Spiritual Journeys: Three in Transit

They say you can't go home again, but sometimes you can't stay either. Here are accounts of people who found leaving or joining complicated.

by Harvey Brenneise

Thompson, James J., Jr. *Fleeing the Whore of Babylon: A Modern Conversion Story.* Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, Inc., 1986.

Bennett, Mildred. *The Autobiography of Mildred Bennett, The Early Years: The Winter Is Past.* Mellen Lives, volume 4. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989.

Holmes, Shirley S. *No Turning Back.* Berrien Springs, MI: Pointer Publications, 1988.

THESE THREE VOLUMES ARE RECENT EXAMPLES OF two related genres of writing that have had an important, if largely unstudied, role in Seventh-day Adventist literature—personal accounts of persons joining or leaving the Seventh-day Adventist Church. An early example of the latter is D. M. Canright's *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced*, an important book in denominational history because of the author's prominence in the early years of the church and his personal acquaintance with its leaders.

These books have not resulted in the scandal (and need for rebuttal) that Canright's caused. The church's publishers have over the years released many volumes of conversion accounts, designed largely to inspire church members, and incidentally sometimes titillating them with the details of the biographee's preconversion life (a type of vicarious entertainment).

These volumes have a number of characteristics in common, along with striking differences. The authors all exhibit a sense of searching, a dissatisfaction with the religio-social status into which they were born, even though they can never entirely leave it behind them. Thompson and Bennett, born into the Adventist Church, search for freedom from its strictures, while Holmes joins the church in a search for truth and an escape from the liberalism she found creeping into the Lutheran Church of her childhood and youth. Thompson and Bennett reject the fundamentalism they find in Adventism, while Holmes joins largely because of it.

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All three volumes exhibit a remarkable sense of place—the place of the authors' childhood and youth. For Thompson it was rural Montgomery County, Maryland—a part of the real South and quite unlike the chic suburbs of Washington, D.C.; for Bennett it was the wide-open spaces of the northern Great Plains; and for Holmes the woods and mines of Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Readers may wonder about the motivation for writing such an autobiography and making the effort to have it published, in some cases by self-publishing. It may be almost a compulsion. Some who make a change in religion, which often results in rupturing social, cultural, and familial ties, have a strong compulsion to explain "why I done it" to themselves, their friends and their families. Perhaps the process is also cathartic.

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James Thompson

Thompson uses the "whore of Babylon" as a metaphor for the Roman Catholic Church, a church that as an Adventist he was taught to fear and even hate. Yet he felt strongly drawn to it, eventually becoming a member. His memory of childhood is strongly imbued with the beliefs and practices of a small Caucasian Adventist church in the rural South.

He movingly describes his grandmother, nicknamed Gonnye, a selfless, big-hearted, strong-minded woman who was largely responsible for his early upbringing and religious background.

> All this I learned from her: of beauty and joy, of love and self-sacrifice, of books and education; but most important, I first heard from her the plan of salvation and the promise of eternal life. . . . I knew a woman who followed God and bore testimony to the transforming power of Christianity. She is gone now, but the influence of her faithful witness will never die (p. 41).

As a child, Thompson moved with his mother to Takoma Park in order to attend Adventist schools. He gives a vivid description of the Adventist anti-Catholicism of the 1950s and the 1960 presidential election. While on a school trip to New York, however, he was strangely moved by a visit to St. Patrick's Cathedral. But it was while a student at Columbia Union College ("an institution dedicated to the three R's of Religion, Righteousness, and Republicanism") that he began to question his faith.

> I focussed [sic] on Adventism's weakest point: those moralistic strictures and prohibitions with which it abounds . . . Could a puff on a Marlboro or a chaw of Red Man really cost one eternal life? Would the eaters of pork chops go to hell? Would the illegitimacy rate soar if we danced? Would the angels weep if I stepped inside a movie theater? . . . Their Bible was a truncated handbook of legalisms and their church a small sect that had arisen out of the heated fantasies of nineteenth-century millenarians (p. 64).

> When Adventists asserted that "the church teaches it," they really meant that Ellen G. White, the denomination's founder, had issued a dictate on the matter. This lady's omnipresent authority began to oppress me. Her spirit hung like a thick fog over the comings and goings of Adventists. One could sit through an entire sermon and hear scarcely a mention of Jesus Christ, but find Mrs. White quoted repeatedly on everything from toilet training to the Second Coming (p. 65).

As a history major, Thompson especially resented the way Ellen White was used as a historical authority.

