

# Reservations About Religious Liberty

Reviewing the Adventist Concept of Separation of Church and State during the Eisenhower and Nixon Era

By Douglas Morgan

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“Bewilderment” was not a state of mind usually associated with Adventism’s self-assured apologist, F. D. Nichol. But in a 1963 editorial, the *Review* editor indeed confessed “bewilderment at times as to just how the principle of separation of church and state applies.” The source of his perplexity was the sharply increasing government involvement in such realms as welfare and education that were major facets of the church’s ministry.<sup>1</sup> And his unusual uncertainty reflects the magnitude of the growing challenge confronting Adventism’s traditional commitment to strict separation of church and state as the postwar decades progressed.

The challenge came from several angles. The radical pluralism and societal fragmentation emerging out of the upheavals of the 1960s raised the question of whether public morality could thrive under separation of church and state. Would it be possible to maintain a common set of values around which a society could cohere?<sup>2</sup> The rapid social changes prompted many conservative Christians to a new activism on behalf of traditional religious morality in the nation’s public life.

Controversial cases involving the free exercise and establishment of religion began to come before the Supreme Court in unprecedented volume. The court interpreted the significance of the First Amendment for a vast range of issues, including prayer, Bible reading, and the teaching of evolution in the public schools, government aid to church-related schools, Sunday laws, unemployment and public assistance entitlement rights for religious minorities, chaplains in state legislatures, and religious displays on public property. The “free exercise” and “establishment” clauses now often appeared to be in tension and holding together commitments to separationism and religious rights, as Adventists had always tried to do, became a more complicated matter. An “accommodationist” or “non-preferentialist” approach that defended positive cooperation between government and religion, so long as one religious group is not favored over others, became more influential among interpreters of the First Amendment.<sup>3</sup>



The expanding role of government referred to by Nichol, combined with Adventism's deepening institutional stake in society, led to conflict within the Church over whether and to what extent government funds should be used for church institutions. While the leaders of the Church's work for religious liberty continued to uphold the separationist banner, others, particularly administrators of educational institutions, advocated a more accommodationist approach that would allow the Church to accept some government funds.

The sometimes wrenching conflict was never fully resolved, but the Church as a whole made a major shift toward selective acceptance of government benefits. Adventist leaders, broadly speaking, came to conceive of the wall separating church and state as flexible enough to allow openings for the Church to take advantage of some provisions of the welfare state. Indeed, one of the principle contributions of the Church's activism in this period came in helping to define how the principle of religious liberty would be applied to citizens' claims on the entitlements of the welfare state. At the same time Adventists continued to defend with zeal the concept of a separating wall as developments relating to education, Sunday legislation and ecumenism seemed to provide new signs of the necessity to forestall the ultimate demise of liberty.

Their understanding of separation of church and state continued in this period to distinguish Adventists from religious liberals who sought to transform society through political action. But though a conservatism linked with church-state separationism remained the prevailing political orientation in Adventism, voices calling for a new and progressive involvement with social issues made themselves heard. Moreover, that progressive influence, along with the sustained commitment to separation of church and state, contributed to the emergence of an even more significant distinction: that between Adventists and premillennialists of the developing New Christian Right.

## Separationism and the Government Aid Controversy

Qualification of the Church's adamant stance against accepting government funds began to appear at least as early as the 1930s. The growth of the federal welfare state in America began to create unprecedented and what proved to be irresistible funding opportunities for the Church's institutions that conflicted with the traditional stand on separation of

church and state.<sup>4</sup>

The conflict sharpened in 1943 when Paradise Valley Hospital in San Diego accepted a grant of \$136,000 through the Federal Work Agency to build an addition to the hospital and a new dormitory for nursing students.<sup>5</sup> Vociferous protests from C. S. Longacre were viewed as a hindrance to raising additional funds for the project within the Church and drew a sharp rebuke from J. L. McElhany, the General Conference president. McElhany cited Ellen White's opposition to A. T. Jones's criticism of the Church's acceptance of a land grant from the British South Africa Company in the 1890s.<sup>6</sup> Here was clear evidence, McElhany declared, that Mrs. White favored acceptance of gifts from government. Longacre responded that Mrs. White nowhere endorsed direct "government" aid to churches, but only that which the rich and powerful were moved to bestow out of their own resources. The land grant in southern Africa that the Adventists received fit the latter category since it came from Cecil Rhodes and the British South Africa Company, not from a government.<sup>7</sup> The ambiguity of this crucial precedent in Adventist history contributed to making the Church's twentieth-century struggle with the issue of government aid a protracted and messy one.

Two more developments in the 1940s prompted church leaders to seek a definitive policy on government aid. Under the provisions of the Surplus Property Act of 1944, the Adventists' Central California Conference in 1948 acquired Camp McQuade, a large former military base, for one dollar and turned it into a denominational high school. H. H. Votaw decried this move as inconsistent with the Church's long-held position and urged that the camp be returned to the government.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the Hill-Burton Act of 1946 made available funding for private hospitals, and Adventist administrators were eager to take advantage of it.

