
Johnsson on the Future of the *Adventist Review*

by Eric Anderson

As William Johnsson was assuming the editorship of the Adventist Review in late 1982, Eric Anderson, professor of history at Pacific Union College, interviewed him in his office at the Review and Herald Publishing Association in Washington, D.C. Anderson edited the tape of their conversation.

Born in Australia, Johnsson's first college degree was in chemistry from Adelaide University. He then earned a B.A. in theology from Avondale College. After accepting a teaching post at Spicer College in India, where he eventually became dean of the school of theology, Johnsson earned an M.A. from Andrews University, a B.D. from London University, and in 1973 a Ph.D. in New Testament from Vanderbilt University. In 1975 he left Spicer College to join the New Testament department at the SDA Theological Seminary where he remained for five years, the last two as associate dean.

In 1980 he accepted the post of associate editor of the Adventist Review, and in December 1982, he became the editor.—The Editors.

Anderson: Elder Johnsson, you recently wrote an article in the Andrews University Student Movement with a very startling

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headline. It was “The *Review*: An Adventist *Pravda*?” What did you mean by that title?

Johnsson: You notice, Eric, that the title did have a question mark. I was trying to meet head-on the criticism that the *Adventist Review* is essentially a mouthpiece for the General Conference; that it simply echoes the party-line.

Anderson: It is correct to say that the *Adventist Review* is the official paper of the

Johnsson: No, that is not correct. For a period the *Review* was classified as the official church paper. But since 1979 it has simply been listed as the general organ of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. And the distinction is important. We would like to be thought of as being close to the General Conference in our philosophy, but also at least half a step away from the General Conference so we can retain a significant measure of journalistic independence.

Anderson: Are there natural limits to how open the *Review* can be in dealing with sensitive issues?

Johnsson: Yes. First of all, we are part of the church, and I see our work here at the *Adventist Review* as clearly a ministry. We are concerned with giving the news, but we also have a pastoral concern, trying to build up people's faith. Also, at times the church may be involved in matters where there is pending litigation. For instance, in the Davenport matter, our attorneys advised us

that we simply were unable to print all that we have known. There are exceptional cases where news stories come from overseas and I can think of one right now that involve stories of hardship and even persecution of our people, that we may choose not to run if we or our leaders feel that there is a likelihood that people abroad will suffer. I would underline that these are clearly unusual cases.

Anderson: As an example of what you are talking about, I read in the secular press that the revolutionary government in Nicaragua has been threatening Adventists, accusing them of various improbable acts of sabotage.

Johnsson: That is the sort of example I would have in mind.

Anderson: Let's think a little bit about the profile of your readers: How many people read the *Review*?

Johnsson: The circulation has gone up and down. Forty years ago we had a circulation of something like 37,000. Twenty years ago, in 1962, we hit 94,000, which was a sudden jump. It gradually tapered off; then in the 1970s, it sharply rose again as the Columbia Union and then the Southwestern Union introduced free copies of the paper to all its members. About eighteen months ago we hit 110,000. As of last August, the Columbia Union pulled out of the scheme so we are at 75,000 right now, 10–15,000 of whom are still paid for by the Southwestern Union for circulation to its members.

Anderson: Would it be fair to say, then, that the *Review's* circulation is, in rough terms, about what it was 25 years ago?

Johnsson: Yes, you could say that. And frankly, I am not pleased with a circulation of 60–65,000 individual paid subscriptions in the United States. I think it should be much higher.

Anderson: Can we speculate about the influence of the *Review*? If the circulation is holding steady in a growing church, isn't it less influential than it was?

Johnsson: For many, the *Review* is very

influential—as much as ever. But perhaps it is less influential among certain groups than it was 25 years ago.

Anderson: With whom does the *Review* have less influence?

Johnsson: I am thinking of academic groups, professional groups. I am not saying that the academics and professionals don't read the *Review*. Many do and are strong supporters of the paper. But I am also concerned that some sort of put the *Review* aside. We are not talking about a very large number in the church, but in my judgment a very important group. My own background is academics, and I feel very badly when academics dismiss the *Review*.

Anderson: Can you tell us a little bit about what we might do to attract that group back?

