

Beyond the Seventh-day Adventist Fringe

Lowell Tarling. *The Edges of Seventh-day Adventism: A Study of Separatist Groups Emerging from the Seventh-day Adventist Church (1844–1980)*. 241 pp., illus., index. Barragga Bay, Bermagui South, N.S.W., Australia: Galilee, 1981. \$10.95 (Aust.) (paper). Available in the USA from Calvin Edwards, 13021 Lincoln Way, #82, Auburn, CA 95603. \$15.00 postage paid.

reviewed by Ronald Lawson

Lowell Tarling, who studied English literature at Avondale College and Newcastle Teachers College, Australia, in the 1970s, has diverse talents and interests. He is a freelance writer on religious topics, a recording artist (gospel music), playwright (mostly musicals), cartoonist, and fisherman. Previous publications include *Thank God for the Salvos: A History of the Salvation Army in Australia, 1880–1980* (Harper and Row, 1980), and a novel, *Taylor's Troubles* (Penguin, 1982), based upon his experiences as a student and teacher at the Adventist Strathfield High School in Sydney.

In his introduction to *The Edges of Seventh-day Adventism*, Tarling applies sociological church/sect theory to Adventism, arguing that the history of the Adventist Church is "the story of its transformation from a sect to a Protestant denomination." Within Adventism

there has always been a tug-of-war between elements wanting to remain sectarian and elements wanting to be denominational. Similar movements at its fringes reflect the battle which is taking place within the church itself. Some fringe movements want to retain the characteristics of a sect, others want the full acceptance of being a denomination in the Protestant sense. . . . However, a study of all the breakaways can give a very clear understanding of the Seventh-day Adventist mind. . . . That is to say, the sum of the parts of the off-shoot movements is equal to the corporate identity of the mainstream church.

The main body of the book gives the history of some 20 off-shoots of Adventism, including all the major groups and several minor ones. While the list is not exhaustive, Tarling does claim that his three-fold classification of the groups represents all their types. This division also represents three fairly neat historical periods. The first category, "separate movements," is made up of groups that rejected distinctive SDA doctrines, or the authority of Ellen G. White, during the first decades of Adventist history, and developed into separate denominations, forgetting their connection to Seventh-day Adventism. Included here are the three groups that emerged from the Millerite movement after the disappointment of 1844 (aside from the Seventh-day Adventists): the Church of God, which separated from Adventism in the 1860s, and later subdivisions of the Church of God, including Herbert W. Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God and its off-shoot. "Perfectionist and reform movements," the second category, which emerged during the 40 years following the death of White, idealized an early period of SDA history and chose to remain there, stressing positions from which they felt the official SDA body had apostatized. These movements remain so conscious of their SDA roots that their proselytizing efforts focus there. The main groups within this category are the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement and the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists (Shepherd's Rod) with its several fragments. "Redemption and Protestant movements," the third category, mostly have emerged during the past 25 years and are led by charismatic leaders with strong Protestant leanings that run ahead of the theological evolution of the SDA Church. Some of these have joined existing Protestant denominations, while others have spawned independent congregations rather than centralized denominations. The main discussions in this section are of Robert Brinsmead's Awakening Movement, the controversy over righteousness by faith in Australia between 1972

and 1979, Desmond Ford and Evangelical Adventists, and the 1888 General Conference Session.

Tarling's material is mostly well-documented; he has done a great deal of searching for sources. However, because source documents and informants were not equally available, some profiles are much fuller than others. Nevertheless, Tarling's most important contribution is to release to the

day Adventist Reform Movement, which arose among conscientious objectors to the militaristic position taken by leaders of the European Division of Seventh-day Adventists in Germany during World War I. The European Division leaders informed the German authorities that defense of the Fatherland on the Sabbath and with arms was not in contravention of either the fourth or the sixth commandments.

