

Historians on *Spectrum*: Pioneering a Free Press

What has been the impact of Spectrum upon the Adventist Church?



Adventism's critical self-analysis parallels an increasing interest in its history and culture among scholars of the American religious experience.

While we await the grace to see ourselves as others see us, you might like to see *Spectrum* as a particular group of others—the historians of Adventism—describes and evaluates us. Adventist historians had published research on a variety of topics of professional interest. *Spectrum* encouraged them to write and publish their studies of Adventism in its pages. Historians are increasingly finding publishers for their analyses of Adventism. These studies have given Adventism a higher profile within the culture. Histories of American religion often overlooked Adventists, but now works on indigenous American churches usually include references to Adventists. Analyses of *Spectrum's* role in the recent history of Adventism appear in these works. They are printed here in the chronological sequence of their publication.

Richard Schwarz, emeritus professor of history at Andrews University, is the author of *Lightbearers to the Remnant*, the standard college text on Adventist history. He also wrote *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.* (Southern Publishing Association, 1970).

Jonathan Butler, author of *Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling: American Revival Preaching on Heaven and Hell, 1870-1920* (Carlson Publishing, 1990), and coeditor of *The Disappointed* (Indiana University Press, 1987) taught Adventist history at both Union College and Loma Linda Uni-

versity Riverside. He was interviewed by an editor of *Sunstone*, a Mormon journal similar to *Spectrum*, for a substantial article on historical method from which this excerpt is taken.

Gary Land, professor of history at Andrews University, not only wrote the article from which this selection is taken, but edited the volume in which it appears, *Adventism and America*. It is a collection of chronologically organized essays that both recount and interpret the history of Seventh-day Adventism, from its beginnings to 1980.

The entry on Seventh-day Adventists by Ronald Numbers and Jonathan Butler appeared in the recently published, multivolume encyclopedia of religion. Numbers is chair of the department of the history of medicine and professor of the history of science at the University of Wisconsin, and is the editor-in-chief of *Isis*, the preeminent journal in the history of science. He is the author and editor of many books dealing with the intellectual and cultural history of science in America. Formerly a teacher at both Andrews and Loma Linda universities, Numbers is the author of the landmark work, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White*, soon to be reprinted in expanded form.

Seeking a Sanctuary, published by Harper and Row, is both the most recent and the most ambitious history of Seventh-day Adventism to date. (See reviews in this issue.) Fourteen of

its 20 chapters refer to *Spectrum* articles. Its authors were raised as Adventists. Malcolm Bull is a junior research fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford, from which he received an M.A. Keith Lockhart received a graduate degree from Andrews University, taught at Newbold College, and is now a writer with the *Independent*, one of England's national newspapers, and remains an active member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

— The Editors

Confronting the Church

Probably no Adventist lay organization has done more to focus attention on social, cultural, and organizational problems confronting the church than the Association of Adventist Forums, organized in 1967. The Association of Adventist Forums ties together a number of discussion groups that grew up during the 1960s in the main centers of Adventist popu-

on controversial topics, to encourage thoughtful consideration of contemporary issues facing the church. In 1969 the Association of Adventist Forums began publication of *Spectrum*, a scholarly quarterly whose columns have frequently presented differing views on such issues as the relationship of church and state and the financing of church institutions. *Spectrum* has also carried a number of articles on aspects of Seventh-day Adventist history, the relationship of science and religion, and the role and authority of Ellen White in the Seventh-day Adventist church.

Richard W. Schwarz, *Lightbearers to the Remnant* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1979).

Facing Problems Evangelistically

Scholars are asked, "Why aren't you converting other scholars and intellectuals? Why do you simply raise problems for the church rather than supporting solutions?" Adventist scholars can point to the Association of Adventist Forums, which is a far-flung community of Adventist scholars, professionals, ministers, and laymen, who hold meetings, entertain wide-ranging discussions of contemporary interest to the church, and publish a quarterly journal *Spectrum*. *Spectrum* started out very much like *Mormon Dialogue*. In fact, I believe there was some dependence on the part of the Adventist founders of the journal about 10 years ago. In the last few years, however, *Spectrum* has shifted from a strictly professional scholar's format to more of a magazine, with increased circulation and a larger impact on church affairs. In design it falls somewhere between *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*. I know many Adventists who say the only reason they've remained Adventists is due to

Spectrum and the Adventist Forums. It seems to me this is to function evangelistically within the church. Clearly, you're not going to convert thoughtful, academic types through the usual door-to-door missionary efforts or mass evangelistic meetings. But if you can show to the world outside that intellectuals find a place within the church, they are nurtured and fulfilled there, you've done something for your evangelistic outreach. I can't bring an academic colleague to church or encourage him to remain there if his kindred spirits are being ignored or misunderstood or harassed by the church.