Johnsson: One thing we must certainly do is cover the news of the church more fully, accurately, fairly, and quickly than we have in the past. The *Review* does not have a large staff. We have basically six people in an editorial capacity and three secretaries, and we print 52 times a year, plus a monthly edition. We do all our own layout and pasteups. So we don't really have too many people to send out on news stories. But we definitely intend to do far more than in the past in the way of news features. We hear church members asking questions, and we would like to direct those questions to people in the church who have been elected to positions and should be able to give us the answers.

Anderson: You are the tenth editor of the *Review*. As far as I can tell, you are the first with advanced training in theology. What's the practical significance of that theological education for your editorship?

Johnsson: Because the paper has traditionally been so tied in with the life of the church, theological concerns have been important to it and will remain important. Although I will not be able to bring advanced academic concerns directly to bear on my editing, I would hope that my background would give me a certain

breadth of judgement in soliciting and evaluating articles. Indeed, I would hope that the *Review* will be known for its theological integrity.

Anderson: You have come to the editorship of the *Review* as a very prolific writer, I believe you have written six books.

Johnsson: Five, with the sixth one just coming off the press.

Anderson: If a *Review* reader wanted to understand the new editor, which of those books would you particularly recommend?

Johnsson: It depends on the reader. The one that I like the best is my work on the book of Hebrews. Hebrews is my favorite biblical book, and I wrote *In Absolute Confidence* to unlock my understanding of Hebrews. I think it succeeds fairly well. I am happy with the book. That would be more for the biblically inclined reader. I am very happy with the new book called *Why Doesn't Anyone Care?* I was asked to write a book Adventists might give to their neighbors, and so it is not scholarly, but I hope its background is good scholarship. It is a series of 10 "why" questions; for example, why good people suffer.

Anderson: Your dissertation for the Ph.D. in New Testament at Vanderbilt University does have a certain topical relevance.

Johnsson: Yes, its title is "Defilement and Purgation in the Book of Hebrews". It was done under Professor Leander Keck, who was chairman of the Department of New Testament at Vanderbilt and is now Dean at Yale University. He is, I think, the outstanding New Testament scholar in the country. The work that I did there involved an exegesis of Hebrews 9 and 10 which, of course, has become critical in Adventist discussions over the past two years.

Anderson: My impression is that your dissertation was very cautious and very constructive, but slightly revisionist. Is that correct?

Johnsson: Some could interpret it that way. But I would just look upon it as a conservative stance.

Anderson: Would you feel comfortable if that little tag I applied to your dissertation were used to describe your editorship—"cautious, constructive, and slightly revisionist"?

Johnsson: While I hope my editorship is responsible, I would not want it to be "cautious." I hope certainly that it would be "constructive." As for "revisionist," I would prefer the word "progressive," building on the Adventist tradition which I think is something not to be ashamed of, but looking toward the future. I would hope as an editor I would even have a certain boldness, as I think that the people who occupied the chair before me have had.

Anderson: You have been an associate editor for just over two years. In that time what were the high points? What were the best articles and the sort of material you would want to imitate and continue?

Johnsson: There are several articles that leap to mind. One is Elder Wilson's report to the church on the Davenport matter. I would hope that we could have more reports to the church from the General Conference and other responsible people. Another example would be the Ramik interview concerning Ellen White. That was significant, I think at a rather critical point in the history of the church and its understanding of Ellen White. In terms of serious theological writing the most important thing we have run were the articles by Alden Thompson on Ellen White.

Anderson: I think, that Elder Wood handled that very well, in that the diversity of responses was very well presented.

Johnsson: In many respects, I would see that series and the way the reactions were handled as a model.

Anderson: Do you plan, then, to leave some things in the *Review* just the same?

Johnsson: Certainly the format of the paper will remain the same. Thanks to Harry Knox, it has a neat, clean design. As for content, the paper will continue to provide articles in the area of doctrine,

Selections from the pen of Editor William Johnsson

compiled by Dan Fahrback

Ellen White Revelations

"We do not concede the point that Ellen White's prophetic role has been disproved. The studies by various researchers during the past few years indeed have brought much new data to light. They have shown that the scope and extent of Ellen White's uses of sources is greater than most Adventists had realized.

