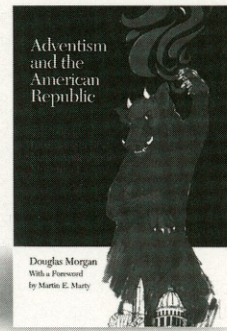


Adventists, Beasts, and America

Adventism and the American Republic. By Douglas Morgan, Nashville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001.

Reviewed by Terrie Dopp Aamodt



Seventh-day Adventist historiography yields several stages in the recounting of the Adventist past: there was the hagiographic phase, and there was the iconoclastic phase. Lately, we have witnessed Adventist histories that strive for evenhandedness and objectivity. A notable example is Douglas Morgan's *Adventism and the American Republic*. Morgan carries out a sympathetic but judicious examination of the relationship between Seventh-day Adventists and the United States government from the 1850s to the present.

This is really a book about history, especially the Adventist theology of history, which Morgan states has prompted Adventists "in late twentieth-century cultural conflicts, to align more frequently with the American Civil Liberties Union and the American Jewish Congress than with the National Rifle Association or the Christian Coalition" (1). Such an apparently puzzling stance for a basically conservative group is just one of the major ironies connected to a movement that has spawned hundreds of powerful health and educational institutions, an intricate denominational structure, and an upwardly mobile membership while sustaining intense apocalyptic fervor.

Morgan sees the Adventist relationship to American government institutions as a strong illustration of the excruciating space the group occupies between the category of "sect" and the status of "denomination." He maintains there is a "causal connection" between Adventist apocalyptic belief and political behavior

(9). He follows that thread through the passionate nineteenth century separatism that made Adventists feel free to criticize their country for tolerating slavery and passing Sunday laws, the cautious accommodation of such mid-twentieth century moves as "conscientious cooperationism," and the more critical, activist social stances of the Church in the 1970s.

In his conclusion, Morgan responds to Robert Fuller's identification of apocalyptic movements as groups that engage in "tribalistic boundary posturing," employing "apocalyptic name-calling" to compensate for a "curtailed sense of agency" (209). According to Morgan, "although the apocalyptic in the Adventist experience has at times been connected with prejudice, narrowness, and dubious speculation, its public impact has, by and large, been on behalf of human liberty and wholeness" (209). Such a confident assertion might suggest an apologetic tone, perhaps accompanied by some searching questions: Is this a story that can be told by a member

of the Seventh-day Adventist faith such as Morgan? Can any church member achieve the objective distance necessary to tell the story accurately? Perhaps not. Perhaps an innate tendency to portray controversial events in a sympathetic light makes objectivity impossible. Yet it would be supremely difficult for any scholar who is not intimately acquainted with Adventism to provide an account as full and fair as Morgan's. He notices subtleties, nuances, and semiotic patterns most accessible to someone who has spent a lifetime steeped in the literature of Adventism.

Morgan also achieves a notable critical distance, I think, in his descriptions of people and ideas sacred to Adventism. For example, he coins a memorable phrase when he describes Ellen White as "a spiritual wild card, a source of authority in the community outside the usual channels, while also providing assurance of the divine presence in the community" (24). In an even more colorful passage, he describes the way twentieth-century church leaders employed a statement by Ellen White to their own advantage. The context is a description of Ellen White's moderate, pragmatic response to A. T. Jones's insistence that the General Conference decline a 12,000-acre gift of land from Cecil Rhodes's British South Africa Land Company. Her advice allowed twentieth-century church leaders to high-

light aspects of her counsel to justify their own enthusiasm for accepting support from government entities. "In attempting to moderate Jones with a sort of ecclesiastical realpolitik," Morgan states,

White sought to ensure that Adventist separatism would not be so radical as to cut the church off from appropriate opportunities to build itself up as a source of good in the world . . . Here was a basis for cultivating cooperative relationships with governments and accepting their benevolence. At the same time the tendency of subsequent leaders to stress her efforts at bridling Jones would contribute to great disengagement from social and political protest. It would lead them to place higher value on minimizing confrontation with governments than on a comprehensive and forthright

witness against suppression of human rights. In their hands, White's action to moderate Jones's radically separatist version of a martyr church's witness to freedom would become, in some instances, basis for emasculating that witness. (57)

The idea of men in denominational leadership bending Ellen White's statements to emasculate Alonzo T. Jones's witness is an intriguing metaphor.

Although Morgan's book is thorough, detailed, and comprehensive, it also contains some intriguing implications. After reading his descriptions and ample quotations of religious liberty lions such as A. T. Jones, Roland Hegstad, and others, it becomes clear that many of the brightest, most colorful, and most articulate Adventist leaders were drawn to the religious liberty arena. Why is that? What entices these

individuals to that particular discourse? Do their wit and energy exert a disproportionate influence on the denomination? Could it help to explain the central Adventist irony of a culturally and politically conservative group caught in a libertarian stance with the more liberal justices on the U.S. Supreme Court?

I could imagine Morgan's conclusion addressing such issues, although his does not do so. In fact, such questions might be more appropriately addressed by Adventist scholars. In the meantime, Morgan's book provides the scholarly world with one of the most detailed and cogent expositions of Adventism available today. We are all in his debt.

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