



# Anarchy and Apocalyptic

By Ronald Osborn

Most radical dissenters in American history have, at a fundamental level, been deeply committed to America itself as “a city on a hill,” a nation of unique promise and destiny. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Mark Twain all criticized the United States for betraying its highest ideals, but they never questioned the sanctity or permanence of the founding vision, or the reality of a peculiar “American Dream.” Freedom and democracy might undergo temporary setbacks, these reformers believed, but by appealing to the principles enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, as well as the character of the American people, all such obstacles might be overcome.

It was in this spirit that one of the greatest radicals of the twentieth century, Martin Luther King Jr., organized his Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He took as the organization’s motto: “To save the soul of America.” “America is essentially a dream, a dream as yet unfulfilled,” King declared in a speech at Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, in 1961. “Now, more than ever before, America is challenged to bring her noble dream into reality, and those who are working to implement the American dream are the true saviors of democracy.”<sup>1</sup>

The early Adventist pioneers, Douglas Morgan has shown in his recent history, *Adventism and the American Republic*, were clearly political dissenters in this patriotic tradition. The United States, they believed, embodied freedom as no other nation in the world. Founded upon the twin pillars of civil and religious liberty, the American experiment could not fail so long as the country remained true to its Republican and Protestant heritage.

When Sabbatarian Adventists agitated against slavery or opposed Sunday legislation for a “theocratic ideal,” they did so precisely by appealing to America’s own best virtues. “We might expect a millennium indeed,” wrote John N. Loughborough in response to the optimistic postmillennial doctrines of other denominations, “if only America would live up to its professions.”<sup>2</sup> By forcefully highlighting these professions, Adventists saw themselves as the true defenders of America’s original greatness. Their dissent from American society was in fact a mark of their loyalty to it.

At the same time, the Adventist apocalyptic understanding of history led the fledgling movement to a more radical and systematic critique of the United States than that of Thoreau, King, or other great prophetic voices in the American tradition. The Republic could not fail so long as it remained faithful to the libertarian principles upon which it was founded. Yet according to their reading of the books of Daniel and Revelation, the fact that America would eventually fail was a foregone conclusion.

No nationalistic project could replace the divine plan to redeem humanity once and for all. The creedalism and intolerance of the emerging Protestant empire—intent upon a new union of church and state—coupled with the social injustice implicit in the economic order, revealed the seeds of corruption eating at the heart of the American experiment. The United States, Adventists declared, was the beast of Revelation 13, a morally contradictory amalgamation of dragon and lamb-like qualities.

Even the best government in human history, it turned out, had feet of clay. Whereas King and other optimistic reformers believed that freedom and justice would unfold and expand until the American Dream was at last realized as a historical reality, Adventist apocalyptic insisted that America's precious freedoms would narrow and erode until the dream finally turned into a nightmare.

The dissenting impulse of Adventists in the first seventy years of the Church's history in this regard had less in common with Thoreau or King's radicalism than with the politics of another, far more unsettling American libertarian. As unlikely as it may first appear, the social ethics of Ellen G. White, Joseph Bates, A. T. Jones, and other early Adventists finds dramatic resonance in the ideas of none other than Noam Chomsky.

Chomsky's anarchist critique of America may seem a far cry from the conservative patriotic stance of many contemporary Seventh-day Adventists. But the latent connections between Adventist apocalyptic and anarchist thinking cannot be ignored. I will first examine some of the anarchist elements in Adventist thought and then discuss the religious roots of Chomsky's own political views.

First, Ellen G. White, like the anarcho-syndicalists, sees hierarchical political and social structures in fundamental opposition to liberty and genuine human community. In the case of White, the focus is primarily on religious hierarchies—typified by the Roman

Catholic Church—that barter freedom of conscience for a kind of order and security. Her analysis of Catholicism is thus close to that of Dostoevsky in his "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The theme of *The Great Controversy*, however, is that of an essentially political insurrection in heaven. Satan has called into question the justice of God's government, which rests upon free and spontaneous love. He has attempted to set in its place a new order based upon the laws of merit and power. The world, then, is a proving ground for these two conflicting principles at work; human history is in fact the stage for a trial of cosmic significance: a trial of the law of power versus the law of love.

All political systems, founded as they are upon calculations of self-interest, merit, and coercive force, therefore tend toward the demonic and the tyrannical. Because "realism"—including bourgeois state capitalism as in the United States—leaves no place for relationships between peoples or nations based upon unmerited love or grace, the power and dominion of the state must ultimately stand as an idolatrous parody of God's kingdom and authority.

The attitude of the early Adventists toward the U.S. government was thus deeply subversive to say the least, though this subversive strain existed somewhat uneasily alongside other more patriotic declarations. Although generally avoiding direct confrontation with the "beast" and seeking to exemplify Christian love to its officials, nineteenth-century Adventists nevertheless urged defiance of the Fugitive Slave Law; refused to bear arms in the military; shunned public office and partisan politics; fought in the courts against compulsory public schooling; thundered against American imperialism in the Spanish-American War; and on occasion refused to salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance.

