the Advent Movement and did not want its truths to be taught.”⁹

Mervyn Maxwell, chairman of the church history department at the SDA Theological Seminary, wrote a different kind of work in *Tell It to the World*,¹⁰ which appeared in 1976. Writing primarily for a Seventh-day Adventist audience, Maxwell wanted to identify the denomination’s uniqueness. While his footnotes indicated a mind trained in the critical method, Maxwell’s text revealed his concern to be primarily theological rather than historical. He argued that there were a number of Bible texts that could have prevented Miller from misunderstanding the phrase “cleansing of the sanctuary” and applying it to Christ’s Second Coming. But God had allowed Miller to preach because the world

needed to know that “Jesus was about to enter upon a *great process of atonement*.”¹¹ The Sabbath doctrine, although it came from the Seventh-day Baptists, took on a fuller meaning in Adventism, according to Maxwell, because “In these *last days* He is blotting out sin [the sanctuary doctrine] and Sabbathbreaking is, of course, sin.”¹² The sanctuary doctrine, he further argued, is the foundation of Adventism,¹³ which led to his final conclusion and the ultimate point of his book: because Christ is blotting out sins in the heavenly sanctuary, “We must cleanse ourselves from all defilement,”¹⁴ which is accomplished through Christ’s power. When such perfection is achieved, enabling the church to “tell it to the world,” then the Second Advent will take place.¹⁵ In short, Maxwell was not so much interested in interpreting history as he was in using history as a springboard for arguing a particular theology. Not surprisingly, *Tell It to the World* appeared at a time when Seventh-day Adventists were arguing over whether perfection was to be achieved by God’s people before Christ could come.¹⁶

The apologetic approach to history received rather rough treatment at the hands of Adventist historians, however. The appearance of SPECTRUM and, later, *Adventist Heritage* gave an opportunity for critical evaluation of these works, and Adventist historians consistently measured them on the basis of generally accepted standards of scholarship. Although Richard Schwartz found Olsen’s *Through Crisis to Victory* useful, he stated, “It appears that the author was so determined to counter those church critics who see the dismal side of the 1888 experience, that he has leaned over backwards to show that Seventh-day Adventists . . . had accepted the concepts of righteousness by faith by 1901.”¹⁷ More strongly, Ingemar Linden said that, in *Movement of Destiny*, Froom “has given a biased and one-sided treatment of what has often been very rich source material.”¹⁸ I can still remember my own disappointment, after having just completed four years of graduate training, upon reading Clark’s *1844* and finding how much

it differed in both conception and execution from the historical work I had learned to admire. Consequently, I objected to the author's mixing of theology and history and concluded that the volumes "reveal that Clark is a committed and sincere Christian; one wishes that he had held the standards of historical scholarship as high."¹⁹

Fortunately, Adventist historians, in addition to criticizing the work of the apologists,

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began producing scholarship that sought to live up to the standards they were promulgating. Some published articles in their fields of specialization,²⁰ but the work that caught the most attention was in the field of Adventist history. Everett Dick had made an attempt to publish Adventist history in the 1930s but had been rebuffed,²¹ and apart from some scattered dissertations, little had been done until the 1960s.

One of the first truly scholarly published works in Adventist history came not from a historian, however, but from Howard B. Weeks, who wrote a dissertation for a degree in speech at Michigan State University. This study, published in 1967 as *Adventist Evangelism in the Twentieth Century*, argued that when “Seventh-day Adventists mobilized their resources for evangelism, they were, in part at least, paralleling a nationwide rebirth of conservative protestantism.”²² An awareness of Adventism’s cultural context was now beginning to affect historical writing about the church. As Weeks traced the development of Adventist evangelism, he found it working best during times of crisis such as World War I and the Great Depression. A new element in Weeks’ approach to Adventist history was his examination of failures as well as successes. He told, for example, how the sensational apocalypticism which brought large numbers

temporarily into the church during World War I had to be reevaluated when the war did not turn out as predicted. Weeks also forthrightly dealt with the attitudes evangelists expressed toward other churches and how their hostility diminished over the years. Examining the roles of men, techniques and institutional adjustments, looking at the relationship of Adventism to the wider culture and recognizing the negative as well as the positive, Weeks ushered in a new era of Adventist history. Evangelism was probably a good topic with which to introduce such an approach, for it was not in itself tied to doctrine or Ellen G. White. As such critical history was applied to other subjects, some church leaders became increasingly suspicious.