Jonathan M. Butler, "Retelling the Old, Old Story," *Sunstone*, 7:3 (1982), p. 33.

A Theological Pluralism

The emergence of the Association of Adventist Forums was also partially related to the growing activism among young people. As increasing numbers of Seventh-day Adventists began to attend non-Adventist graduate schools, they expressed concern that the church was not meeting their intellectual, spiritual, and social needs. Under the leadership of Roy Branson, a student at Harvard University, and with the help of denominational leaders Reinhold R. Bietz and Neal Wilson, the Association of Adventist Forums was established in 1967 and two years later began producing a quarterly journal called *Spectrum*. The association soon ran into conflict with the church—from which it was organizationally independent—over articles appearing in *Spectrum*, and it experienced tension within its own ranks between those who wanted it to focus on intellectual concerns and those who saw it as a medium to generate broad-based lay activism within the church. By the late 1970s the Association of Adventist Forums was concentrating on *Spectrum* and the

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lation in the United States. Appealing primarily to the church's "intellectuals," the Association of Adventist Forums has sought, by sponsoring retreats, conferences, and discussions

sponsorship of local discussion and study groups. Increasingly, many Adventists believed that the organization represented the liberal wing of the denomination, a labeling the association sought to avoid. . . .¹

On the other hand, the appearance of *Spectrum*, published outside the control of denominational administrators, gave an outlet to renewed examination of the questions shelved by the 1919 Bible Conference. The discussion began when *Spectrum* (in its autumn 1970 issue) offered several articles on Ellen White. Two theologians, Harold 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.² As if in answer to this proposal, William S. Peterson, an English professor at Andrews University, argued that Ellen White's account of the French Revolution in *The Great Controversy* was drawn primarily from books by Sir Walter Scott and James A. Wylie. "It simply will not suffice to say that God showed her the broad outline of events," he concluded, "and she then filled in the gap with her readings. In the case of the French Revolution, there was no 'broad outline' until she had read the historians."³

Two other articles about Ellen White appeared in the same issue of *Spectrum*, though those by Weiss, Branson, and Peterson caused the most discussion. W. Paul Bradley, speaking for the White Estate—custodian of the prophetic writings—saw no need for critical scholarship, declaring that "no reinterpretation is required to make us know God's messages for us." He further rejected the suggestion that Mrs. White had obtained her ideas from other authors, and he concluded that,

in forming one's personal judgment about the validity of the gift that resulted in the work of Ellen G. White . . . , one must doubt whether historical criticism will

have a preponderance of weight. There will always have to be present a strong element of faith.⁴

The discussion of Peterson's article continued until Ronald Graybill, a research assistant at the White Estate, showed that Ellen White drew her material from Uriah Smith, who had, in turn, obtained it from the historians.⁵

The subject of this debate may seem a minor one, but the issues involved—the validity of historical criticism and the relationship of its findings to an understanding of Ellen White—were large. And it was not only the findings of scholarship but also suggestions that the prophet had borrowed and even mishandled information that threatened the authoritative role Ellen White had come to play in the church. . . .

The denomination dismissed [Desmond] Ford partly on the grounds that he did not agree with the statement of fundamental beliefs voted by the General Conference session in the spring of 1980. This official action seems to have been related to an effort that had been going on for several years to define more fully Seventh-day Adventist doctrine. Concerned that a number of denominational positions were being questioned by church employees, particularly educators, some members of the Robert Pierson administration sought written definitions of "landmark" doctrines.

