

A Few Words with Walter | BY BENJAMIN McARTHUR

Editor's Note: Pacific Press has recently released a new book, *No Peace for a Soldier*, which Walter C. Utt, former Pacific Union College history professor, started before his death and Southern Adventist University associate English professor Helen Pyke later completed. The significance of the book is highlighted in this excerpted imaginary conversation that Benjamin McArthur created for the inaugural Walter C. Utt Lecture, on April 16, 1998.

It was only a few weeks ago, as I was working late one evening in my Irwin Hall office, that I had an experience so extraordinary that I haven't mentioned it to anyone—until now. As I was finishing up some student papers I had promised to have graded by the next class, the tasks of the day started finally to wear at me. Losing concentration on the essays, my mind wandered from this to that, and I decided to lay my head on the desk for a quick nap. But hardly had I moved the papers aside when I heard steps in the outer chamber of the office. I lifted my head in time to see a carefully groomed, middle-aged man leaning on two canes, peering around the corner of the door. He wore a wry smile that suggested he shared a joke I wasn't onto yet. "You're Keith Francis?" he inquired.

"No," I replied, "This is his office, but he's on leave and I'm using it presently."

"And who are you?" he continued.

"My name is Ben McArthur. I'm a visiting professor, the Walter Utt Visiting Professor of History."

My mysterious visitor seemed amused by this bit of information.

"Well, is this some new custom our colleges have taken up, hiring contract teachers at budget rates and attaching the names of long-gone professors to dignify the practice?"

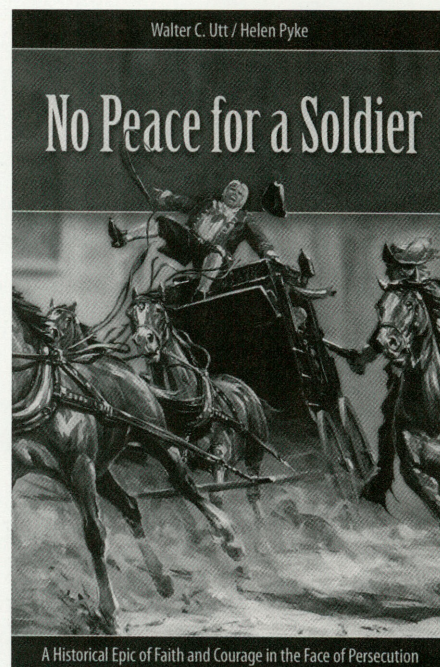
"Not at all," I replied, feeling a defensiveness creeping into my voice.

"I'm being paid a salary I only wish I were receiving at my home institution. Furthermore, friends of Dr. Utt raised an impressive sum of money to fund this chair, aided by a sizeable grant from the college."

My reply seemed momentarily to stun my midnight caller, and his manner softened; he appeared genuinely affected by the news.

"I've always enjoyed friends whose generosity far exceeded anything I merited," he replied at last. "To imagine they would do such a thing for the history department in my honor is..."

"In your honor?" I interrupted. Things were becoming stranger than I liked, and I don't even watch "X-Files." I considered pinching myself to make sure I was awake, but the thought seemed too clichéd



to merit action. "You are Walter Utt?" I responded weakly.

"Yes. Now don't get all concerned about it. I occasionally stroll the halls of Irwin late at night, purely for old time's sake. I've never even gone into an office before tonight, when I saw the door ajar. I had no idea about what had been going on."

I finally got my wits enough about me to invite my guest, the one without whom I would never have made my visit here, to take a chair. I could

Benjamin McArthur chairs the History Department at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. In 1997–98, he was the Walter C. Utt professor of history at Pacific Union College, where this interview was originally presented.

tell that prolonged standing was a labor for him.

"Where's your home?" he asked after settling uncomfortably into the red vinyl padded chair.

"Southern Adventist University."

"Oh. I didn't realize we had another university. Is that a branch of Andrews or Loma Linda?"

"No. It's the school in Collegedale. You knew it as Southern Missionary College, or perhaps Southern College."

"Yes. A university you say."

"Don't ask me to explain."

"Now, isn't Collegedale the place where they make the cupcakes?"

"That's snack cakes, Yes, the Little Debbies. It's an impressive factory, helps our local tax base."

Amidst this chit-chat, I suddenly realized I had an opportunity to inquire about something I assumed I would never know. "You are the only trained historian in our church, so far as I recall, who devoted great energy to producing young adult historical fiction. How was it, with your ambitions for scholarship, and unrelenting teaching loads, that you took up that task?"

"Professor McArthur, can you think of a more important group to endow with the pleasure and instruction of history than the young?"

"No," I admitted. "But what would the history faculty at Berkeley think if they knew one of their PhDs lavished research time over such tales for children?"

"I know what they ought to think. They ought to think that if more professional historians worried about reaching the general public with narrative history of some appeal instead of one more technical monograph of

interest to perhaps eight other specialists in the world then maybe our profession wouldn't have lost the reading public to the Gore Vidals of the world."

"I agree entirely," I responded. "I admire your efforts along these lines. I recently read to my daughter both *The Wrath of the King* and *Home to Our Valleys*. And one of our best history majors back at Southern told me not long ago that he had read your works when he was young and they were among his favorites."

"I'm pleased to hear it," Dr. Utt responded. "You send a book out and often never learn whether it touches anyone. You know," he continued, "virtually every scene and even much of the dialogue is based on research. It may look like another swashbuckling historical romance, but it's solid history."