At the Autumn Council of 1948, church leaders voted to "reaffirm our full belief in the historic doctrine of the separation of church and state." They passed resolutions against accepting free textbooks from the government or public funds for teachers' salaries or school maintenance.<sup>9</sup> The council also declared that Adventist medical institutions in the United States, as "an integral part of our denominational program," should not accept government funds for operation or maintenance.<sup>10</sup>

The unyielding policy didn't last long, however. The very next Autumn Council brought a crucial change, opening the door to capital funds from the



government for medical institutions and to war surplus such as Camp McQuade. Acceptance of funds for capital development of hospitals, available through the Hill-Burton Act of 1946, was justified on the grounds that Adventist institutions “render a recognized service to the medical needs of the communities in which they are located” that was not specifically sectarian in nature.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, a theory on which to base the accommodationist stance toward government aid was gaining acceptance among some Adventist leaders. J. I. Robison, who had served the church for many years in Africa and Europe, argued in a position paper circulated in the late 1940s that a distinction should be made between religious liberty and separation of church and state. Religious liberty, he maintained, is basic, unquestioned Adventist doctrine. Separation of church and state, on the other hand, was an arrange-

context. Controversy deepened despite the policy voted in 1949 as the church’s institutions of higher education began to push through the door cracked open by the provision for limited acceptance of government aid for the Church’s medical institutions. Many Adventist educational administrators were eager to take advantage of the Higher Education Facilities Act of 1958 that offered government funds for one-third of the cost of new buildings, and other legislation for various forms of aid such as scholarships, fellowships, equipment, and training programs in specific areas. Also, numerous acquisitions of government surplus property were made in the 1950s. Thus, by 1963, Seventh-day Adventist institutions were listed by Protestants and Other Americans United for Separation of Church and State among the violators of the “moral, spiritual, and constitutional



ment particular to the American government and not the only system under which religious liberty could be enjoyed. And now, the development of the welfare state in America had led to a “twilight zone” in the realms of education and social welfare where state and church have overlapping interests. The claims of both are legitimate, he argued, and he therefore called for “a plan of mutual agreement as to how each shall cooperate with the other.”<sup>12</sup> Changes in the American government made mandatory an accommodation in which strict separationism is abandoned but the principle of religious liberty is maintained.

A change in the Religious Liberty Association’s Declaration of Principles in 1956 reflects a consensus that separation of church and state, while ideal, was one particular means for realizing the more fundamental principle of religious liberty. Thus, the RLA no longer declared separation of church and state as its first principle but rather affirmed belief in religious liberty, which “is best exercised when there is separation between church and state.”

Nonetheless, the strict separationists were far from accepting Robison’s prescription for the American

aspects of the principle of Church-State separation.”<sup>13</sup>

Such departure from the separationism so long advocated in the pages of *Liberty*, significant enough to prompt criticism from an organization in which Adventist leaders themselves had a high profile, understandably sparked intense debate within the Adventist community. Many Adventists wondered if their own church was now entering the very sort of illicit union with the state that it had frequently attributed to others.<sup>14</sup> For their part, the Church’s religious liberty leaders, reluctantly conceding defeat on the issue of Hill-Burton funds, fought to maintain the policy against acceptance of government aid for capital improvements at Adventist colleges, even while adherence to the policy was in fact rapidly eroding.<sup>15</sup>

The debate continued through the 1960s and the controverted issues were aired in an unusually frank public manner in a panel discussion printed in the *Review* in 1968. Moderated by Neal C. Wilson, vice president of the General Conference for North America, the panel included Robert H. Brown, a vice president of Walla Walla College; Herbert Douglass, president of Atlantic Union College; and F. E. J. Harder,



chairman of the Department of Education at Andrews University. As educators, these men favored a relatively liberal policy on government aid. Also included were Roland Hegstad and attorney Warren Johns, who were concerned with upholding a separationist policy.<sup>16</sup>

The educators developed the themes adumbrated by Robison. Harder emphasized the point that separation of church and state should be seen as a policy rather than a doctrine. While a doctrine of "personal and religious freedom" could be derived from the Bible, he argued, separation of church and state was "not exemplified, described, or prescribed" therein.

Hegstad and Johns agreed with their brethren that complete separation of church and state was not possible and that the counsels of Ellen White made room for some forms of government aid. But they argued for adherence to separationist principles, based

For Hegstad and Johns, the twin dangers of governmental control and secularization highlighted the need for maintaining a critical perspective on government aid. As evidence of the danger of secularization, Hegstad pointed to the many church-related colleges, particularly Roman Catholic, that "were altering their organizational structure and admission requirements to allow for the secularization that will bring government subsidy." While many of the constitutional issues remained unresolved, he feared that with federal aid, Adventist schools would face similar pressure toward secularization.

