



Adapted from M. C. Escher's "System III"

# Adventism as Both/And, Not Either/Or

An Adventist theologian says the biblical God is greater than the certainties of either liberals or conservatives.

by Herold Weiss

AT THE 1992 ANNUAL MEETING OF THE Andrews Society for Religious Studies in San Francisco I was amused to hear a well-respected Adventist theologian claim that the Bible does not teach retributive justice. Instead, it teaches social justice. The theologian flatly asserted that retributive justice is not a biblical teaching, and then gave some proofs to show that social justice is biblical. If this speaker amused me, I was amazed when the one who gave a prepared response—and later the audience, containing most of the Adventist theologians in the North American continent—failed to question such blunt misrepresentation.

Readers of the Bible know that at the core of Deuteronomy, of the deuteronomic historians, and of the exilic prophets is the teaching that humans, and God's people in par-

ticular, have gotten and will get from God what they deserve. If that is not retributive justice, I don't know what is. They also know that the Book of Job is the great theological debate about the merits of conceiving God's justice as retributive.

On the Sabbath before Christmas 1992, a seminary professor preached to our Spanish church in Berrien Springs. His burden was to expose what he considered an ominous trend in Adventism: an emphasis on the certainty of salvation as God's activity. According to our visiting preacher, this kind of theology is unbiblical, dangerous, and contrary to the Adventist theological heritage. Adventists are not Augustinians who trust God's grace to do everything; rather, we are Arminians who recognize that human agents must do their part. We do not agree with Calvin's doctrines of total depravity and predestination, thereby leaving our salvation to God, basing our certainty on his sovereignty. All this is unbiblical. For our illumination we were given a long list of texts pointing out the conditionality of salvation. The

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refrain of the morning was 1 Corinthians 10:12: "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (RSV).

Readers of the Bible, however, know that any number of Psalms praise God because salvation is his doing and humans can rest assured in his power. The Gospel of John is one extended affirmation that those who believe that the Son is one with the Father *have* eternal life.

**M**y experiences at San Francisco and Berrien Springs left me pondering what lay behind them. After some reflection I am ready to offer a tentative answer. Rather than to work my way slowly toward it, I will offer it up front in all its stark simplicity: Both anecdotes demonstrate that Adventists have been trained to think in terms of either/or. Whether we are trying to catch up with a major theological trend that has been already firmly established for the past 20 years, or trying to prevent a tradition from informing our theological horizon, it is assumed that in order to defend one position, another must be attacked.

Once Adventists caught up to the fact that in order to be politically correct one had to be for social justice, we began to find in the Bible evidence that the kingdom of God is not a personal but a social reality. Amos, Hosea, and Micah regained their voice among us. During my student days at the seminary in Washington, D.C., my professors denounced the social gospel as unbiblical, the creation of Chicago liberals of the 1930s. When in 1958 I took a course in exegesis of Hosea in Hebrew at the seminary, we spent the quarter deciding whether Gomer bath Diblaim had been the real wife of Hosea or an allegorized figure in his literary imagination.

In those student days we read word studies denying that the kingdom was a social reality. According to those word studies, the Hebrew word for *kingdom* did not refer to national or

geographic entities, but meant *sovereignty* or *rule*, and was to be understood in an atomistic fashion. Thus God's kingdom has to do with his dominion over individuals, just as British citizens are under the sovereignty of their queen wherever they may be.

Those word studies are now justifiably seen as good examples of special pleading. I gladly witness some of my own former seminary students taking a stand for the social gospel. As a matter of fact, it is not just the pressure to be politically correct that impels us to give the gospel of the kingdom its legitimate social dimension. The concept that the kingdom is basically a social reality is biblical. But why do my former students assert that the biblical warrant for social justice or the healthy skepticism called for by human agency in salvation makes it necessary to deny biblical warrants for retributive justice and certainty in salvation? Why does it have to be either/or?