Biblical apocalyptic led the movement to a decidedly apolitical stance. Yet this very apoliticism proved a potent and anarchic challenge to the powers that be—not anarchic in the popular sense of disorder or chaos, but in the sense of an arche: no authority, no domination.

Beyond calling into question the power of the state, the Adventist pioneers likewise rejected the brutality and coercion implicit in the capitalist order. Their outlook might thus be described as libertarian socialist, with concern for individual freedom not leading to simplistic allegiance to market values, as may be found



among many conservative libertarians, but to a vision of distributive justice grounded in a theology of the Sabbath Jubilee.

Under the topics of “wealth” and “poverty,” the *Index of the Writings of Ellen White* contains almost twenty pages of citations—four times as many references as to Roman Catholicism. Many of these statements are in the spirit of the following passage from *Patriarchs and Prophets*:

The [Sabbatarian Jubilee] principles which God has enjoined, would prevent the terrible evils that in all ages have resulted from the oppression of the rich toward the poor and the suspicion and hatred of the poor toward the rich. While they might hinder the amassing of great wealth and the indulgence of unbounded luxury, they would prevent the consequent ignorance and degradation of tens of thousands whose ill-paid servitude is required to build up these colossal fortunes.

They would bring a peaceful solution to those problems that now threaten to fill the world with anarchy and bloodshed.”<sup>3</sup>

In the same chapter, White writes that there will always be a diversity of “temporal blessings” and that those who urge an absolute leveling of material possessions are mistaken in their zeal. But in opposition to the capitalistic values of regnant American Protestantism, she sees economic justice in terms of a well-known anarchist principle: the principle of solidarity. “We are all woven together in a great web of humanity,” White declares. “The law of mutual dependence runs through all classes of society.” The monopolistic accumulation of wealth by elite classes tends to “demoralize society and open the door to crimes of every description,” whereas God’s laws “were designed to promote social equality.”<sup>4</sup>

Much of White’s writing on the topic of education thus deals with the need for dignity in labor and the problems of alienation and exploitation associated with the division of society into managerial and menial classes. “We are not to do brain work and stop there, or make physical exertions and stop there,” she writes with regard to Adventist colleges, “but we are to make the very best use of the various parts composing the human machinery—brain, bone, and muscle, body, head, and heart.”<sup>5</sup>

Adventist communities, and Adventist schools in particular, were to model a kind of radical

egalitarianism based on the life and teachings of Jesus. “At the feet of Jesus,” White declares, all “distinctions are forgotten. The rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, meet together, with no thought of caste or worldly preeminence.” In practice, this meant that at Adventist schools honorific titles would not be used for teachers with advanced degrees.<sup>6</sup>

Students, teachers, and administrators would meanwhile work side by side as full partners in the quest for truth, both within and outside the classroom. Hence, for example, at the third biennial session of the Australasian Union Conference held at Avondale in 1899, delegates at the end of each day of meetings removed their coats and spent two hours performing manual labor alongside students.<sup>7</sup>

Through the nineteenth century and into the early part of the twentieth, we thus find a quiet but unmistakable current of anarchist thinking and practice among Seventh-day Adventists. Believers do not align themselves with any particular political party or movement but remain staunchly, sometimes stridently, pacifist, antinationalist, anticredal, and anticapitalist. They reject political and religious authoritarianism and any union of throne and altar. And they organize themselves in small fellowships and companies that largely disavow participation in the activities of the state while periodically agitating against the government when they perceive that vital liberties are at stake.

Like their Anabaptist forebears of the Radical Reformation, Adventists see themselves in fundamental tension with society and the state. Ultimately, they see themselves in confrontation with the United States, in particular, the dragon of John’s apocalypse who “doeth great wonders, so that he maketh fire come down from heaven on the earth, and deceiveth them that dwell on the earth by the means of those miracles” (Rev. 13–14 KJV).

With the preceding outline of Adventism’s anarchist connections in mind, we may now examine the religious and apocalyptic roots of Noam Chomsky’s particular anarchism.

According to Chomsky—considered the founder of modern linguistics and described by the *New York Times* as “arguably the most important intellectual alive”—the true story of the United States and its institutions of power is not one of ever-expanding freedom and liberty, but of greed, imperial aggression, terrorism, lawlessness, and increasing contempt for humanity, all masked by sophisticated mechanisms of

propaganda and thought control.