Controversy over the issue of government aid continued to simmer until external and internal pressures prompted the Church to another attempt at resolving it in 1972. Cuts in government appropriations by the Nixon administration and a general dip in

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on the Church's apocalyptic identity as "remnant," that would strictly limit the forms and conditions under which aid was accepted. Hegstad cited the Adventist interpretation of Revelation as depicting the emergence of an oppressive union between church and state to suggest that separationism was indeed a biblical principle. In view of such apocalyptic understanding, he asked, "can we hasten the erosion of the wall of separation for the sake of financial subsidy, or for any other reason, and yet claim to act in a principled way?" In fact it would be "criminal," he added, "for men with the prophetic insight of the Adventist ministry uncritically to involve the church in confederacy with government for the sake of financial aid."

Again here, the issue turned in part on how much emphasis would be placed on the church's "remnant" status. Johns maintained that the very survival of Adventism as a "viable remnant" was at stake. If the Church that claims to be the "remnant" of faithful believers described in Revelation "unites with government for economic gain," then, he suggested, "the prophetic term 'remnant' as applied to the Seventh-day Adventist Church would face redefinition."

enrollment created financial distress for colleges. Then, passage of the Higher Education Omnibus Bill in 1972 offered relief by extending old programs and funding new ones. Adventist educational administrators sought to take advantage of the programs, but there was some confusion as to what was allowable under church policy.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, some administrators were less conscientious than others about following denominational policy. Neal Wilson observed that numerous violations of existing policy were occurring and expressed the desire of church leaders that policy and practice be consistent within the denomination.<sup>18</sup>

The new policy proposed at the 1972 Autumn Council was more permissive in that it no longer categorized some forms of government aid as inherently unacceptable. Government funds for capital improvements, equipment, general operating, and salaries might now be approved. However, a set of guidelines was established to restrict the conditions under which aid might be received. The guidelines stipulated that any participation in aid programs should not compromise the independence of Adventist schools, deflect them from their purpose of inculcating



Christian principles, or weaken the "historic position" of the Church that "religious liberty is best achieved and preserved by a separation of church and state." A system of monitoring and evaluation by church boards external to the institutions receiving aid was set up in an effort to avoid inconsistencies and violations.

In the floor debate at the Autumn Council, W. Melvin Adams registered sharp opposition. "This new policy is dishonest," he declared. "It begins by maintaining our historic position of separation of church and state and then turns 180 degrees." Adamant opponents of the policy turned out to be a small minority, however. Hegstad's somewhat reluctant support reflected the position of many whose views could allow for government aid under some circumstances but remained highly concerned about its

safeguarded by the stipulations of the new policy. He claimed that it was strict enough to ensure that the amount of government aid would "not exceed a trickle," and affirmed his conviction that "the First Amendment still stands as a desirable wall between tax dollars and the kind of schools Adventists are determined to maintain."<sup>21</sup>

Despite Hegstad's efforts to reconcile the new policy with separationist principles, the Adventist solution to the problem of the expanding role of government and growing needs of its own institutions came at the price of a loss of clarity in the Church's stand on separation of church and state. Adams's objection seems irrefutable. While on the one hand continuing to affirm separation as the best way of achieving religious liberty, the Church had given



potential threat to the church. "This has been a traumatic issue for me," he observed, "but I am not afraid to depart from the policies of the past." The council eventually approved the new policy overwhelmingly.<sup>19</sup> The denomination appeared to have achieved relative consensus on a policy that could be squared with the actual practice of its educational institutions, though concern continued to be expressed occasionally about the government funding reaching such an extent that it threatened the autonomy of Adventist schools.<sup>20</sup>

Hegstad put the best face possible on the new policy, defending it in *Liberty* as an "uncompromising Declaration of Independence." Though editor of the publication subsidized by the Church "to advocate continued separation of church and state," he recognized that the separation could not be absolute and that "Caesar's sphere and God's sphere sometimes overlap." On the specific matter of government aid to church-related colleges, Adventist leaders declared that "they could not make the constitutional judgments necessary" and thus accepted the Supreme Court's ruling in *Tilton v. Richardson* (1971) that permitted some forms of such aid. In earlier eras Adventists had rarely been so timid about expressing their judgment on constitutional issues of church and state. But Hegstad believed their principles were

official approval to forms of cooperation with government of the sort that it had condemned in earlier years as an egregious trespass of the wall of separation.

Regarding the "wall of separation," it was Bert B. Beach who perhaps best expressed the position to which Adventism, by and large, had come: Separation of church and state must at times be an invulnerable wall, but on occasion it must also be a permeable honeycomb allowing legitimate cooperation and even government regulation. . . . Think of church schools and state education laws, church construction and building codes, church financial operations and laws affecting them, to name but a few spheres of joint influence where ironclad separation is out of the question.<sup>22</sup> Adventists still wanted the barrier between church and state to be strong where necessary, but less uniformly absolute than they had previously envisioned it.