**I**would suggest that at work here is the assumption that truth is One. Adventism arose and marched into history led by the banner of THE TRUTH. In our scale of values the top spot is occupied by TRUTH, and those who follow such a banner are eager to trample down all errors. According to this vision, the Christian life is a continuous search for truth. In this search we advance from truth to truth until we arrive at THE TRUTH, which is at one and the same time ALL TRUTH (notice singular). When truth is the highest good, this invariably means that at one time or another we will need to step on humility, justice, and love in order to reach it. This approach seems to make it necessary for us to have an extra supply of revelation that guarantees OUR TRUTH.

Not so long ago, the news was full of the debate following George Bush's decision to grant pardons to six members of the executive branch under Ronald Reagan after they were charged by a special prosecutor of criminal wrongdoing in connection with the Iran-Contra

scandal. What interested me about this episode was that while some argued that even though the prosecutorial investigations had been going on for six years, they should continue as long as necessary for the American people to learn the truth about Iran-Contra. Others argued that the fetish for establishing all the details of that sorry affair would not necessarily serve justice, and might, in fact, do great damage to the guarantees of confidentiality essential to the consultations between a president and his advisors.<sup>1</sup>

Making the truth a *sine qua non* is not necessarily healthy, either to the body politic or to the community of faith. Health, love, and forgiveness are important considerations that, at times, may take precedence over truth. Establishing those times is what moral dilemmas are all about.

My second point is that reducing THE TRUTH to propositional statements is reductionist and therefore misleading. Reading the letters of Paul, I find many things that intrigue me no end. One such is that in the letter to the Galatians Paul refers four times to “the truth” or “the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2:5, 14; 4:16; 5:7, NIV). It is clear that when he wrote Galatians, Paul was at his fighting best (or worst). He did not pull punches, and even landed one below the belt (Galatians 5:12, pardon the pun). He engaged in a heated dispute about “the truth of the gospel.” I have read the letter many times searching for the passage where Paul reduces that truth to a declarative sentence, but to no avail. Most of us would feel very uncomfortable if anyone

suggested that for Paul the truth of the gospel is that Jews and Gentiles are to eat together, or that Gentiles should not be circumcised. In fact, how to understand Paul’s attitude toward circumcision is not all that clear. On the one hand, he insists that “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision” avail for anything, which is the negative way of saying that for God circumcision is a matter of indifference. On the other, however, he is involved in a major debate about circumcision, giving it thereby quite a bit of significance. What are we, then,

to make of this debate about circumcision with which Paul defends “the truth of the gospel”?

What is the biblical truth about justice?<sup>2</sup> About salvation? About circumcision? Those who presuppose that Truth is One are caught by the either/or syndrome and are bound to give us something less than the biblical truth. As a matter of fact, on almost any given topic the Bible teaches both/and.

I imagine the reason most of us refuse to admit this is that we do not want to affirm that Truth is not One, but Many. But how can anyone who claims to be faithful to the whole Bible deny pluralism in the Scriptures? If anything, the Bible is its own strongest argument for pluralism. The only reason some sincere Christians believe in righteousness by faith and others just as sincerely believe in salvation by works is because the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, teaches both. It is only by carving out canons within the Canon that biblical truth can be exhibited as One. Dealing with the biblical witnesses to

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God's kingdom, we have to come to terms with their incommensurability (that is, the inappropriateness of comparing two entities for which we have no common standard of measurement). It is unwise to stack them up and count them. The truth we are searching for is not found at the top of the pile. Salvation, after all, is not a truth but an *experience*. The Gospel of John very wisely identifies the Truth not with any biblical passage but with a Person who lived outside the pages of the Bible.

Reflecting on this leads me to agree with Raimundo Panikkar when he argues that the truth is neither One nor Many, but both One and Many. Pluralism is not plurality but openness.<sup>3</sup> Pluralism does not affirm the ultimate truth that Truth is Many. Neither does it consider itself a transitional stage before final unity is attained. Reality is incommensurable with both unity and plurality.