"We are hardly the first power in history to combine material interests, great technological capacity, and an utter disregard for the suffering and misery of the lower orders," Chomsky writes. "The long tradition of naiveté and self-righteousness that disfigures our intellectual history, however, must serve as a warning to the Third World, if such a warning is needed, as to how much our protestations of sincerity

to see," he writes. Concerned, marginal, and desperate people—"that's the milieu I want to be a part of." "[E]ver since I had any political awareness, I've felt either alone or part of a tiny minority." "I was always on the side of the losers."<sup>10</sup>

If it is not apparent to readers by now, these are not the words of an ivory tower intellectual, a mere social theorist, or even a political activist in any straightforward sense: these are the words of a Hebrew

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and benign intent are to be interpreted."<sup>8</sup> The United States, in Chomsky's analysis, is indeed unique among world empires in its ability to speak as a lamb while acting as a dragon.

In opposition to the American system, Chomsky describes his own values as left libertarian and anarcho-syndicalist. He envisions a society that would offer no privileged role to professional intellectuals or other select groups. Those whose labor primarily involves knowledge "would have no special opportunity to manage society, to gain any position of power and prestige by virtue of this special training and talent."<sup>9</sup>

Nor, in such an anarchist state, would individuals work exclusively with their minds but would participate with their hands in other forms of action essential to the good of the community—ideas that trace back to Chomsky's personal experience working on an Israeli kibbutz in the 1950s. Anarchism for Chomsky, then, does not imply lack of order but a different kind of order based upon radically communitarian values as well as unassailable personal freedoms.

Unlike Marx and other optimistic socialist and anarchist thinkers, however, Chomsky harbors few utopian illusions that the Good Society will be realized in the near future. Like apocalyptically minded Adventists, he sees America acting in only increasingly violent and intolerant ways as it strives to retain and expand its imperial privileges. Still, he believes, human beings, as free moral agents, can make a difference, and must try to make a difference, whether or not they succeed.

"[W]hile I expect that any worthwhile cause will achieve at best very limited success, and will quite probably largely fail, nevertheless there are accomplishments that give great satisfaction, however small they may be in the face of what one would like

prophet. This is not surprising considering Chomsky's personal background. Both of his parents were Russian Jewish emigrants who fled Czarist rule to America in 1913, and both eventually became teachers of Hebrew language at a religious school of the Mikveh Israel congregation in Philadelphia.

His father was a renowned scholar of medieval Hebrew grammar, and Chomsky was raised steeped in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish history and culture. He would later be immersed in the new ideas of various anarchist, libertarian, and Marxist writers in New York in the 1940s. In fact, Chomsky biographer Robert Barsky points out, these radical thinkers were not presenting new ideas at all: they were reviving the old Jewish Messianic faith and the well-known categories of biblical apocalyptic. "The libertarian movement used a new terminology for ancient Jewish ideas, which were near to the hearts of these young Jews."<sup>11</sup>

Its leaders were driven by an unflinching desire to conceive an alternative social order and not to accept the injustice of the prevailing order, with its powerful and revered institutions, as either permanent or necessary. They were not afraid to hold the American empire accountable to higher standards of freedom and equality than state capitalism allows. And they refused to compromise their dissent, even at great personal cost: they were jailed for "un-American" activities; they were expelled from universities and teaching posts; they were marginalized by their colleagues and peers; they were harassed and intimidated by the government; and they died in relative obscurity.

Yet it is groups such as these, along with Spanish peasant anarchists in the 1930s and radical Anabaptist



Christians like the Quakers, that Chomsky most identifies with—movements he sees in a long line of champions for freedom and liberty stretching most dramatically back to the Bible itself. There have always been two kinds of people, he writes: the commissars and the dissidents. In the Jewish faith:

The intellectuals who gained respect and honour were those who were condemned centuries later as the false prophets—the courtiers, the commissars. Those who came to be honoured much later as the Prophets received rather different treatment at the time. They told the truth about things that matter ranging from geopolitical analysis to moral values, and suffered the punishment that is meted out with no slight consistency to those who commit the sin of honesty and integrity.”<sup>12</sup>

In reply to a letter I sent him, Chomsky wrote that from his early childhood he has been deeply moved by the prophets, particularly his favorite, Amos of Tekoa. A consideration of Amos’s indictment of Israel reveals a number of striking similarities to Chomsky’s own analysis of the United States.

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In the time of Amos, the Kingdom of Israel had reached its zenith in material power and economic prosperity. The wealth and splendor of the North, however, was built upon corruption, exploitation, violence, and slavery. Hence, declared Amos, the nation’s ritual piety, its scrupulous Sabbath observance, was little more than a noxious affront to God. To those who “trample the heads of the poor into the dust of the earth” (Amos 2:7 RSV) the Lord vowed only lamentation and sackcloth. Insatiable and arrogant empire building was an affront to the moral law, and the prophet was filled with disgust for the military boots, for the mercenary hands dipped in blood.