As I pondered these two popular histories of the Huguenot travail under Louis XIV, it occurred to me that its author wasn't speaking just to a juvenile audience. He was attempting to challenge the Adventist Church. His account of how many prosperous Huguenots were willing to surrender their property and lives for an unpopular faith could be read as an allegory of God's remnant in the last days, a remnant we like to think will be disproportionately Adventist.

Can we recognize ourselves in that harried and martyred band of Frenchmen? Or is similar persecution so unthinkable that we feel no kinship? Shouldn't all seventh-grade teachers in our schools be reading these books to their students?

I was getting too worked up in my own thoughts. I decided to have some

fun and bait Dr. Utt about the anti-Catholicism that some might find in his novels. "You know Walter, your portrayal of intolerant and persecuting Catholics wouldn't play well in the more progressive corners of Adventist society today. Would you change some of that now?"

For a moment, I appeared to catch him off guard. "This wasn't a controversial issue in the sixties and early seventies," he admitted, "but I never thought of myself as a Catholic basher. In my Western Civilization lectures I think I made great efforts to give the mother church its due in nurturing Western civilization. Furthermore, the most despicable people in my histories are the mercenary Protestants who became informers and spies. In any event, to ignore the travesties of any people or institutions for the sake of good manners defeats the instructive possibilities of history. An education is neither more sophisticated nor more civil by virtue of a selective memory."

Dr. Utt had spoiled my fun, but I wouldn't let go. "Still," I was rubbing my hands in anticipation of a quandary I thought I was presenting the good professor. "Your book could be used by David Mould and his cronies in their antipapal diatribes. You could be quoted in underground pamphlets circulated in odd Adventist corners from coast to coast, about persecutions behind and ahead of us, adding fuel to the already considerable fire of conspiracy theories in the Church." I knew this would get a rise out of him.

"These conspiracy nuts will be the death of our Church," he intoned solemnly. "I will never do anything to further their wild-eyed notions, and if I see myself quoted in one of their

divisive publications, I will take immediate action."

He calmed down after this bit of venting and began to reflect on the subject.

"It's a genuine dilemma, these conspiracy theories, I mean. Historians recognize that a view of reality that finds major events being orchestrated by a cabal of conspirators is almost always wrong. It's not conspiracy but incompetence and failure by our leaders to anticipate the contingencies of life that ought to concern us. On the other hand, we have to acknowledge a fact about Adventism. The eschatology at the heart of our belief system nurtures conspiratorial thinking. When we anticipate betrayal and persecution in our future, we are apt to find it in spades. It was no different with the Huguenots. During difficult times, they lived within a constant web of suspicion and rumor."

"But we are nowhere close to persecution at the present time," I countered. "Isn't the obsession with conspiracy theories more an indulgence in a sort of paranoid scapegoating than anything else?"

"There's lot of that, certainly," Walter retorted, "but there is also an ineffable sadness in the apparent vulnerability people feel. It's not just—or even primarily—an Adventist problem. Conspiracy mongering permeates American life. Many people seem to live in an atmosphere of vulnerability. It breeds suspicion and aborts clear thought. Given the situation when social tensions are relatively few, what might one expect if the wheels truly started to come off our society? What would be the atmosphere within and without the Church should the expected 'end of time'

events begin to unfold?"

"It could get ugly," I conceded. I had never before considered that the American penchant for unwarranted suspicions lent plausibility to apocalyptic scenarios.

But what I found most intriguing about Dr. Utt's historical novels was their insight into the internal dynamics of the Huguenots when they were under stress. Our Great Controversy image is of a people simple in faith and single-minded in their resolve. He told a more complex story.

"Professor Utt, the Huguenots you describe violate my idea of God's tender-hearted chosen people. These folk bicker among themselves, calculate the costs of faithfulness, even betray one another to the authorities. Then when they campaign to win back their homes in the Piedmont valley, they brutally slaughter soldiers and civilians alike. This following some of the most heartfelt prayers one can imagine."

Walter put on a quizzical look. "You're an historian?" he asked. "You apparently haven't read the Old Testament lately, let alone histories of the Puritans or other Calvinist groups. Piety and violence are frequent bedfellows, and we confront the limits of human understanding when we try to resolve this paradox."

"Might we not say that the Huguenots confused a human desire for their homeland with divine permission for retribution on those who opposed them?" I suggested. "After all, there has been no greater abuse in history than religion misused to sanction the oppression of others."

"Oh?" Walter's eyebrows raised a bit at my pronouncement. "Let me refer you again to some more history, specif-

ically the twentieth century's unparalleled totalitarian violence, whose inspiration was overtly secular. Certainly religion has engendered moments of sublime evil, but I think a more accurate accounting would find violence usually bound up with other motives."

I had to admit I had fallen victim to the oft-repeated canard about religion's ill effects. But there was one last point about his second book, *Home to Our Valleys*, that intrigued me. "Your conclusion was not the typical 'happy ending' we expect in our books. I had anticipated that the Huguenots would with God's help have overcome the Catholic menace and found contentment in the ancestral home. Instead, you tell a story of incomplete victory, obtained as much by the political maneuverings of Europe's great powers as by their own efforts. The future still seemed uncertain for the noble Protestant band."

"But isn't that the way of history?" Dr. Utt responded. "There are few real 'endings.' We see momentary resolutions to problems, the only promise being that the challenge will return later in a slightly different form. The experience of God's people has been no different. Israel's victory over the Canaanites was never complete; dangers always lurked. We mistake God's purposes, I think, if we expect the kind of final judgments within history that can only happen at the end of time." ■