This movement arose for a number of reasons. President Pierson had served as an overseas missionary for many years, and at the time he took office he was probably out of touch with intellectual developments on Seventh-day Adventist campuses. As he became aware of contemporary Adventist thought, he found aspects of it—particularly with regard to creationism and Ellen White—rather different from the Adventism in which he had been schooled. Second, the appearance of *Spectrum* provided a previously unavailable outlet for critical analysis of traditional Adventist views. Third, a *Newsweek* magazine article in

1971 suggested that liberalism was creeping into the SDA Theological Seminary at Andrews University, an assertion that, although publicly denied, probably confirmed suspicions held by some church administrators.⁶ And fourth, in the background lay the upheavals in the evangelical world: the inerrancy movement so highly publicized by Harold Lindsell's *Battle for the Bible* and the division in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.⁷ Some Adventists felt that liberalism had to be rooted out of Adventist colleges before it grew significant enough to force a similar split in Seventh-day Adventism. More generally, the denomination, in putting great emphasis on education, had inadvertently produced intellectuals who, on the basis of new experiences and new information, were in various ways reformulating Adventism. The real question was, How much theological pluralism could or would the denomination tolerate?

Gary Land, *Adventism in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986).

Notes

1. Richard C. Osborn, "The Establishment of the Adventist Forum," *Spectrum*, 10 (March 1980), pp. 42-58.

2. "Ellen White: A Subject for Adventist Scholarship," *Spectrum*, 2 (Autumn 1970), pp. 30-33.

3. "A Textual and Historical Study of Ellen G. White's Account of the French Revolution," *Spectrum*, 2 (Autumn 1970), p. 66.

4. "Ellen G. White and Her Writings," *Spectrum*, 3 (Spring 1971), pp. 48, 61.

5. "How Did Ellen White Choose and Use Historical Sources?" *Spectrum*, 4 (Summer 1972), pp. 49-53.

6. *Newsweek* (June 7, 1971), pp. 65, 66; Kenneth H. Wood, Editorial, "The Newsweek Story," *Review and Herald* (January 1, 1970), p. 2.

7. Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976).

Dissident Voices

Many Adventists, nevertheless, continued to live in tension with the church's teachings on the sanctuary and the authority of Ellen White. Dissident voices became increasingly audible in the 1960s, especially after a group of Adventist academics and professionals in 1967 created the independent Association of Adventist Forums (AAF) and began publishing a lively journal, *Spectrum*. During the 1970s and early 1980s Adventism was torn by claims of Adventist scholars that they had uncovered evidence that the writings of the prophetess not only contained historical and scientific errors but in many instances paralleled the prose of other authors—discoveries that forced a rethinking of White's role in the community.

Jonathan M. Butler and Ronald L. Numbers, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, ed. (Macmillan Publ. Co.: New York, NY, 1987).

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Pioneering a Free Press

Eventually, then, Adventist college teachers came to see themselves as scholars rather than educators. This change was not envisaged by Ellen White, and it did not conform to her sectarian educational philosophy—even though she did write, as the liberal Adventist professor never failed to point out, that an object of Adventist education is to produce individuals who are “thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thought.” The modern Adventist professor was largely a creation of church leaders. Whatever their initial reservations, they accepted accreditation, nurtured liberal arts colleges, and made the decisions that provided the resources for the denomination's universities. They supported the expansion of graduate education, encouraged talented individuals to secure Ph.D. degrees, and employed only those teachers with the best academic qualifications. It was clear, once the dust of accreditation settled, that the General Conference wanted an educational system that compared with the best in outside society. What they found difficult to accept were the consequences of their policies.

The most important result of the formation of a community of scholars within the denomination was the establishment of an academic organization, the Association of Adventist Forums (AAF), in 1968. The association was largely the brainchild of Roy Branson, an ethicist at the SDA Theological Seminary. The church's doctors, who through the accreditation move-

From *Seeking a Sanctuary* by Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart. Copyright © by Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart. Used with permission from Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., San Francisco.