A crucial event in his disaffection with the church was an incident in a Christian ethics course in which a student complained about having to sit in the same congregation with flagrant sinners.

> For the first time I saw clearly the arrogance of the Adventist conception of the Church—this huddling together of a handful of saints who cling to their list of niggling dos and don'ts while the rest of humanity gropes blindly toward perdition. . . . I was more comfortable in the company of sinners than in the embrace of self-proclaimed saints (p. 66).

In 1966, along with his new bride, Thompson left for Charlottesville to pursue doctoral study in history. They then discarded the remnants of their Adventism.

> I felt immense relief at ridding myself of a burden, but at times a pang of remorse would stir memories of the security and certitude of the fellowship I had abandoned. Carol shed her Adventism more easily than I did; for her, it had always been bound inextricably with the rigid authoritarianism of her father [an Adventist minister], and without him to enforce belief, her belief vanished (pp. 66, 67).

The implications of his rejection of the church struck home when Joseph Smoot, then vice president for academic administration at Andrews University and formerly Thompson's mentor at CUC, came to interview him for a job at Andrews. "Widely read, erudite, blessed with a powerful and probing mind, humorous, compassionate and deeply committed to the idea that teaching is a vocation and not simply a job," Smoot had become Thompson's hero and model. It was with great difficulty that Thompson admitted to Smoot that he had left the church.

Thompson then drifted religiously, retaining a belief in God but not participating in organized religion. After he joined the faculty at the College of William and Mary, Thompson's marriage disintegrated, and he turned to alcohol. It was through reading Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* that he read himself into Catholicism. However, in his search for traditional beliefs and practice, post-Vatican II Catholicism was a disappointment, and he did not find social support in a subculture of Italian and Irish "born Catholics." Two influences ultimately kept him in the Catholic Church—Pope John Paul II and the *New Oxford Review*.

Thompson's search now led to Southern traditionalism, rejecting the liberalism of the William and Mary faculty. He resigned from William and Mary, and became an editor at a conservative magazine, the *Chronicle of Culture*. After quarreling with the editor, he left the magazine and was "ready to cease fleeing the Whore of Babylon, willing to surrender and return to full communion with the Church." However, his remarriage without an annulment blocked the way. He could not be accepted into full communion, yet found no appeal in mainline Protestantism, rejected the literalness of fundamentalism, and found Orthodoxy too ethnic.

It was Catholicism or nothing, but the measure of peace he found was an uneasy one. Published when the author was 41, this autobiography shows him still searching. He concludes,

> I struggle to live as a Christian, to be a decent man, to love the right and hate the wrong. I am a sinner, perhaps . . . the worst kind of sinner. . . . I cleave, however tenuously, to [the] cross, and I cling to the Whore of Babylon who pursued me tirelessly for so long; after all, she is the Bride of Christ (p. 159).

Mildred Bennett

The Winter Is Past, the first volume of Willa Cather scholar Mildred Bennett's autobiography, was published shortly before her death. It covers the years from birth to her marriage and leaving the church. Winter here is a metaphor for the lack of warmth she found in the church, its judgmentalism and paranoia. Over all she felt the hovering presence of "Sister White" stifling her natural artistic nature.

Bennett came from pioneer Adventist stock. Her maiden name was Rhoads, and she was related to a number of prominent church workers by that name. She was also related by marriage to the Bresees, Minchens, and Youngbergs (she was sister of Norma Youngberg and aunt of Dorothy Minchen Comm). Thus it is not surprising that writing and love of literature came to her naturally. The book is written in the present tense, and reads much like a diary, although her recollections are no doubt colored by later experiences. Her memory for small details from her childhood is impressive, and she reconstructs dialogue.

The personality Bennett describes is that of a sensitive and imaginative person who is awkward and unsure of herself, for whom religion does not provide comfort but guilt, insecurity, and a feeling of wickedness. She appears to have had little sense of self-worth in her growing-up years and the natural rebellion that a child might feel toward a parent is inextricably linked with the church.

Bennett's father was an Adventist church school teacher and conference educational secretary in the Great Plains, so in her childhood and youth she lived at such places as Plainview Academy (South Dakota), Oak Park Academy (Iowa), Enterprise Academy (Kansas), and Union College (Nebraska). She gives a firsthand glimpse of Adventist life in that time and place, including the many vicissitudes of her father's career and how it was affected by church politics.