Not surprisingly, Amos’s invectives pitted him against the political and religious establishment and the naïve and vulgar patriotism of his day. These corrupt minions of power rejected his message as intolerable and irresponsible and ordered him to “never prophesy at Bethel” again, “for it is the king’s sanctuary” (Amos 7:12-13 RSV). Because he had sided with the poor and downtrodden rather than with the state, he was played for a fool and reviled as a traitor.

Chomsky knows something of this kind of treatment. Widely acclaimed for the rigor and brilliance of his scientific, philosophical, and linguistic work (for which he has received countless awards and distinctions, including the 1988 Kyoto Prize, the Japanese equivalent of the Noble Prize) he is equally often attacked, reviled, or studiously ignored for his prolific political writing.

Mainstream publishing companies have refused to print his books; political science departments at leading universities will not teach his ideas (though his own Massachusetts Institute of Technology once taught a course attempting to discredit him); he has been jailed for his political activism; he was included on Richard Nixon’s personal “enemies list”; the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *National Public Radio* and *Television* all refuse to grant him print or air time; and more recently Lynne Cheney and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni have menacingly described him as a “weak link in America’s response to terror.”<sup>13</sup>

Most of Chomsky’s political work is thus published by Seven Story Press, an independent company begun by some of his former students, and by *Z Magazine*, an anarchist periodical with a modest circulation. In contrast to popular priests of America’s civil religion like Billy Graham, who sycophantically court the favor of America’s ruling elites, Chomsky—like the biblical prophets—is a prophet without honor.

It may seem to some readers that an anarchist reading of Seventh-day Adventism is anachronistic and untenable since the word *anarchism* did not exist in the mid-nineteenth century but came into usage at a later time. Many anarchists have also been violently opposed to Christianity, taking as their watchword the slogan, “No God, No Master.”

Furthermore, although Adventists may have questioned political and religious authoritarianism in

They might mine the writings of Ellen G. White and the Adventist founders for clues as to what an apocalyptic social ethic would look like. And they might read Noam Chomsky—a prophetic thinker who, unlike the early Adventists, is skeptical of the “American Dream” from its founding, but who, like the Adventist pioneers, refuses to invest the American empire with idolatrous prerogatives or permanency.

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others, the authoritarian, institutional, and hierarchical impulse within Adventism cannot be denied. Does this not invalidate any similarities between anarchy and apocalyptic?

Both Adventism and anarcho-syndicalism, I have shown, share similar concerns and affinities, and both have intellectual roots in the same biblical sources. The anarchist current within Christianity has often been weak or nonexistent. But the striking fact is that there is a Christian anarchism, and this anarchism has much to do with the apocalyptic beliefs of early Seventh-day Adventists.

The question therefore arises: what happened to the Adventist Church? The Anabaptist ethos of the pioneers has been lost in almost every area, but particularly with regard to the U.S. government and military. Instead of decrying American imperialism in prophetic language as evidence of the Beast at work, as they once did in response to America’s annexing of the Philippines, church leaders today decorate their offices with patriotic bunting and the national flag, praying all the while for God’s blessings on the U.S. military machine.<sup>14</sup> There was a time when loyalty to the American Dream meant not unthinking compliance with power, but vigorous activism and radical dissent. That day is gone.

Still, it may be that the spirit of early Adventism is not entirely lost, but merely submerged, waiting to be recovered. It might not be too late for Adventists to return to their firm foundation in anarcho-syndicalism. The question hinges on whether believers can find new ways of thinking about biblical apocalyptic that are also somehow old and true ways. They might begin by revisiting not only Daniel and Revelation, but also Amos, Isaiah, and the other prophets of the Hebrew Bible.

## Notes and References

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3. Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1958), 536.
4. *Ibid.*, 534–350.
5. Ellen G. White, “Counsel on Food, Manual Labor, and Voice Culture in SDA Schools,” *Manuscript Releases Volume Two*, page 221, paragraph 4. White’s concern for the evils of competitive rivalry in both labor and education, and her linking of the spirit of competition with the Great Controversy, are highlighted in Herbert Douglass’s *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1998), 349–51.
6. Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: 1940), 437. On the use of honorific titles, representative quotations can be found in Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1946), 131–35. See also, her *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 1:633, in which she criticizes even the use of “Mr.” and “Miss” instead of “Brother” and “Sister” at an Adventist health care institution.
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8. Noam Chomsky, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals,” *The Chomsky Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), 126.
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12. Noam Chomsky, *Powers and Prospects: Reflections on Human Nature and the Social Order* (London: Pluto Press, 1996), 62.
13. Howard Zinn, *Terrorism and the War* (New York: Seven Stories, 2002), 45–47; and “Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It,” <[www.goacta.org/publications/reports.html](http://www.goacta.org/publications/reports.html)>.
14. See Ronald Osborn, “A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists in Times of War,” <[www.adventistpeace.org](http://www.adventistpeace.org)>.

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