Reading a recent issue of *Spectrum*,<sup>4</sup> I was drawn to Hugh Dunton's placing of Mohammed and Ellen White on parallel tracks and tracing lines of comparison and contrast. He starts confessing to "hard choices" that may cost him friends:

First, if one accepts either of the prophets on his or her own declarations, there is only one way of salvation. Neither way permits much flexibility, if any. To move to a position of religious pluralism is to go beyond what either of the protagonists believed. A pluralist view would therefore be almost a "higher revelation," and falsify the original messages (p. 40).

Dunton's willingness to be boxed in, in more than one way, is another example of the either/or mentality. His considerable grasp of Islam, which his article amply demonstrates, does not offer us a path to enlightenment when it is placed at the service of a very narrow apologetic task—introducing Ellen White to Moslems.<sup>5</sup> What makes it necessary for us to deny others in order to affirm ourselves? Is it the need to claim a monopoly on salvation and God's power, fueled by our

either/or mentality? Either God chose us, or he didn't.

The Bible itself presents more than one way of salvation. Who are we to reduce it to ours? Faced with the Assyrian threat toward the end of the eighth century B.C., the prophet Micah announced that Jerusalem would become a heap of rubble and the hill where the temple stood would be plowed like a field (Micah 3:12). His contemporary, Isaiah, on the other hand, affirmed that, even if the rulers and the people would pay for their sins, the monarchy and the temple were secure (Isaiah 4:5, 6).

Salvation has been understood differently by different people at different times depending on their existential understanding of what they need to be saved from. In the Old Testament, salvation is from hunger, injustice, dishonor, and oppression, and it is to be achieved on earth. In the New Testament, salvation is from the power of the law, the heavenly intermediary powers, sin, and death, and it is to be gained in heaven. Are we justified in reducing God's salvation to our Adventist version of it as expressed toward the end of the 20th century? To claim that our message is THE TRUTH that solves the problems of all peoples everywhere is quite presumptuous, if not incredible. As Adventists, we may defend the legitimacy of our claims. I am not questioning their validity. I am questioning the necessity to make our claims exclusive of all others. Ours should be a relational, rather than an exclusive, distinctiveness.

Pluralism does not claim a "higher revelation" that falsifies both Mohammed and Ellen White, as Dunton would have us believe. Rather it allows both Mohammed and Ellen White to have their say, just as both Micah and Isaiah, Paul and James have theirs in the Bible. Pluralism does not claim superior knowledge. It just reminds us of the virtue of humility in our epistemological claims. It also discourages us from colonial adventurism in our mission-

ary efforts. Pluralism takes away from us the imperialist tradition that entered Christianity with Constantine and has kept Christianity launching Crusades ever since.

There are two basic reasons why we should change our thinking from either/or to both/and. The first, as argued above, is that the Bible itself is pluralistic. The second, closely related to the first, is that any pretense to having built the edifice of truth is suspect of being nothing but an ideology. In other words, the presentation of truth in propositional statements is from the biblical perspective reductionist and from the philosophical perspective ideological.