A few Adventists felt discomfort when Richard W. Schwarz of Andrews University in the early 1960s began writing his dissertation on John Harvey Kellogg, the controversial doctor who had helped precipitate a split in the church. Although the potential for conflict over the historical record existed, Schwarz was able to examine, in addition to Kellogg’s own papers and other materials, the correspondence between Kellogg and Ellen G. White located in the White Estate. As William Frederick Norwood commented, “Schwarz has lifted the veil that tends to shroud the mass of significant papers, correspondence, and memorabilia still waiting in various depositories for historical examination and evaluation.”²³

The popularized book resulting from this dissertation, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.*,²⁴ proved to be another milestone in the development of a professional Adventist history. Like Weeks on evangelism, Schwarz examined Kellogg in the context of nineteenth century medical history and, in the case of his city mission program, the social gospel movement. But even more significant in the light of previous histories, he approached the conflict between Kellogg and the church in an evenhanded manner. Eschewing a single cause approach, he found the sources of the trouble in differences in personality, attitudes and philosophy, as well

as theology. Although dwelling on Kellogg's role in the controversy far more extensively than that of other church leaders, Schwarz indicated that demominational leadership was not entirely without blame. In a later article, he explored the causes of the conflict in more detail, arguing that the issue of pantheism was only the tip of the iceberg.²⁵

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Other significant works of denominational history also came from the church's presses in the 1970s. Reflecting the racial concerns of the previous decade, Ronald D. Graybill attempted in *E. G. White and Church Race Relations*²⁶ to place the prophet's apparently conflicting advice within its historical context. While written to address a contemporary problem and prepared by a seminary rather than a history graduate, in its reexamination of primary sources, treatment of previously ignored topics and attention to the broader cultural context, the volume was part of the developing professionalization of Adventist history.

Emmett K. VandeVere's *The Wisdom Seekers*, a history of Andrews University, made another contribution to the growing literature. Like Schwarz's volume, and unlike those of Weeks and Graybill, the book appeared without footnotes, a decision made by the publisher. VandeVere had thoroughly researched his subject, however, and the reader could find the documented manuscript in the Andrews University library. Although this research uncovered useful information, the volume made little interpretive contribution to Adventist history, for VandeVere framed his narrative around people and tried not to “overmoralize.”²⁷ As a result, he gave little attention to the broader social context both within and without the church, a characteristic that led to the impression, Maurice Hodgkin complained, “that growth and development toward the

present were inevitable.”²⁸ A few years later, VandeVere produced a volume of readings, *Windows*,²⁹ on the history of the church that likewise concentrated upon the thoughts and feelings of individual people.

VandeVere's style of excellent research, but little interpretation, characterized other recent books as well. Eric Syme's *A History of SDA Church-State Relations in the United States*,³⁰ based primarily on published sources, traced chronologically the development of Adventist attitudes. Although arguing no general thesis, it did observe that Adventists had consistently recognized that they needed to have good relations with both the government and the general public. Searching out unpublished manuscripts as well as obscure books, Godfrey T. Anderson, in *Outrider of the Apocalypse*,³¹ reconstructed in considerable detail the life of Joseph Bates, but declined to evaluate his subject's contributions to Seventh-day Adventism.

The most exhaustive recent study of Adventist history, P. Gerard Damsteegt's *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission*, also consciously chose to avoid interpretation in favor of a “descriptive historical-theological and missiological approach.”³² The result was a detailed account of the development of Adventist theology between 1831 and 1874, particularly as it related to mission, in terms of Seventh-day Adventist self-understanding as revealed in the primary sources. Although Damsteegt argued no obvious thesis, he did emphasize throughout his study the significance of a historicist hermeneutic in shaping Adventist theology. In contrast to the direction that Adventist historical studies were taking, he made little attempt to understand Adventist theology within its intellectual and social setting or ask questions regarding the validity of the Seventh-day Adventist self-understanding. Nevertheless, Damsteegt's work was a substantive contribution upon which future scholarship will much depend.