"But that is a far cry from falsifying her prophetic gift. What has been shown to be in error, in fact, is the *concept* of inspiration held by many Adventists. In light of the facts, a verbal (dictation) theory of inspiration for Ellen White cannot be sustained. Nor will it hold up for the Scriptures. While historically the Adventist Church has refused to endorse verbalism, in practice many members have inclined toward it.

"We suspect that many of those who have recently turned away from Ellen White's writings followed the verbal theory of inspiration. They should have abandoned their theory, we suggest, not Ellen White."

—Editorial, January 27

Church Structure

"The time has come in Adventist history when more study must be made of the nature of the church. Ecclesiology—the general doctrine of the church—has not been an area of deep study heretofore. . . ."

". . . It is important that the practical questions—questions of structure and organization—not be decided on a merely pragmatic basis. A theology of the church should inform discussions and decisions about the working of the church."

—"Editor's Viewpoint", February 10

Neal Wilson's style of leadership

"Neal Wilson has the ability to keep the respect of those who disagree with him. He is able to tell another he's wrong in a manner that does not drive a wedge between them. He hears people out, even if eventually he has to oppose their ideas.

"The Wilson philosophy of leadership defies complete analysis. An elusive, personal quality goes be-

yond influences from father or up-bringing. He consciously follows no particular school of leadership.

"Part of that quality is the sharpness of a probing, informed mind. Elder Wilson to an unusual degree, has the ability to absorb detail into a comprehensive picture."

—"Perspective", February 24

Davenport Disclosure and Discipline

"While the *Review* stands for a disclosure, our position demands that the disclosure reflect sensitivity and a truly Christian spirit. The *Review* is more than a newspaper. While we seek to keep our readers informed, we also wish to be redemptive. We seek to build up both individuals and the church at large.

"We do not think that the printing of names in the *Review* should become a means of church discipline.

". . . While we hold that disclosure through the printing of names in the *Review* is not a desirable means of church discipline, we maintain that credibility and confidence can be built only on a basis of release of information through appropriate means. It is imperative that avenues of disclosures be established for those church members who individually desire more information.

". . . The Davenport affair will go away eventually, if boards and committees follow through on the recommendations of the officers, and if the church at large perceives that they have done so, we may be able to put it behind us with reasonable speed. Without such actions and perception, however, the church may suffer under the Davenport burden for many years.

"Another factor to hasten its demise might be the readiness of leaders directly involved in the discipline to acknowledge their mistakes.

"We can understand, for instance, the feelings of those church members who are threatening to withhold tithe, but we cannot endorse such action. The church and its mission are far greater than the Davenport affair."

—Editorial, March 24

Dan Fahrback, a graduate of Andrews University, has been editor of *Insight* since 1981.

articles that inspire, and articles that deal with the Adventist tradition.

Anderson: In the last few months, the *Adventist Review* and *Ministry* have included articles that attempt to re-educate the Adventist public on the role of Ellen White. In response to challenges they have attempted to spell out a new position. What role do you see for the *Review* in this new understanding of Ellen White's mission?

Johnsson: Some people might challenge whether, in fact, it is a new understanding of Ellen White. For some people, certainly, it may be a new understanding and I would hope that we can continue that process by a steady series of articles and reports.

Anderson: I am not sure I agree. Wouldn't you say that these understandings of Ellen White are new for everybody? Certainly no one in the church realized the full extent of Ellen White borrowings.

Johnsson: In terms of data, yes, but not in terms of interpretation of the data. I have to say that the impact of the borrowing of Ellen White has perhaps not been so severe on me as on some others. Years ago, when I took my doctoral studies I went through the process of trying to accommodate the fact of inspired writers' borrowing.

Anderson: Do you think that the worst of theological controversy in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is over?

Johnsson: I would hope so. I see some signs that we are moving into a period of greater tranquility.

Anderson: What are the positive signs that you see?

Johnsson: I think scholars in the church feel a little bit more settled than they did a year or two ago; Consultation II would be a positive mark here. Also I sense among pastors and lay people alike almost a weariness with theological argument—not a weariness that says, "Let's forget all about it," but a weariness that says, "Let us go on to something else. Let's continue to work on these theological matters, but let us not be absolutely preoccupied with them." There is a sense that we simply cannot live on

debate forever. We have to go on. I sense a third thing—a feeling that the church is valuable, that there are limits to dissent and questioning. I don't want to be misunderstood here, but I sense more and more people, including intellectuals, saying, "Hey, we cannot simply open up the church in such a way that discussion might lead to utter dissolution of the church; there have to be limits."