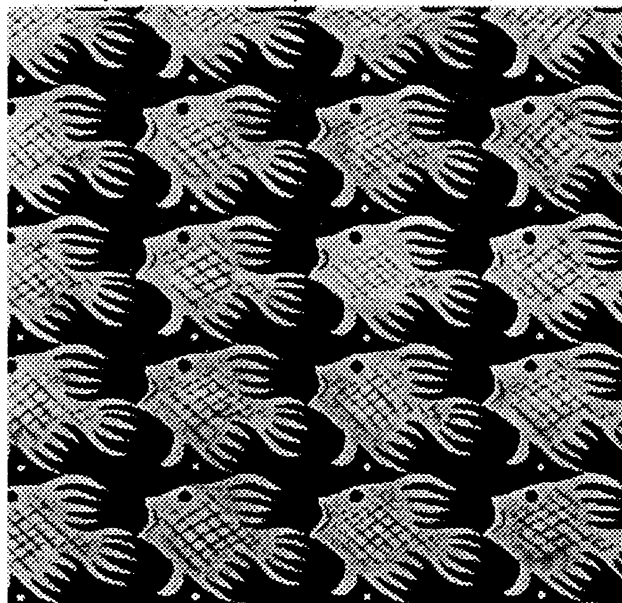
The attention given to hermeneutics in the recent past has made us aware of the flaws in our hermeneutical circles. Ultimately, there is no hermeneutic without presuppositions, even when we make every effort not to allow our presuppositions to determine our methods or our results.<sup>6</sup> This means that in our exegetical work, as Willi Marxen (and many others) reminds us, we must make every effort carefully to lay out our presuppositions and distinguish between pre-understandings and pre-judgments.<sup>7</sup> Students of the Bible come

routinely to the text with both. Do we approach the texts in order to have our pre-judgments confirmed, or our pre-understandings corrected? The hermeneutic of suspicion has exposed how the interpretation of texts answers to the demands of power.<sup>8</sup> Besides, the sociology of knowledge has demonstrated how truth depends on the social canopy that shelters it.<sup>9</sup>

Adventism cannot hope to have a message for the world if it retains an unbending confrontational stance buttressed by an either/or mentality.<sup>10</sup> Its message will be taken for an ideology whose time is past. The future belongs to those willing to enter the dialogue that is, at this crucial moment in history, shaping a rapidly changing world. The events of the past several years, which have transformed the world before our very eyes, were guided by forces that no one saw coming, and on which no one seemed to have a handle. This experience should make us all believers in a God with the ability to be incarnated in a thousand and one ways. If we wish to be instruments of the divine activity, we must be open to it. A dialogical stance sees intrinsic value in dialogue itself. It cannot see dialogue as instrumental to conversions.

The future of Adventism cannot be found in the winning of theological battles whose only purpose is to defend ideological turf. Claiming to control "higher ground" is a military metaphor that may have been meaningful at the time of the battle of Gettysburg, but is totally anachronistic in today's world. Trying to compete with Hal Lindsay for the most revealing apocalyptic scenario while the struggle for non-militancy and peace on earth is being won by other Christians of the anabaptist tradition is to misspend our energies. The end of the Cold War does not mean just the end of atomic confrontation between two superpowers. As significant as this may be, more significantly the collapse of the Soviet Union marks the end of ideologies as ways of salvation.<sup>11</sup>

Adapted from M. C. Escher's "System I'-I' Variant of Nos. 29 and 84"



Ideological isolationism is no more productive among Christians than it is among nations. Whether it be China, Albania, or Adventism, trying to do it alone is an exercise in futility. To pretend otherwise is to fail to see “the signs of the times.”

Unexamined ideological assumptions prevent the critical examination of traditional positions. This facilitates the making of universal claims for truths that happen to occupy a position of prominence at a given time. If it is true that we must be wary of ethnocentrism,<sup>12</sup> we must also be wary of chronocentrism.<sup>13</sup> It would seem to be the height of folly to absolutize ourselves into the present when the incarnation of Christ teaches us of the relativizing of God’s very self in history, and the Trinity teaches us that diversity is at the very heart of the Being of God.

The incommensurability of God is the Mystery of Being. To affirm this mystery is not a retreat from the demands of our calling and our identity, a “failure of nerve,” to use Gilbert Murray’s phrase to describe the Greeks of the Hellenistic Age.<sup>14</sup> To recognize the limits of rational inquiry is not necessarily an escape into mysticism. Rather, to accept that Reason is not coterminous with Being is to affirm that God is not an epistemological problem but an ontological status. Exclusivist claims on God convert a mystery into a problem in order to offer a solution.<sup>15</sup> To reduce God and salvation to propositional truths presented in an either/or framework is to make a caricature of God.