Except for Graybill, these authors were older men who had worked for the denomination for many years and their works were relatively uncontroversial. The appearance of SPECTRUM, however, reflected the interests of a younger generation of scholars, most of whom entered graduate school right after college and at a time when social activism per-

meated the nation's campuses. Not surprisingly, they expressed a greater professional consciousness and felt strongly the need to look critically at the religious tradition in which they had been reared. Ellen White quickly became the center of concern in a discussion that involved theologians, literary critics and historians as well as the church leadership.

The discussion began when the autumn 1970 issue of SPECTRUM offered several articles on Ellen White. Two theologians, Herold Weiss and Roy Branson, called for a reexamination of Mrs. White's writings in terms of her relationship to other authors, her intellectual and social milieu and her own intellectual development.³³ As if in answer to this proposition, William S. Peterson, who taught English at Andrews University, examined Mrs. White's account of the French Revolution in *The Great Controversy*. He argued that instead of writing from vision the prophet had drawn both her ideas and information primarily from Sir Walter Scott's *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte* and James A. Wylie's *The History of Protestantism*, both works based on poor research and written with considerable bias. "It simply will not suffice to say that God showed her the broad outline of events," he concluded, "and she then filled in the gaps with her readings. In the case of the French Revolution, there was no 'broad outline' until she had read the historians."³⁴

Although two other articles about Ellen White appeared in that same issue, those by Weiss and Branson and Peterson caused the most discussion. W. Paul Bradley, speaking for the White Estate, saw no need for critical scholarship, stating that "no reinterpretation is required to make us know God's messages for us."³⁵ He further rejected the suggestion that Mrs. White had obtained her ideas from other authors. "While it is true that Ellen White did use certain historical quotations," Bradley argued, "it does not follow that she searched histories to develop a theme or plot."³⁶ "In forming one's personal judgment about the validity of the gift that resulted in the work of Ellen G. White. . . ," he

concluded, "one must doubt whether historical criticism will have a preponderance of weight. There will always have to be present a strong element of faith."³⁷

This reluctance to reexamine traditionally held opinions had been common in the history of Christianity, indeed of all cultures; for Seventh-day Adventists, however, to raise questions about Ellen White was to strike at a foundation stone of the faith. Hence the concern. The debate continuing, Peterson defended the legitimacy of historical criticism.³⁸ Then John W. Wood, a religion teacher at Atlantic Union College, reexamined the historians that Ellen White had used, concluding that they held little in common, that they were good sources, and that Ellen White had not mishandled them.³⁹ Peterson rejected these arguments on the grounds that Wood had manipulated evidence, offered misleading generalizations, asserted rather than proved, and concealed "the dogmatic assumptions upon which his argument rests."⁴⁰ The debate closed when Ronald Graybill, a research assistant at the White Estate, showed Ellen White drawing her material from Uriah Smith, who had, in turn, obtained it from the historians.⁴²

The subject of this debate may seem a minor one — a single chapter in one book of a prolific author. But the issues involved — the validity of historical criticism and the relationship of its findings to an understanding of Ellen White — were large. Not simply the findings of scholarship, suggestions that the prophet had borrowed and mishandled information threatened the authoritative role that Ellen White had come to play in the church.

The next major contribution came from a historian of medicine and science, Ronald L. Numbers, whose *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* reexamined the development of Mrs. White as a health reformer. In his preface, Numbers noted that he was parting from traditional Adventist scholarship in that he did not presuppose inspiration or ignore witnesses who rejected Ellen White as inspired.⁴² Cast in the form of a biographical study, Numbers' book developed two major

themes. First, he argued that Ellen White drew upon the ideas of health reformers such as James C. Jackson and R. T. Trall, although she had consistently denied any relationship of that sort. Second, he pointed out that Ellen White had changed her ideas on whether an Adventist should consult physicians, don “reform” clothing, or adopt the two-meal-a-day plan, among other matters. Her historic function, he concluded, had been to make a religion out of health reform.⁴³