### Free Exercise in the Welfare State

While the issue of how to handle the provisions of the welfare state in regard to the Church's institutions created a crisis for Adventism, church leaders had little hesitation about asserting the right of individuals—Adventists and others—to claim the entitlements and



legal protection afforded by the state without suffering discrimination because of their religious practices. Here Adventist activism contributed to extending the principle of religious freedom in the new historical context brought about by the progressive social legislation of the twentieth century.

Workplace conflicts created by their distinctive practices constituted one of the most difficult challenges faced by Saturday sabbatarians in a society where Sunday is the recognized day of rest. Faithful Seventh-day Adventists insisted on abstaining from work for the entire twenty-four hour period from sundown Friday evening to sundown Saturday evening, and frequently found it necessary to give up jobs that demanded Saturday work in order to be faithful to their beliefs.<sup>23</sup> As government expanded its

benefits to those refusing work on either Saturday or Sunday were tested in the state supreme courts of Michigan and Ohio. Alvin Johnson argued in *Liberty* that such laws exhibited a governmental hostility toward religion in violation of the "free exercise" provision.<sup>27</sup> Both courts agreed, ruling in favor of the sabbatarians claim on benefits, as did the North Carolina Supreme Court in 1956.<sup>28</sup>

In South Carolina, however, a legal battle began over the issue in 1959 that eventually reached the United States Supreme Court. Mrs. Adell Sherbert, who had been employed for over thirty years in Spartan Mills, a textile mill in Spartanburg, converted to Seventh-day Adventism in 1957. At this time the mill was operating only five days per week, thus she had no Sabbath work conflicts. In 1959, however, the mill shifted to a six-

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role in providing for the needs of the unemployed, disputes arose concerning whether Adventists who were out of work solely because of their sabbatarianism were entitled to unemployment benefits. Could Adventists claim benefits on the basis of their right to the free exercise of religion, even though the state was doing nothing directly to restrict their practices? Or would the payments in effect subsidize the practices of a particular group and thus be an unconstitutional establishment of religion? This convergence of Adventist practice, the welfare state, and the Constitution led to a Supreme Court decision in 1963 that came to be regarded as one of the most significant interpretations of the First Amendment in the court's history.<sup>24</sup>

The issue of the Sabbath and unemployment compensation surfaced as early as 1948. Several Adventist women in Battle Creek, Michigan, initially denied benefits, appealed their case successfully to higher state officials. Frank Yost described the incident as "an important precedent in favor of liberty of conscience."<sup>25</sup> The issue was far from settled, however, and with other cases arising, church leaders voted the following spring that the denomination should bear the expenses of members seeking legal redress.<sup>26</sup> In 1954, laws that stipulated denial of unemployment

day work week, and Mrs. Sherbert lost her job for refusing to work on Saturdays. After failing to find work that accommodated her convictions at three other mills in the area, and filing unsuccessfully for unemployment benefits, she took her case to court.<sup>29</sup>

The Supreme Court decided in favor of Sherbert in 1963 by a 7-2 majority. In the majority opinion, Justice William Brennan held that the government was imposing on Sherbert a choice between practicing her religion and accepting work, which was equivalent to fining her for her worship on Saturday. Thus: "To condition the availability of benefits upon this appellant's willingness to violate a cardinal principle of her religious faith effectively penalizes the free exercise of her constitutional liberties." Such a burden to free exercise could be constitutional only if necessitated by some "compelling state interest," and Brennan could find none in this case. His ruling did not foster the "establishment" of Adventism in South Carolina, Brennan further argued. Rather, providing those who worshiped on Saturday and Sunday alike with access to unemployment benefits constituted "nothing more than the governmental obligation of neutrality in the face of religious differences."<sup>30</sup>

Adventists naturally celebrated the decision as a vindication of "equal justice for all" and reason to



“thank God anew for His protecting care over those who conscientiously witness for the truth of the Sabbath at the risk of discrimination in the matter of unemployment compensation.”<sup>31</sup> The landmark application of the free exercise clause that they embraced in the Sherbert decision was perhaps an indirect part of a process leading Adventists toward a more nuanced view of the relationship between church and state. In an era when the role of government was expanding, “neutrality” was becoming at least as important as “separation.”

In the 1970s another dimension of the welfare state, namely, its regulations protecting civil rights, came to prominence in connection with Sabbatarian



employees. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and its 1972 amendments forbade job discrimination on the basis of religion. Guidelines issued by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission stipulated that employers “make reasonable accommodations to the religious needs of employees and prospective employees where such accommodations can be made without undue hardship on the conduct of the employer’s business.” When Edward Shaffield, an Adventist helicopter mechanic employed at Northrop Worldwide Aircraft Services in Alabama, was fired for leaving work early on Fridays to avoid working after the Sabbath began at sundown, he filed a suit charging religious discrimination in federal court. Northrop claimed that its policy was to treat all employees alike, thus it could not give preferential treatment to Shaffield. But the court ruled in Shaffield’s favor, arguing that the company had “numerous opportunities to effect an accommodation with only minimal disruption of business.” *Liberty* columnist Elvin Benton, in an appreciative analysis of the decision, commented that treating everybody alike would only be fair if “all people were identical.”<sup>32</sup>