ment had sparked the growth of Adventist scholarship, also helped to foster this new development. A physician, Molleurus Couperus, was appointed as the first editor of the AAF quarterly journal *Spectrum*, and the medical community gave generous financial support to the organization. But the AAF might not have succeeded if the General Conference officers had not supported the organization and the aims and objectives of its constitution. The General Conference thus approved the existence of an independent, academic organization in the denomination. It is difficult to know exactly what the church hierarchy expected, but the founders of the AAF were determined to carry out the obligation “to examine . . . freely ideas and issues relevant to the church in all its aspects.” The contributors to the AAF's quarterly, *Spectrum*, faithfully followed the journal's objective “to look without prejudice at all sides of a subject.” The effects were far-reaching. The AAF gave Adventist academics the opportunity to turn their scholarly expertise on the Adventist tradition, sometimes to devastating effect. Professors from the denomination's colleges, universities, and seminary published in *Spectrum* critical articles on Adventist theology and history. This provided the educated Adventist, and other members who cared to look, with a new view of the church and its development. *Spectrum* became, in effect, a meeting place for those in the church who believed in the benefits of academic freedom. Donald McAdams, an academic who took a leading role in the demythologizing of Ellen White in the 1970s, summed up the position of Adventist scholars: “We have no choice but to be honest at heart, acknowledge facts, and seek the truth.” To McAdams “the search for truth is, after all, the basic premise upon which Adventism is founded.”

The other effect of the publication of *Spectrum* was on the denomination's media. Initially, the journal was an academic publication, which

specialized in scholarly debate. But toward the end of the 1970s, *Spectrum* began hiring trained journalists to report objectively the affairs of the church. It was a form of journalism of which the denomination had relatively little experience. *Spectrum* took on the role of an independent press. As a result, General Conference leaders were unable to control the publication of information in the same way their predecessors had done. The AAF journal did not immediately affect the *Review*, which under Kenneth Wood (editor from 1966-1982) continued to present an uncritical view of the Adventist church. In this respect, Wood did not depart from the tradition of the *Review's* two most powerful editors in the 20th century, F. M. Wilcox and F. D. Nichol. But when William Johnsson took over the editorship in 1982, he realized the *Review* would cease to be credible if readers had to go elsewhere in order to find accurate information about the church. Johnsson thus began reporting more openly the issues and problems that faced Adventism. In a similar way, the denomination's clerical paper, *Ministry*, took to reporting doctrinal debates in the manner that *Spectrum* had pioneered. The AAF's journal also created the climate for other, more radical publications to appear. In 1983

an independent magazine, *Adventist Currents*, was founded, which styled itself as "an unauthorized free press supplement to official Seventh-day Adventist publications." In these ways, *Spectrum* opened up a closed society to a freer circulation of information.

For the most part, church leaders kept to themselves whatever reservations they had about the activities of Adventist scholars. Indeed, throughout the 1970s, they continued to serve as advisers both to the AAF and *Spectrum*. However, there was one preoccupation of the academic community that proved more sensitive than others. This was its dissatisfaction with the denomination's hierarchical structure. Articles advocating the reform of Adventist government appeared at regular intervals in *Spectrum*. In 1982 the AAF commissioned a special task force to work out proposals for an alternative administrative system. After two years, the task force reported in *Spectrum*, calling for a democratic church, open elections, freedom of information, and the end of the General Conference oligarchy. Adventist leaders were not slow to perceive this threat, and later in the year, the church president, Neal Wilson, finally ostracized the organization. He rejected the notion that "*Spectrum* is the most authentic source of information regard-

ing church affairs" and attacked "the AAF and *Spectrum*" for "actively urging what appears to us to be irresponsible concepts of, and changes in, denominational administration, operations, structure and organization." That Wilson was the individual who made this statement was particularly ironic. In the late 1960s, as president of the North American Division, he was heavily involved in setting up the AAF. In the mid-1980s, he attempted to close a Pandora's Box that he himself had opened.

It did not, however, prove easy to silence the AAF. Historically, the organization was the product of an increasingly well-educated community that the provision of Adventist graduate education had created. The close connection between the AAF and the educational system was one of the sources of its strength. The organization's members were drawn from the colleges, and the colleges often provided the location for meetings of chapters of the AAF. It would be wrong to conclude from this that all church academics were equally critical of the Adventist tradition. Within the faculties of the colleges, universities, and theological seminary, professors held different positions. Adventism's scholarly community was not entirely homogeneous.