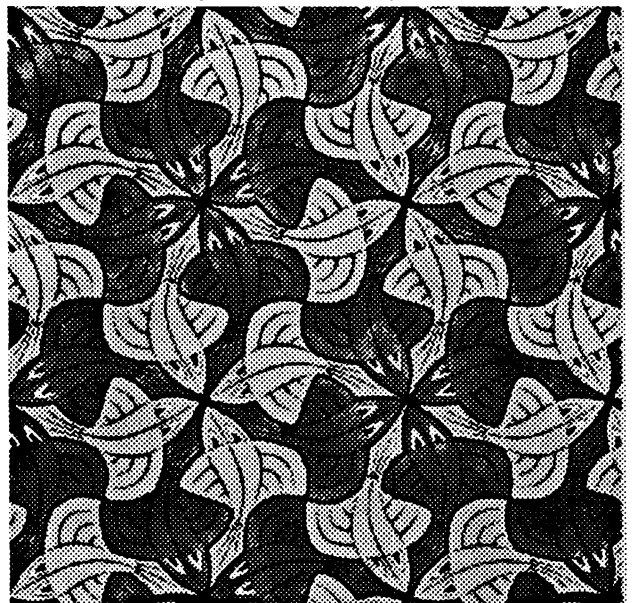
Christians must live the dialogical life-style because they recognize that even in the revelation of Truth in Jesus Christ, God did not cease being the ultimate Mystery. No Adventist, no matter how much of an Arminian he or she might be, would wish to deny that salvation comes from God. That being the case, the possibility for other valid experiences of salvation must remain open. Exclusivism builds fences and locks in God’s caricature. But can

those who live within the fence expect the rest of humanity not to recognize who is inside?<sup>16</sup>

If what has been said so far is an argument against exclusivism, it should be clear that I am not arguing for inclusivism. If exclusivism claims universality for its particularisms and seeks to conquer those outside by means of crusades, inclusivism patronizingly extends its vision to absorb others without bothering to ask for their consent. It is a more subtle form of Christian imperialism. Its most famous example was given by Karl Rahner who, wishing to defend God’s boundless grace and unwilling to claim that only church members are saved, postulated the existence of “anonymous Christians.”<sup>17</sup>

Pluralism moves beyond exclusivism and inclusivism and offers the opportunity for genuine dialogue—dialogue which is not just looking for similarities helpful for public relations and salesmanship, but which is willing to recognize differences as grounded in the incommensurability of God. As Christians engaged in discovering the meaning of Jesus Christ in our lives we should be eager to receive help from our neighbors, even the non-Christian ones, with whom we share the human predicament.

Adapted from M. C. Escher’s “System XE”



Theological sectarianism is something that Adventism tried to get rid of with the famous production of *Questions on Doctrine*.<sup>18</sup> This work resulted from an attempt to dialogue with other evangelicals and in the process shed our sectarian past. The results of that initiative, however, have been the opposite of those desired by the participants. Rather than entering into dialogue with evangelicals as an ecclesiastical community, we have retreated even further into isolationism. Thus, while sociologically we are losing our sectarianism, theologically we have become, officially, reactionary. Would that the reverse were true.

In the time of Christ, Jews debated whether the Sabbath was their exclusive possession or if it belonged also to the rest of humanity. Some argued that it was impossible for a non-Jew to observe the Sabbath, since the Sabbath was God's special gift to the Jews, marking them as God's peculiar people. Others, like Philo of Alexandria, argued that people from many nations observed the Sabbath and in this way recognized the superiority of the God of Israel and his prophet

Moses.<sup>19</sup> The Christian community behind the Gospel of Mark seems to take sides in this debate when it remembers that Jesus said "the Sabbath was made for humankind" (Mark 2:28, NRSV). One can only wonder if the reason this saying of Jesus is omitted by the authors of Matthew and Luke, who undoubtedly copied the rest of this story from Mark, is in any way due to their having taken a position on the opposite side of this debate.