Here it must be noted that when it came to application of Title VII to church institutions, Adventism’s top leadership put up trenchant resistance. In 1973

Merikay Silver filed a suit alleging sex discrimination in hiring and payment practices against the Church’s Pacific Press Publishing Association. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and Department of Labor filed related suits on behalf of Silver and another female employee of Pacific Press, Lorna Tobler. The Department of Labor also filed a complaint in 1975 against the Pacific Union Conference, an umbrella organization for the Church’s associations, schools, and colleges on the West Coast, which charged that unequal pay for basically equal work had been rendered to employees of different genders.

The fundamental contention made by the defense in these cases was that the First Amendment placed

church institutions beyond the jurisdiction of the state. The defense in the Pacific Press case declared that “in doing its work, the church is free to ignore, even to flout, measures which bind all others” and that “[t]he church claims exemption from all civil laws in all its religious institutions.” In both the Pacific Press and Pacific Union cases, the Church’s sweeping claims to freedom from government regulation was rejected in federal court. The ruling in the press case declared that it was the job of the courts, not the Church, to interpret the Constitution, that workers in religious institutions had the right to protection against discrimination, and that it was the clear intent of Congress that Title VII apply to religious organizations, with the only permissible form of discrimination being the practice of hiring church members exclusively.<sup>33</sup>

In the secular arena, however, Adventist activism contributed to a broadening of the state’s role in protecting workers against religious discrimination. This point was true not only in regard to Sabbatarian accommodation and unemployment compensation but also in regard to yet another employment-related issue—compulsory labor union membership.

In the late nineteenth century, Adventists viewed unions as “combinations” that repressed individual freedom through coercive collective action. Labor



violence was expected to lead to the final apocalyptic conflict, with the strong Roman Catholic influence helping to make unions appear a likely instrument of the last conspiracy. Unions thus posed a fundamental challenge to the believer's loyalty to God and the Church, and Ellen White urged Adventists to avoid them and "stand free in God." It should also be reiterated that White and other Adventist writers at this time were just as severe on the large trusts for conspiring to deprive individuals of economic rights and thus prompting social upheaval.<sup>34</sup> In the years following White's death, Adventist spokespersons continued to dissociate the Church from the strikes and violence of the labor movement, point out the guilt of capital

ciently lasting, widely accepted, or consistently applied to resolve the problem.<sup>37</sup>

In the early 1960s, church leaders sought new ways to apply their two-pronged approach of encouraging members to "stand apart" from unions while negotiating ways for them to keep jobs normally requiring union membership. While reiterating the long-standing position that union membership was not a barrier to Adventist membership,<sup>38</sup> church leaders continued to emphasize the spiritual perils of unions. Rather than fading away as an issue, union membership continued to be strongly and repeatedly discouraged, if not absolutely forbidden.

Neal C. Wilson, then the Church's vice-president for

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in establishing unjust economic conditions, and urge that those injustices be redressed through legal means.<sup>35</sup>

It was not until the late 1930s, however, that union membership became a personal, ethical dilemma for many Adventists. As the number of Adventists living in cities increased, both through conversion<sup>36</sup> and the nation's general trend toward urbanization, and organized labor made advances under the New Deal, more and more faced pressure to join unions. They were confronted with the perplexing choice between retaining their jobs in a union shop and defying the church's historic position, which was given prophetic authority through Ellen White's admonitions.

For over two decades the Adventist leadership took the approach of negotiating agreements with labor unions. Some unions accepted a document, called the "Basis of Agreement," that committed the unions to certify Adventist workers for employment if they would contribute the equivalent of union dues to union-supported charities and not cross picket lines in the event of a strike. In a manner similar to their "conscientious cooperation" with the military, Adventists could thus avoid direct, personal involvement in actions violating their beliefs while not interfering with and in some ways supporting the unions. However, these agreements were not suffi-

North America, drew on numerous arguments from the past in summarizing the case against unions in 1969. He cited the teachings of Jesus on treatment of enemies, and the inclusive nature of Christianity that makes impossible affiliation with organizations that divide and create conflict along social and political lines. The capstone of his biblical argument was chapter 5 of the epistle of James, which had become a favorite in Adventist polemics against unions. The epistle pronounces judgment on the wealthy who have made their fortunes by fraud and oppression, and then calls for patience until the coming of the Lord. "James does not advocate a workingman's confederacy," commented Wilson, but instead "cautions all Christians to be patient and not retaliate." This passage seemed useful in not only justifying the Adventist position but also to distinguish it from support for the interests of big business.