Even before its publication, Numbers’ book aroused a storm of controversy, as clandestinely obtained copies of his first draft typescript circulated within the church community. The denomination early in 1976 published a paperback edition of D. E. Robinson’s *Story of Our Health Message*, together with a study guide for use in the churches.⁴⁴ The White Estate sent speakers to Adventist centers to present the official church position, and letters went out to ministers warning against those who questioned Ellen White’s inspiration.⁴⁵ After publication of the volume, the controversy caught the attention of *Time*⁴⁶ which, in turn, inspired a *Review and Herald* editorial that claimed the book really presented no challenge to the faith of a knowledgeable Adventist.⁴⁷ The White Estate prepared a 23-page response to Numbers that was immediately available,⁴⁸ and a larger printed critique that appeared in the fall and was delivered free of charge to all history and religion teachers in the denomination’s colleges in addition to being sold to the Adventist public.⁴⁹

The White Estate response followed Bradley’s earlier argument. “If divine inspiration is excluded *a priori*,” the Estate argued, “then one is left with nothing but a secularist-historicist interpretation of Ellen White’s life and with the implicit denial of the validity or truthfulness of her claim to divine inspiration.”⁵⁰ After expressing this philosophical objection to Numbers’ methodology, the Estate then provided a chapter-by-chapter critique of *Prophets of Health*. Although admitting that there were some problems in Mrs. White’s writings and that she had borrowed from other writers, the Estate asserted that Numbers had misread his sources on

crucial points and had left out evidence necessary to a true understanding of Ellen White. “This late-hour attack upon the validity of her messages,” it concluded, “does not stand the test of history nor the judgment through the years of the church’s trusted spiritual leaders.”⁵¹

SPECTRUM, in early 1977, published several articles on the Numbers book, including a brief version of the White Estate critique.⁵² Of the two Adventist historians writing in that issue, W. Frederick Norwood supported Numbers’ refusal to use the supernatural as a category of explanation,⁵³ while Richard W. Schwarz expressed dissatisfaction with this approach and criticized Numbers for relying on hostile witnesses.⁵⁴ Both historians, however, believed that Numbers’ study should lead to a reexamination of the denomination’s understanding of Ellen White. Two non-Adventist historians also commented on the book. Psychohistorian Fawn Brodie, in what became the most controversial article of the issue, interpreted Ellen White as a hysteric who deluded

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herself into believing that she was a prophet chosen by God.⁵⁵ In contrast, Ernest Sandeen, author of *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, concentrated on the problem of being a believer and historian at the same time, stating that one could “see this tension and even feel this agony in the pages of Numbers’ book.”⁵⁶ In addition to a commentary by a theologian,⁵⁷ Numbers replied to his critics, primarily the White Estate, arguing that judged by the evidence his study stood validated.⁵⁸

This ended the immediate response to the book. In 1978, however, I reviewed the White Estate critique, arguing that its criticisms did not hold up to scrutiny and concluding that we may need to reexamine our

understanding of inspiration and authority.⁵⁹ The long-term effect of Numbers' work upon Adventist scholarship remained to be seen. But *Prophets of Health* made clear a problem that had existed from the time that Everett Dick had first proposed to apply professional standards to the writing of Adventist history. Namely, the church could not live easily with attempts to understand Adventism, particularly Ellen G. White, within its historical context and on the basis of critically reexamined and more extensive documentation. Nor could the historian expect to pursue his work without raising questions about Adventism's uniqueness and the meaning of inspiration.

Not all was controversy in the 1970s, though. Vern Carner, a teacher of religion at Loma Linda University, organized on that campus a lecture series presented in 1972-1973 on the social and intellectual milieu of the Millerite movement. Involving some of the leading names in the field of American religious history as well as one Seventh-day Adventist historian, the lectures appeared in print in 1974 as *The Rise of Adventism*.⁶⁰ Jonathan Butler's closing essay on "Adventism and the American Experience" made a groundbreaking exploration into the nature of Adventism and its relationship to the larger American culture.⁶¹ He argued that between the 1850s and 1880, Seventh-day Adventists had shifted from a sectarian to denominational identity and from apocalypticism to a "between the times" eschatology. Politically, they had moved from withdrawal to moderate Republicanism. In the end, he concluded disturbingly, "these American Adventists came to use the Republic, in a sense, to fulfill their millennial dream."⁶²

Carner also worked on two other projects. In conjunction with Ronald Numbers and Godfrey T. Anderson, both of Loma Linda University, he initiated *Studies in Adventist History* in 1971. These individuals envisioned the publication of a series of volumes on Adventist history that would gain the respect of the historical profession. Drawing upon more than a score of Adventist historians to

write the essays, they asked me to edit the volume treating the chronological development of the church, and Jonathan Butler, then of Union College, to prepare the volumes containing topical essays. The project is still in progress.