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general reader material concerning groups on the edges of Adventism that was not previously available. Since the main controversies of the past quarter-century have centered to a large extent in Australia, he was especially well-placed to research these. Tarling is also to be complimented for maintaining a high degree of objectivity in his account, but unfortunately the proof-reading of the volume did not maintain the standard. I have never seen so many errors in a book—in spelling, grammar, and even dates.

Some of the material is fascinating. Margaret Rowen, one of three women put forward at different times as prophetesses for Adventism, was prepared to lie, forge a letter from Ellen White, and plot a murder to convince followers of the truth of her visions. Changes introduced by wives succeeding to leadership helped bring about the fragmentation of the Shepherd's Rod. The personal theological journey of Robert Brinsmead and the details of the groups to emerge from the “great disappointment” are most interesting. Saddest of all, perhaps, is the story of the origins of the Seventh-

What of Tarling's contention that a study of SDA offshoots can tell us much about Adventism itself? Implicit in Tarling's account is a sense that changes in Adventism are often produced reactively—that the offshoot tails wag the church dog. In this he corroborates the conclusion of Geoffrey J. Paxton's *The Shaking of Adventism*, which focused on the official responses to the evolution of Brinsmead's theology. However, Tarling notes that in the early decades of this century most groups exited to the sectarian right, but that more recently they have been breaking off from the denomination's liberal left. This suggests a period of sudden change in official church positions around 1955–1965, rather than a gradual transformation from sect to denomination.

Church/sect theory has become widely used as an analytical tool within Adventism in recent years, but its adoption usually has been naive, uncritical, and deterministic; in this respect Tarling is no exception. Sociologists have a difficult enough time with these concepts, so it is no wonder that non-sociologist Adventists do. “Church” and “sect” are “ideal type” poles that summarize many variables. Most religious movements tend to move along the continuum between these poles over time as they are institutionalized (become integral to society) and rationalized (become hierarchical and bureaucratic). (Secular movements usually undergo a similar process of institutionalization. The labor movement, for example, developed from short-lived, isolated strikes into the AFL-CIO.)

But considerable evolution is not inevitable, as the Amish, Hutterites, or even the Jehovah's Witnesses illustrate. Nor is change in each variable necessarily linked and therefore parallel. For example, the socio-economic status of the Quakers has risen while on the whole their formal organization has remained fairly static; the situation is the reverse for the Jehovah's Witnesses. Moreover, the direction of change may on occasion be altered. Much of American Judaism retreated from the liberal, Reformed position it had attained by the 1930s. Thus, it is not inevitable that Adventism will continue to evolve towards Protestant denominationalism, and the direction of its evolution, measured grossly, could even reverse. Indeed, Paxton argues that as the church hierarchy has reacted to liberal reformers this reversal already has begun. If much of the educated-liberal-scholar wing splits off, or in discouragement wanders off, the remnant likely would be quite sectarian in some respects.

The German sociologist Ernst Troeltsch developed the church/sect typology (*The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, first published in German in 1911), but his oft-neglected third pole, "mysticism," is relevant to Adventism today. According to Troeltsch, "mysticism arises when 'the world of ideas' which makes up the religious belief system has 'hardened into formal worship and doctrine.' Religious life then, for some people, becomes 'transformed into

a purely personal and inward experience.' The result is the 'formation of groups on a purely personal basis, with no permanent form, which also tends to weaken the significance of worship, doctrine and the historical element.' . . . [Mysticism] attracts varied types of people, but especially the intellectual and cultured groups" (T. F. O'Dea, *The Sociology of Religion*, p. 86, quoting Troeltsch, II, p. 993). When religious groups have been able to contain diversity—church-like, sectarian, and mystical elements—within their ranks, this has proved to be an important source of vitality for them. For example, much energy and innovation accrues to the Catholic Church when, rather than sloughing off sectarian and mystical elements, it channels them into religious orders. On the other hand, when religious groups have been unaccommodating and have expelled diverse groups, this has weakened them and narrowed their relevance. There is no doubt that Adventism has become increasingly diverse in recent years, but now Tarling has demonstrated that Seventh-day Adventism and its offshoots in turn have been decidedly schismatic.

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