

## Adventists and Secularists: Is Dialogue Possible?

by George Colvin

With the recent publication of the Great Controversy theme in comic book format titled *War of the Starlords*, Adventists officially began their attack on secularism. Plans for the attack go back to 1981, when the General Conference appointed a committee to research the existing problem of widespread secularism and the dilemma of carrying the Gospel to that large segment of society that has no concept of God or respect for Scripture.

The committee's membership, which reflects its origins in publishing concerns, includes Lowell Bock, General Conference vice president, as chairman; Humberto Rasi, chief editor of international publications at Pacific Press Publishing Association; Ron D. Graybill, the Ellen G. White Estate; Victor S. Griffiths, General Conference education department; Fritz Guy, theological seminary, Andrews University; Mervyn Hardinge, General Conference health and temperance department; Roland R. Hegstad, editor of *Liberty*; Kenneth Holland, editor of *These Times*; William G. Johnsson, editor of *Adventist Review*; Jack Provonsha, Loma Linda University; Louis A. Ramirez, General Conference publishing department director; and Ariel A. Roth, Geoscience Research Institute.

Since its creation, the committee has met five times, most recently in Seattle, Wash., on June 27–28, 1983. Presentations by experts on topics related to the committee's work have covered a marketing approach to evangelism, evangelistic tactics, and the need to develop greater openness in the Adventist Church in order to attract secular-minded people to it. Nor have the presentations been limited to Adventists; one of the committee's recent

guest speakers was a representative of World Vision International, a nonsectarian evangelistic organization.

Mark Finley, who trains Adventist laypeople to witness to secular-minded people, presented a particularly helpful tool—a typology of secular people that places them in a grid defined by two lines at right angles to each other. One line, running from left to right, represents three degrees of secularism, from the nominally religious person (who will avow belief in God and has some understanding of religious language, but who lives as if God did not exist or made no difference) to the committed atheist-materialist. Another line, running from bottom to top, represents increasing sophistication, from working class to intellectuals. The various presentations to the committee have emphasized the need to use different approaches to meet people in different places on this grid.

The committee faces a number of obstacles. One of them is the wide and expanding area of its work, which Rasi candidly admitted is beyond the committee members' ability to handle. For this reason, he urges people with specialized knowledge that might be helpful to the committee to contact Bock or himself and make their interests and abilities known.

Another obstacle is the opposition to the committee's work expressed by some Adventists who fear that the committee might be working to redirect or subvert the Adventist Church or to dilute the Adventist message. Rasi denies such charges, pointing out that the committee is only attempting to give attention to a neglected area of Adventist thought and operations—a process he likens to "building a bridge to the other side of the river without the foundations on this side crumbling."

The secularism committee's working term continues at least until 1985. Its next scheduled meeting is January 15 and 16, 1984, in Loma Linda, Calif. People interested in the committee's work through 1983 can order a complete set of the papers

presented to the group and a full set of minutes (a total of 327 pages) by sending \$25 to the committee secretary, Humberto Rasi, at the office of International Publications, Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1350 Villa Street, Mountain View, CA 94042. Checks should be made payable to Pacific Press.

Committee recommendations to the General Conference in a preliminary report included: establishing a field secretary to coordinate activities designed to minister to Adventist students on secular campuses and Adventist professionals not employed by the church; seminars at Andrews University and Loma Linda University on "Approaches to the Secular Mind" (the Andrews seminar is in the process of organization); development of publications to reach the secular mind (partially fulfilled through booklets being published by Pacific Press); and changes in ministerial training.

A subcommittee on publications, chaired by Ramirez, has been having what Rasi

called "a fruitful dialogue" with the Adventist Health Systems (AHS) on the establishment of two lines of publications for distribution in AHS institutions. One line would deal with general health concerns, another line would concentrate on metaphysical questions such as "Why?" and "What next?" that people ask as a result of suffering. Another subcommittee, chaired by Griffiths, is dealing with reaching secular man through the arts. A third subcommittee, chaired by Guy, is investigating the desirability and nature of a Seventh-day Adventist response to Marxism, which Bock in the April 7, 1983, *Review* called "one of the prevailing forms of secularism today," whose "promises appeal to vast masses of humanity from all social levels."

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### *Correction*

In the last issue, the final sentence of Jon Dybdahl's article, "The Sanctuary as a Call to Moral Seriousness," was unfortunately not completed. The entire final paragraph should have read as follows: "A community

steeped in the sanctuary doctrine may well consider this ethical motif. Indeed, it may be that the world is ready to listen to the message that continued flagrant wrong accumulates as pollution and necessitates cleansing judgment."