The other effort involved publication of *Adventist Heritage: A Magazine of Adventist History*. Begun in 1974 as a semiprivate venture by Carner, the biannual publication proposed to present Adventist history in a popular form that nevertheless adhered to the standards of historical scholarship.⁶³ Edited at first by Jonathan Butler, Ronald Numbers and myself, the magazine touched on a wide variety of topics from Millerism to Adventist involvement in the chaplaincy program of the United States armed forces. Although we intended to cover other Adventist groups as well as Seventh-day Adventists, we have seldom done so. In 1975, partly because of the magazine's financial problems, Loma Linda University took over its publication. Denominational control meant the possibility of editorial censorship. Numbers was dropped from the Board of Editors because of the impending publication of his book, and a new managing board requested delay in the publication of an article by him. (Numbers subsequently withdrew the article.) Fortunately, no censorship has taken place since that time. Despite some unevenness in quality, largely because the editors have had few articles to choose from, *Adventist Heritage* has provided a previously unavailable outlet for denominational history. At this writing, however, lack of a solid subscription base makes its future questionable.

In addition to the activities of Adventist historians, the denomination also promoted the development of Adventist history. In 1974, the education department of the General Conference requested Richard Schwarz to write a textbook on the history of the church for use in college classes. This volume, *Lightbearers to the Remnant*, appeared in 1979.⁶⁴ Also, partly in response to a recommendation from the newly organized Association of Seventh-day Adventist Historians, the denomination in 1973 established an official archives that organized and made avail-

able historical materials for research. Although the denomination had some problems with its scholars, it was apparently still encouraging them, hoping perhaps that cooperation and further work would resolve the dilemmas that were appearing.

While this interest in Adventist history was developing, Adventist historians began seriously discussing the problem of a philosophy of history. Because of the denomination's historicist approach to the interpretation of biblical prophecy, there had long been an interest in establishing a specifically Adventist approach to history. But apart from Raymond Cottrell's master's thesis at Pacific Union College in the 1940s and some papers presented at the College History Teacher's Council in 1962, little formal effort had taken place. But the publication of two books in 1967 and 1970 on the subject prompted a debate that has yet to close.

When George Edgar Shankel of Atlantic Union College published *God and Man in History*, he made the first extensively developed statement of an Adventist philosophy. Focusing on God's intervention in human affairs, he stated,

In the larger view, all history is the struggle between two great spiritual forces. The nations of earth seem to shape the events we call history. In reality, the powers of earth are frequently the instrumentalities in the hands of God to accomplish his purpose, although they may be entirely unconscious of fulfilling any such divine mission. Likewise, they may serve to promote an adverse spiritual power.⁶⁵

Developing his thesis further, Shankel argued that God intervenes in history in two ways. Indirect intervention takes place through "making the forces and laws operating the world the expression of divine will"; direct action occurs "when God by supernatural intervention causes matters to take a different course than they would in the natural course of events."⁶⁶ All interventions and all history revolve around the pivotal fact of Christ as Lord of history. "The emergence of Christ injected into history something more

than an accelerated movement in time," Shankel wrote. "He brought into history a revolutionary set of values. When man violates these values or by his misdirected effort interferes seriously with God's eternal purpose, God intervenes."⁶⁷

Three years later, a theologian, Siegfried J. Schwantes, carried this theme further in his *The Biblical Meaning of History*. Schwantes rejected determinism and chance, replacing them with providence,⁶⁸ which he described as "an all-pervasive and silent influence shaping the whole course of history, rather than a punctiliar and cataclysmic one."⁶⁹ Not everything that happens in history meets God's approval, Schwantes argued, but everything "that happens is allowed to happen by God and remains under his judgment."⁷⁰

Schwantes went beyond the work of most previous Adventist historians on the philosophy of history in his attempt to apply his general philosophical understanding to the actual course of historical events. He found his points of application in two areas: the history of the church and the history of freedom. Arguing that if a divine goal is to be found anywhere in history, it would appear in the story of the church, he concluded that "the rationale of all history should be illumined by ecclesiastical history and not vice versa."⁷¹ The task of the historian, therefore, is to discover where the histories of the church and the world have interacted "and whether one or both bear the evidence of providential guidance."⁷² The history of freedom was in his view closely related to that of the church, for God works through spiritual renewal, which can best take place in an atmosphere of freedom. Therefore, "God's effective presence in secular history is best recognized in every movement that promotes human freedom and dignity."⁷³