The debate itself illustrates the exclusivistic vs. the inclusivistic alternatives. It would seem that Paul transcended this debate when he relativized all days (Romans 14:5; Galatians 4:10), clearly condemned all human pre-judgments (Romans 14:4, 10), and in an exultant praise affirmed the mystery of God and the incomprehensibility of his ways (Romans 11:33-35). Paul's pastoral project in his letter to the Romans is to make his readers come to terms with God as the one who had already accepted those who thought differently on matters that they considered essential (Romans 14:1-15:7). I find Paul's concern most timely. I would not wish, however, to claim that affirming that the Sabbath is a special day, either for a peculiar people or for humanity, is not biblical.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. I am aware that the charges against these officials are related to the cover-up of their actions when they lied to Congress, and as such merit careful attention.

2. See H. Weiss, "How Can Jeremiah Compare the Migration of Birds to Knowledge of God's Justice?" *Bible Review* 2 (1986) pp. 42-45.

3. "The Jordan, The Tiber and the Ganges: Three Kairological Moments of Christic Self-Consciousness," in J. Hick and P. Knitter (eds.) *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (New York: Orbis, 1988), pp. 109, 110.

4. *Spectrum*, 22:4 (October 1992).

5. This reminds me of the very defensive opening toward Protestant biblical scholarship on the part of Pope Leo XIII in 1893. He conceded that maybe some Catholic scholars should learn something about it to combat more effectively its advances. See his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, which, in part, reads, "It is most desirable, therefore, that there should be

numerous members of the clergy well prepared . . . to repulse hostile assaults, chiefly thrusting in that armor of God recommended by the Apostle (Eph. 6:13-17), but also not unaccustomed to modern methods of attack."

6. R. Bultmann, "The Problem of Hermeneutics" (1950) and "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" (1957) in Schubert Ogden (transl. and ed.) *The New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 69-93, 145-153.

7. *Jesus and Easter: Did God Raise the Historical Jesus From the Dead?* (V.P. Furnish, transl.) (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1990), pp. 45-46.

8. For a rationale, description, and demonstration of what is involved, see Elizabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroads, 1984).

9. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of*

*Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966).

10. Kierkegaard's famous Either/Or is not at all ours. He insisted on the need to choose between all the supports for social, economic, cultural, psychological, spiritual life, and the claim of Jesus' divinity on the other. He presented the choice as absurd.

11. Even the Chinese, who insist on maintaining an authoritarian one-party political system, are silently abandoning the economic "truths" of Maoism.

12. The tragedy of the end of the Cold War is that it has meant also the revival of exclusivistic ethnic claims. The gospel, of course, aims directly at their elimination (Galatians 3:28).

13. Panikkar, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. 97.

14. *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), chapter 3.

15. See Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983), (original 1950-1951). Marcel insists that at the core of a mystery is the impossibility of a "solution."

16. In the words of Schubert Ogden, "Whatever else

our age may still be willing to accept from us, surely it will no longer hear of a Christianity that is little more than a tribal religion with universal pretensions." "The Reformation That We Want," *Anglican Theological Review* 54 (1972), p. 268.

17. "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," *Theological Investigations* (New York: Crossroads), IV, pp. 115-135. For a critique, see Eugene TeSelle, *Christ in Context: Divine Purpose and Human Possibility* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), pp. 163-169.

18. *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine: An Explanation of Certain Major Aspects of Seventh-day Adventist Belief, Prepared by a Representative Group of Seventh-day Adventist Leaders, Bible Teachers, and Editors* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1957).

19. See H. Weiss, "Philo on the Sabbath," in David T. Runia, David M. Hay, and David Winston (eds.), *Heirs of the Septuagint: Philo, Hellenistic Judaism, and Early Christianity* (Earle Hilgert *Festschrift*, *Studia Philonica Annual*, III, 1991), p. 99.