Wilson also found Ellen White's warnings concerning the apocalyptic threat of unions still pertinent. The papal support for labor exhibited since the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 was evidence that unions were "helping to implement the Catholic church's objectives" in America, which, according to Revelation 13, meant "erecting an image to Catholic power." Some labor leaders expressed support for Sunday laws, underscoring the ultimate danger of



unions to Adventists.<sup>39</sup> Wilson in fact devoted greater attention to apocalyptic concerns than many *Review* articles on the topic of labor unions in the 1940s—yet another indication of the continued strength of the Adventists' interpretation of history in influencing their action in the public arena and creating permanent distance between them and public institutions.

But here again the apocalyptic outlook did not simply produce a quietism that preferred to wait for the coming of the Lord rather than join the struggle to achieve justice for workers. It also correlated with an activism that used the political process to preserve and extend liberty. Having failed to establish a satisfactory arrangement through direct negotiation with unions, Adventist leaders in the mid-1960s turned to legislation and litigation as means to help working

church and unions had failed, and the spotty protection afforded by state right-to-work laws was now jeopardized, "it is now time for the Government to step in and guarantee the God-given right every man has to make a living for himself and his family, one of those rights our forefathers called 'unalienable.'" In other words, the government must combine with its program to combat poverty and expand economic opportunity strong provisions for individual liberty.

Specifically, he, on behalf of the Church, recommended to House and Senate subcommittees in June 1965 an amendment stipulating that to require an individual who has religious convictions against so doing to "join or financially support any labor organization" shall be "unfair labor practice." Such an individual would be required, in turn, to pay the equiva-



people in the Church enjoy religious liberty without loss of economic opportunity. And, ironically, that effort at times brought them into political alliance with organized labor.

President Lyndon Johnson's call upon Congress in 1965 to repeal section 14(b) of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 provided the occasion for an Adventist legislative initiative. Taft-Hartley, with its limitations on the power of organized labor, had afforded Adventists some support in their endeavor to work without joining unions. However, rather than oppose the repeal of section 14(b), which provided for state right-to-work laws, Adventist lobbyists proposed attaching to the repeal an amendment preventing the exclusion of religious objectors to labor unions from work places under union contract.

W. Melvin Adams, then associate secretary of the General Conference Religious Liberty Department, spearheaded the intensive lobbying effort for what became known as the "conscience clause."<sup>40</sup> Adams's plea, in the setting of the Johnson administration's ambitious program for social justice and welfare, was expressed in the title of a *Liberty* article: "Is there room for religious conviction in the Great Society?" He argued that since voluntary agreements between the

lent of union initiation fees and periodic dues to the treasurer of the United States.<sup>41</sup>

Adams persuaded Representative Edith Green of Oregon to sponsor the amendment. A prolabor Democrat, she had initially regarded Adams's proposal as anti-union. After agreeing to sponsor it, however, she stuck by it despite some opposition from labor supporters.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to Adventists, representatives of a branch of the Plymouth Brethren, the Mennonites, and the National Association of Evangelicals spoke at congressional hearings, pressing the case for protecting religious convictions against union membership. Additional support, elicited by Adams, came from pro-labor ecumenical organizations. Representatives of the National Council of Churches, the National Catholic Welfare Conference, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis sent a joint telegram urging that Congress "find a formula which simultaneously guarantees the legitimate rights of organized labor and the rights of those workers...whose religious beliefs make it impossible for them to join or support a labor organization."<sup>43</sup>

In this vigorous effort to promote legislation, the Church, said Adams, was "neutral on the political, economic and social aspects of the repeal of Section



14(b),” and concerned only with defending religious conviction.<sup>44</sup> But however apolitical the Church’s motivation, it had definitely taken a side in a political fight. Moreover, the desire to “stand free” from labor unions led Adventists in this instance to take the side of organized labor, supporting labor’s leading legislative priority, so long as the conscience clause was included.<sup>45</sup>

As it turned out, the bill to repeal 14(b), to which a modified form the conscience clause became attached, was killed by a filibuster. But despite its failure in Congress, the conscience clause served as a new general framework for Adventist efforts to make arrangements with unions. A boost came from the executive council of the AFL-CIO, which endorsed the provisions of the conscience clause while it was pending in the Senate and urged unions “to accommo-

Adventists, employed as cooks, housekeepers, and nurses aides, were affected when the Drug and Hospital Workers’ Union No. 1199 won the right to represent workers at the United Presbyterian Home. Four of the Adventists quit, wishing to avoid any connection with labor unions. Two agreed to join the union. The other three contacted church officials for help. Representatives of the General Conference and local union conference Religious Liberty Departments arrived to negotiate with union leaders. The union refused to accept a proposal based on the conscience clause, which would have allowed the workers to retain their jobs if they paid an amount equivalent to union dues to a national charity. However, the union was willing to exempt them from actual membership, oaths, picketing, and meeting requirements, if the

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date themselves to genuine individual religious scruples.”<sup>46</sup> For its part, the Church, through its Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, issued a “statement of cooperation,” pledging Adventists to abide by the stipulations of an amendment proposed by Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon regarding the payment of the equivalent of union dues and fees to charity. By such action they sought to show that they were not, as sometimes accused, “free riders.” Additionally, in the event of a strike, they would “not side with the union by participating in the strike activities, nor with the employer by interfering with the union picketing.”<sup>47</sup> In essence, this was a renewal of the terms of the “Basis of Agreement” established in the 1940s, with one major difference: the money paid by the religious objector would go to an independent charity, rather than into union coffers.