Bennett's most moving writing is her description of the hounding for alleged heretical beliefs and sudden death in 1931 of Elder H. U. Stevens, a returned missionary and religion department faculty member at Union College (see *Spectrum* 18:2, pp. 8 ff.). Bennett blamed the church for this, which proved to be the final event in the process of her leaving the church.

Leaving Lincoln, Bennett taught public school in rural Nebraska. As she left, she declined to promise her father to keep the Sabbath or not attend movies, to which he replied that this was the worst thing that ever happened to him.

> I know what he's saying. My leaving the church hurts worse than [my sister] Ruth's death. He would rather see me dead than living like this. So be it. Like Judas, I will go into the night (p. 152).

Subsequently, she did with difficulty the Adventist "bad things": eating ham, wearing make-up, playing cards, and smoking. The book concludes with her courtship and marriage to Wilbur Bennett.

As an Adventist period piece, the book is invaluable. It includes many photographs of the family and places where they lived and worked. In the acknowledgements, Bennett describes *Spectrum* as "a publication of advanced Adventist thinking." At the end of her life, there appears to have been a partial rapprochement between Bennett and the church, as she was willing to accept an honorary doctorate from Andrews University (though reported to have expressed surprise at being offered this honor), and was honored by Union College. This volume was published shortly before she died, and unfortunately was the only portion of her autobiography that Bennett completed for publication.

Shirley S. Holmes

In contrast to the above two authors, Holmes' autobiography is the story of her leaving the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church—Suomi Synod—to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The metaphor she uses is horticultural—a transplantation. Evangelical religion is obviously very important in her life, and the book is written to inspire readers. She was seeking a sanctuary in her new-found church, and the writing is that of biography as spiritual journey, even homiletic.

Holmes' attitudes toward church and society are conservative. For example, she is quite opposed to feminism. She describes her father working in the mines with male co-workers, sharing "a male subterranean sub-culture uniquely and exclusively their own, with no envious liberated women demanding to join their ranks!" (p. 20). She also advocates a hierarchical structure in church and home, with everyone serving in his or her proper role.

> This role principle was settled at creation. It has not been seriously challenged until recently. The advent of the modern feminist movement, universal in scope, has emerged as one of the most significant developments of this century and constitutes, I believe, one of the "signs of the times" (p. 101).

Holmes was born to Finnish immigrants in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, a sparsely settled area of mines, woods, and long winters. These, and the conservative attitudes of the inhabitants, have been strong influences on her life. She was the youngest of 12 children born to a "yours, mine, and ours" family (four in each). Death in the family was not unknown, with several children dying from accident or disease.

Her mother's first husband was killed in a mining accident, leaving a pregnant wife and three young children. Holmes describes her mother being comforted at that difficult time by

> a shining angel [sent] to that desolate room to comfort her and provide the strength and courage she needed then and for the trying, grief-filled days to come. One of my most sacred memories is that of Mother relating this incident to me when I was young. It left an indelible mark which [the passage of] more than five decades has not succeeded in diminishing (p. 17).

Sometime later, Holmes' mother "deliberately set about making herself available," and married another Finnish miner with four children, a widower who attended the same Lutheran church. Eventually, the daughter became a Lutheran pastor's wife in a small-town parish.

Holmes expresses a strong need for female friendship, and she recounts becoming the friend of a local Adventist woman. She read all the Adventist literature she could find, hiding it in the bottom of the dirty clothes hamper because her husband, Ray, would throw it against the wall or burn it if he found it. The marital conflict was eventually resolved when Ray also became a Seventh-day Adventist. Like many new converts, he felt compelled to become a minister, and he and Shirley were sent as missionaries to the Philippines. He tells his story in *Stranger in My Home.* Shirley is currently library assistant in the seminary library of the James White Library at Andrews University, and Ray is Professor of Preaching and Worship at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary.

All three volumes show how different individuals expressed their spiritual needs in different times and places. They show how difficult it is, if it is possible at all, to ever entirely leave the religious culture of one's roots. Holmes maintains that Adventism need not cancel or replace her Lutheran heritage, that she can graft it to Adventism and become a "Lutheran Adventist Christian" (p. 134). She does not explain what happens when her Lutheran heritage conflicts with that of others in her new church. Bennett and Thompson are also never entirely able to leave behind their Adventist upbringing.

These books raise interesting questions about the relationship between a person's personality and religious affiliation, with the possibility that the relationship between particular personalities and the beliefs and practices of some church communions might be dysfunctional. In these three volumes, ironically we see two individuals rejecting exactly what the other is looking to—a close, sometimes controlling, religious community with well-defined and largely inflexible beliefs and practices.