The appearance of Shankel's and Schwantes' books prompted the first critical discussion of an Adventist philosophy of history that appeared in print, an event made possible by the establishment of SPECTRUM. In its pages, Ronald Numbers began the debate by taking a dim view of *God and Man in History*, stating that Shankel's emphasis upon divine intervention produced a strange conception of freedom and criticiz-

ing Shankel's speculations about particular points of history where God had intervened.⁷⁴

These issues received more extended attention in a discussion of Schwantes' *The Biblical Meaning of History* originally presented by Gary Ross of Loma Linda University to the Western Adventist Historians. Ross concentrated on what he called the "freedom device" which he found unsuccessful on two counts. On theological grounds, it violated Christianity's portrayal of men as both free and determined. On historical grounds, it

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retrogressed, Ross argued, “to monocausality; to a politicized, libertarian, or Whig interpretation of history; to a simplistic and romanticized dialectic; and to that fondness for eulogy which we call filiopietism.”⁷⁵ Despite his severe criticism, Ross appreciated Schwantes' attempt to do what Adventist historians needed to do, namely, develop a workable philosophy of history. But his confidence in the possibility of a Christian approach to history did not find agreement among his commentators. Walter Utt suggested that there was no necessity for a specifically Christian history, for the primary influence is the teacher himself. Likewise, Ronald Numbers criticized the revival of the providential approach to history preferring “honest agnosticism to pious fraud.”⁷⁶

Just as Adventist historians and theologians were most fully discussing a unique philosophy of history, therefore, a deep pessimism appeared regarding the possibilities of such an approach. Emphasis upon divine intervention as the key element of an Adventist philosophy of history had resulted in the feeling that it raised crucial questions regarding the scope of human freedom. Furthermore, it was difficult, if not impossible, to

interpret history providentially, because of the historians' inability to determine the actions of the supernatural.

Sharing this pessimism, I suggested, first in my review of Clark's *1844* and then in a more expanded way to a group of students and faculty at Andrews University in 1972, a different approach to a Christian philosophy of history. I pointed out that the traditional way of describing God's hand in history implied an almost deistic separation of God and the world, whereas the Bible presented God as both immanent and transcendent. This meant, then, that God is always active in history. But because, in the light of revelation, some events are more meaningful than others, the Christian historian, rather than emphasizing God's intervention, will seek to understand the meaning of events within a Christian framework. Concerned that we should develop a philosophy that would be applicable to classroom teaching, I suggested that such elements as the Christian understanding of man and ethics and the significance of the Christian religion are possible avenues to a Christian approach to history.⁷⁷

A revised version of this paper appeared in *SPECTRUM* in 1976⁷⁸ and I presented another paper expressing similar ideas to the history section of the North American Higher Education Conference that same year⁷⁹ but there has been little critical discussion of this approach as yet. With the traditional understanding of providential history apparently at a dead end, and my own approach (which is not necessarily the only alternative) yet unexplored, the future direction of the Adventist philosophy of history is uncertain.

Much work remains to be done, it is clear, in both Adventist history and the philosophy of history, for serious efforts are still in the beginning stages. One individual cannot imagine all the possibilities, but a few suggestions can perhaps provide some direction for the future.

To date, Adventist history has followed certain established patterns. The favorite subject is biography. The popular histories have been mostly biographical as well as the recent

scholarly works of Schwarz, Graybill and Numbers. Second, most Adventist historical writing concentrates upon the nineteenth century, and when it does push into the twentieth, makes little or no attempt at conceptualization. Arthur W. Spalding's work⁸⁰ is a good example of this approach, but even the recently published textbook for the most part treats twentieth century developments topically. Finally, Adventist history has depended primarily upon published sources. As a result, there has been little analysis of the process by which the organization has arrived at its public actions.