With AFL-CIO policy not binding on union locals, however, it remained often difficult to persuade them to accept the conscience clause. Adventists continued to encounter pressure, with some losing their jobs and others either agreeing to join unions or accept arrangements that fell below the standard recommended by the Church. An occurrence in 1972 in Long Island, New York, is illustrative. Nine Seventh-day

money was paid to the union instead. The workers accepted these terms.<sup>48</sup>

While Adventists, with increasing success, pressed the issue in the courts during the 1970s,<sup>49</sup> Adams and his colleagues persisted in seeking congressional action on a conscience clause.<sup>50</sup> Success came slowly and in stages. A crucial breakthrough came in 1975, when New Jersey Congressman Frank Thompson, a prolabor Democrat who chaired the Subcommittee on Labor-Management Relations, indicated his support for such action. A bill sponsored by Thompson early in 1977 providing for substitution of charity payments for union membership and dues passed overwhelmingly in the House. In the Senate, however, it was attached to a broader Labor Reform Bill that was defeated by a filibuster. Finally in 1980, with Adams now retired and Gordon Engen leading Adventist lobbying, conscience clause legislation made it all the way through the congressional maze, despite continuing opposition from some unions. Reaching the Senate floor just a day before Congress was to adjourn, it passed by a voice vote without dissent and was signed into law by President Jimmy Carter on December 24, 1980. After a fifteen-year period of congressional lobbying, Adventists won the backing of federal law



for the right of individuals with religious convictions against union membership to not have their economic opportunity thereby obstructed, so long as they did not take unfair advantage by pocketing the amount that would go to union dues.

The ethical approach taken by Adventists toward labor unions paralleled that taken toward the military in some important ways. They believed that the violence and coercion practiced by these institutions was contrary to biblical teaching concerning individual Christian behavior. Yet they did not protest the existence of such institutions in a sinful world, nor did they address the broad issues of peace and justice surrounding the activities of armies and unions. In exchange for the freedom to follow their understand-



ing of certain biblical injunctions, they could offer silent neutrality and, sometimes, tacit blessing and willing cooperation to the institutions participating in conflict. In some respects, then, they tended toward uncritical nationalism, moral passivity, and indirect complicity in actions they regarded as morally impermissible for themselves.

At the same time, they would not entirely be swallowed up by conformity to the dominant institutions of American society. Indeed, Adventists sought with some rigor to maintain their social nonconformity on the issues they expected ultimately to be decisive. So even in the period when American Adventists were eagerly cultivating a cooperative relationship with the powerful institutions of the surrounding society, their apocalyptic view of history continued to undergird a sphere of resistance. Their earthly citizenship was, after all, only temporary; the heavenly was soon to supplant the earthly. In pursuing the course required by that expectation for the future, American Adventists succeeded in expanding the scope of individual freedom recognized by their earthly government.

While during the 1930s and 1940s many of the Church's editors and evangelists had denounced the

welfare state as a potential instrument of repression, Adventists in the postwar decades did not perpetuate intransigent denunciation of "big government." Instead, they used legal channels in pressing for full realization of religious liberty under the provisions of the welfare state.

In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, "cautious conservatism" remained the dominant, though no longer unchallenged, political style among American Adventists. Not only did they generally refrain from challenging the status quo, many leaders stressed more than ever that belief in the premillennial return of Christ and separation of church and state meant the Church must avoid political activism. That emphasis, however, was in part a reaction to significant

voices being raised in the Church on behalf of a new and deeper involvement with the issues dividing American society.

### Separationism and Conservatism

Reacting to the increasing involvement of American churches in progressive social causes, *Review* editor Kenneth Wood exclaimed in a 1971 editorial, "When will Christians really believe that the second coming of Christ is the only answer to this world's problems!"<sup>51</sup> Wood here ignored the history of extensive activism on the part of apocalyptically motivated Adventists. But he and other Adventist leaders posited a sharp distinction between the religious—the Church's proper realms of activity—and the secular, the proper sphere of government and politics. Making such a distinction was certainly nothing new for Adventists, but now leading spokespersons seemed to be making it in a more unqualified fashion than in previous eras. Borrowing the language of a Gallup Poll question, Wood declared in 1968 that while the Church should indeed be attentive to human rights and needs, it should "stick to religion" and not be



“sidetracked” by such worthwhile causes from its “God-given assignment” to preach the gospel throughout the world, particularly the “three angels’ messages of Revelation 14—God’s saving messages for this judgment hour.”<sup>52</sup> Similarly, F. D. Nichol, in 1965, described the increasing Protestant interest in political, economic, and social issues as an effort to “reform the world in its secular aspects.”<sup>53</sup>