Anderson: At the same time, people in the church who have been extremely suspicious of scholars and engaged in wholesale attacks on them have somewhat subsided, haven't they?

Johnsson: It seems so to me. I believe Consultation II has broken down a good deal of suspicion.

Anderson: Are there any innovations, besides more news, which you are planning as the new editor?

Johnsson: Well, about the news, we intend to speed up certain phases of production of the paper so that we can get news of the church out much faster, so that the *Review* is not simply recording news that people have already heard. Also, we will certainly have more of human interest in the paper. More of the content of the paper will be staff written. Anyone who joins the staff from here on must already be a proven writer, a good writer—be able to write quickly, to report a story. That will be an absolute requirement.

Anderson: There's an Adventist truism that "if we had studied the Bible the way we should have, we wouldn't need the spirit of prophecy." Let me try this one out on you. "If the *Review* did its job properly we would not need *Spectrum*." How do you react to that?

Johnsson: Well, I don't know. I don't feel that my role here at the *Review* is to try to put anyone out of business, *Spectrum* or anyone else. *Spectrum* obviously can do things we cannot do. *Spectrum* is not plugged into the official church as we are. I would hope that some of the people reading *Spectrum* and not reading the *Review*

would start reading the *Review* as well. I am not here to put *Spectrum* out of business. *Spectrum* will offer a variety of opinions. In many areas, it would be difficult for the *Review* to do so.

Anderson: I suppose an example of that would be *Spectrum's* coverage of the very complex situation in the Soviet Union which really couldn't appear in an official publication.

Johnsson: That is right, yes. We have clear evidence that the *Review* does end up in offices of ministers of state in countries all around the world. So this makes us cautious in certain areas.

Anderson: Sometimes when you give an interview you probably are frustrated that the interviewer didn't ask the right questions. Is there any question that you would ask yourself if you were conducting this interview, something we left out?

Johnsson: I think I would want to know about the changing relationship of the *Review* with the Review and Herald Publishing Association. This is an area that has not been very widely publicized so far. Starting January 1, the magazine is no longer a part of the Review and Herald Publishing Association. Because the publishing house is moving out of Washington, the decision had to be made: "Will the *Adventist Review* tilt toward the publishing house or will it remain in Washington?" But this also raises some questions. Since we'll now be attached to the General Conference, the area of journalistic integrity becomes even more acute.

Anderson: It would seem that whether or not you like it, more than ever you will be thought of as the official publication of the General Conference.

Johnsson: Well, we have to keep educating the people that that is not true. You see, it's rather a fine line that we have to walk here. On the one hand, the very

strength of the paper, in large measure, arises from the close relationship of the *Review* with the General Conference. The editors supported staying in Washington so that we could remain close to the heartbeat of the church.

At the same time the *Review* editors and the General Conference officers don't want every word we print treated as if it had received the seal of the General Conference brethren. We don't want to have any censorship committee, as it were, looking over our shoulder. By the way, I want to lay to rest the idea that everything we publish is censored by some anonymous group. This has not happened. What may happen is that once in a few months, we refer an article to some of our consulting editors for counsel.

Anderson: To end, let me ask you a question about your predecessors. When President Reagan came into office he had the chance to hang a portrait of one of his predecessors in the Cabinet Room. He chose President Calvin Coolidge because he was particularly impressed with Coolidge's tax policy. If you had the choice to choose one portrait of a *Review* editor, is there one you would particularly want to model yourself on?

Johnsson: Three editors stand out. The first, although he served for only a couple of years, is J. N. Andrews. Since he was the outstanding scholar of the early Adventist church, I am naturally attracted to him. For totally different reasons, I am drawn to W. A. Spicer. He had a great warmth, deep human concern and a love for the people of God. He liked to say repeatedly, "The Adventist Church is a great family to belong to," a concern that I share. The third editor is F. D. Nichol. I am especially attracted to him because of the clarity of his thought and the sharpness of his expression. If you really forced me to choose among the three, I think I would hang Spicer's portrait.