These characteristics indicate some of the problems Adventist historians need to address. Much of the institutional history at the several levels of organization and in the many aspects of denominational activity remains to be written. Twentieth century Adventism is a virtually virgin field for historical research. In addition to specialized studies, there must be attempts at synthesis offering general interpretations and periodization. The archival material being organized at the General Conference and the Heritage Rooms of Loma Linda and Andrews universities needs to be utilized in an effort to gain insight into the internal workings of the church.

Such are a few of the more obvious directions in which Adventist history must move. But there are other modes of the historical quest that would be fruitful to apply as well. The intellectual history of the church — its ideas, attitudes and emotions — is a tremendously interesting subject that would contribute greatly to our self-understanding. Jonathan Butler's "Adventism and the American Experience" has shown how valuable such an enterprise can be. We know little about the kind of people who have become Adventists and how the church has developed as a social group over the years. Answers to questions posed about topics such as these would require the use of social science techniques including statistical and comparative analysis, in which most Adventist historians have no training. A start in this area has been made by Ronald Graybill, however, in a study of the economic status of early Adventists.⁸¹ Despite the difficulty of such work, it would be a boon to Adventist studies if one

or more historians would undertake it. In addition to our lack of knowledge about the Adventist masses, we really know little about the kind of men who have become leaders in the church. Collective biographies combined with the theoretical underpinning afforded by social scientists in such works as William Whyte's *The Organization Man* and Michael Maccoby's *The Gamesman*⁸² would, I believe, provide rich insight into the development of the church. And, of course, controversial and filled with pitfalls as it is, there must be continuing research on Ellen White and the role she has played in the denomination.

Something else needs to be done as well.

Adventist history is almost totally the possession of Adventist historians. Apart from several discussions of the Millerite movement and Peter Brock's examination of the Seventh-day Adventist response to the Civil War,⁸³ non-Adventist historians know little of Adventist history. One step toward correcting this will be for Adventist historians to begin publishing research on Adventist history in scholarly journals. To do this, we will have to begin looking at Adventism not only in the light of our own narrow concerns, but also in terms of how it contributes to an understanding of larger historical problems. The occasional appearance of such an article might awaken the interest of others in our history, and out of that interest a scholarly dialogue may emerge that would be of value to historians both within and without the church.

At the same time that we are developing Adventist history in a highly professional manner, we need to remember our responsibility to the general Adventist public. As specialized research takes place, it must be synthesized and translated into a popular form that still maintains scholarly integrity. Only through such means can we keep an understanding and appreciation of the Adventist past alive within our denominational community.

As Numbers' work on Ellen White has revealed, however, research into Adventist history carries certain risks, especially where

it impinges upon deeply held beliefs and attitudes. For this reason, I believe that we must take seriously the problem of a philosophy of history. Most historians are not particularly philosophical, and Adventist historians are no different. But if we are to survive and make our research understood, we must be able to articulate the relationship between critical history and religious belief.

In addition to discussing the ultimate meanings and patterns of history, a task most relevant to the classes we teach, we need to analyze the nature of historical knowledge. While making a commitment to the possibility of obtaining real knowledge, we need to establish the limits of that knowledge. We must further identify the interpretive concepts of the Christian historian and contrast them with non-Christian concepts. We need to examine the process of applying the Christian view, recognizing that the Christian perspective becomes less clear as we move toward a narrow focus. As Christian philosopher Arthur F. Holmes told me, theological concepts affect the historian's work more clearly "in construing the overall pattern of history than in explaining the rise and fall of Rome — more in explaining that than in giving a causal account of Caesar's invasion

of Britain — more in that than in reconstructing the size and equipment of his army, etc."⁸⁴ And above all, we need to engage theologians and denominational administrators in dialogue about the meaning of our history and its implication for our beliefs and practice.

Through efforts along these lines, both historical and philosophical, Adventist historians can help fulfill the promise of the recent past. Although the reawakened interest in Adventist history holds both opportunities and dangers, it offers a unique path, though not the only one, to Adventism's understanding of itself. As one who a few years ago never envisioned himself working in the field of Adventist history, I have found it an increasingly important subject, giving direction to my professional life and helping explain the thinking and actions of both myself and those around me. In a period when history is often dismissed as irrelevant to the practical world, growing numbers of students are discovering through Adventist history that the past can add meaning to the present. Perhaps Adventist history provides a route by which we historians can once again make our discipline important to our audience.

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