Though they thus tended to distance themselves from church-based political activism, Adventists could not be described as politically neutral or entirely aloof. Though hard evidence is sketchy, Adventist church historian C. Mervyn Maxwell’s observation about late nineteenth-century Adventists being “overwhelmingly Republican in political sympathies”<sup>54</sup> held equally true

Democratic Action ranged from 0 percent in 1968 to 28 percent in 1970.<sup>57</sup>

Probably no church official expressed Adventist identification with conservatism and the Republican Party in more direct fashion than J. James Aitken, who served as the General Conference representative to Congress and the United Nations in the early 1970s. After President Richard Nixon’s speech in April 1972 declaring plans for intensive bombing of North Vietnam, Aitken sent him a letter of appreciation and, in a second letter a month later, expressed the hope “that the nation will understand the extreme importance of the most courageous action which you have taken.”<sup>58</sup> Writing to Pettis on the same topic, Aitken summarized in a sentence the aggregate of church-

“In earlier eras Adventists had rarely been so timid about expressing their judgment on constitutional issues of church and state.”

into the 1970s, at least for the white majority.<sup>55</sup>

The record of Jerry L. Pettis, the first Adventist elected to the United States Congress, gives us a window on Adventist political leanings. Pettis began his remarkable career as a minister, then turned to aviation, and then to business ventures in audio tape distribution and tape duplicating equipment that made him a millionaire. He also took up citrus and avocado ranching. Then, in 1966, he was elected to represent the southern California district that included Loma Linda, the site of the Adventist medical school. A private plane crash brought a tragic end to his life in 1975 while he was still in Congress.<sup>56</sup>

The *Almanac of American Politics* described Pettis as “safely conservative” though straying from party orthodoxy enough “to indicate the presence of an original mind.” Analysis of his voting record from 1968 to 1970 shows support for all major weapons programs and opposition to the Coop-Church amendment to limit presidential authority to conduct military operations in Cambodia. These votes earned him a 100 percent rating on the National Security Index of the American Security Council. He also received high ratings from the conservative Americans for Constitutional Action. Ratings from the liberal Americans for

state separationism, quietism, and conservatism that had become the dominant political style in Adventism: “Other Churches may take whatever action they desire on Vietnam, but the Seventh-day Adventist Church feels that it should pray for the Chief Executive that the state might make the right decisions without pressure from the Church.”<sup>59</sup> Under Aitken’s approach, the Church could support a favored government such as Nixon’s with complicity and spiritual legitimation and yet remain ostensibly apolitical, not crossing the wall separating church and state.

During the Watergate crisis, Aitken assured Nixon and other Republican leaders of ongoing support from the Adventist Church. In a letter to George Bush, then chairman of the Republican National Committee, Aitken declared that in all the political crisis we have been going through recently, we as a church want to be loyal to our President and to the Republican Party who put him there... We have not lost faith in you, your party, and above all, the President of the United States. We stand firm in our support of him. Acknowledging that some Adventists vote Democratic, he maintained that the majority “have through the years been on the conservative side and appreciate the great principles of the Republican Party.”<sup>60</sup> Though no



public church pronouncement would be so openly partisan and Aitken's sweeping statements no doubt exceeded any authority with which to back them, he did speak as the Church's official representative to Congress, and effectively conveyed a political orientation that was rarely stated so explicitly in public.

The quietism and cautious conservatism that Adventists continued to exhibit in this period derived in part from their belief in the separation of church and state, which biased them against church-based advocacy for governmental solutions to social problems. However, just as the expanding welfare state battered strict separationism in regard to government aid, the issues of war, race, and poverty that stirred the nation in the 1960s prompted challenges to the blend of patriotic conservatism, individualistic piety,



and disengagement from public controversy that had come to be viewed as normative for American Adventism. Particularly from black Adventist leaders and from a growing class of young, highly educated academics and professionals, came calls for the Church to break out of its isolation and relate its message to the turbulent issues facing the nation.

It was controversy over these issues of war, race, and poverty that sharpened into what Robert Wuthnow has called the "Great Divide" between religious conservatives and liberals in America. Liberals sought to galvanize direct action by the church for peace in Southeast Asia and racial justice. Conservatives judged such activism improper for the church, while favoring a strong military posture and a lesser role for the government in resolving racial and economic problems.<sup>61</sup> The new voices in Adventism identified, at least vaguely, with the liberal side.

Reaction by adherents of cautious conservatism against the new calls to such involvement was strong, but not so overwhelming as to silence the voices for change. The "Great Divide," which marked conflict between liberals and conservatives within denominations rather than between denominations, now manifested itself in the new plurality of views that persisted in Adventism. Each of the key issues that

divided the nation—war, race, and poverty—brought new tension and new dynamism into Adventism.

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"Separation of church and state must at times be as invulnerable wall, but on occasion it must also be a permeable honeycomb allowing legitimate cooperation and even government regulation." Bert B. Beach

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