

Exile and Responsibility: A Perspective on the Seventh-day Adventist Church's Exilic Calling | BY ABI DOUKHAN

As Seventh-day Adventists, we are called to be witnesses to another reality. We recognize that this world is not our home and that we are waiting for another order. Such is the destiny contained in our very name—*Adventist*. We are the people of the Advent, the people who wait for the ushering in of a new era or order. We are, essentially, a people in exile, strangers in this world wherein we have made it our destiny to wait and hope for another reality. Our hope is thus connected to our exile. It is our very condition of exile, our sense of alienation, of not-belonging in this world which fosters our hope in a better world. Thus, our identity is not just that of a people of hope, but essentially, and primordially that of a people in exile.

The question remains, however, as to how we are to live this exile. Is this exile a call to separate ourselves from the world, to distinguish ourselves from its hopes and aspirations? Are we simply to live detached lives from the world, separate and exiled from the world, whilst doing our best to prepare ourselves for our hope? Or is our exile rather to be experienced from within the world? Does our exile mean a separation from the world; or does it point, on the contrary, to a responsibility for the well-being of this world, to a work of reparation of the world? How are we, as a Church, to live our exile? What is to be the meaning of our exile; and more importantly, what is to be our *calling* as an exiled people?

Indeed, exile as a calling can already be found throughout the Scriptures. I would like, however, to focus on one particular passage, Peter's first epistle. This article will show that this epistle speaks to two facets of the exile of the Christian church. The first one is that of exile as a *calling* to come out of the world, to separate oneself from the world, to be *ex-iled*. This calling does not constitute a form of escapism or of detachment or

indifference to the matters of this world, but, on the contrary, signifies towards a *responsibility* for the world. Which brings us to the second facet of exile as responsibility. The exile's calling to responsibility would thus entail that he or she remain *within* the world, that he or she has a central role to play there.

Exile as a Calling

To God's elect: strangers in the world (1 Peter 1:1)

IN THIS PASSAGE, it is possible to observe a direct connection between the believer's election and his or her exile in the world. Election is here intrinsically connected to the status of the believer as a stranger or exile in the world. And indeed, exile can be seen, throughout the Scriptures, as a form of election, as a sign of discipleship to God. Already, Abraham, the first believer, was called by God into a form of exile. The first Hebrew was defined as a stranger in the land, as would be his entire offspring. In the Hebrew context, exile is seen as a calling away from the stability and comforts of idolatry towards an invisible and unpredictable God. Exile thus presents a necessary step towards encountering God. It constitutes a veritable experience of initiation to discipleship and to the Hebrew faith.

This initiation by exile was again manifest in the gospels. Just like God called Abraham to a life of exile, Jesus calls His disciples to a life of exile. To follow Jesus means to forsake all earthly attachments and abodes and to follow the one who Himself has no home. We are reminded here of Jesus' answer to a potential follower: "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the son of man has no place to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20). To follow Jesus necessitates the courage to "leave the nets behind" and to engage in a journey unto the unknown. And indeed, just as Abraham did not know where he

was going, Jesus' disciples were to go forward in faith without knowing where they were going and what was to happen. Exile was for them the ultimate experience of initiation to the Christian faith.

We are thus, as believers, elected to a destiny of exile in the world, called to be separate, to be different from the world around us. We are called to be in the world but not of the world. The question remains, however, as to what this means? Is this calling of exile to lead us away from the world? What kind of separation is here meant by the exile? Does this exile mean that we are to remain separate from the world in a way that takes away our involvement in the world? Is this exile to be lived as a form of escapism, as a form of indifference to the matters of the world? Such was indeed the Greek conception of exile. For the Greeks, exile was seen as a lesser condition, as a curse, that was to be overcome by detachment from the material world and an ever-increasing preoccupation with the spiritual realm. Is this the kind of exile that we are called to live?

The direction taken by our text is an interesting and surprising one. While the exile of the Christian does constitute a conscious act of separation from the world, it does not entail an evasion of our responsibilities to this world, nor an indifference to the matters of the world. On the contrary, our text forgoes all escapism and indifference and connects exile with an attitude of responsibility towards the world. We shall see that Peter's epistle engages us to a dual responsibility: an ethical responsibility and a religious responsibility.

Exile as Responsibility

I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world...to live such good lives and to glorify God. (1 Peter 2: 12–13)

IN THIS PASSAGE, the condition of exile—of being aliens and strangers in the world—is not associated with an attitude of quietism and indifference but entails a double responsibility: The responsibility to “live such good lives” and to “glorify God.” Exile is not just a static condition that we must endure until things get better as it was for the Greeks. Our condition of exile is understood in this passage as a dynamic condition, as containing a calling, a destiny, a vocation. There must be, according to this passage, an orientation to our exile, a meaning, a sense to it. It is not to be lived as an absurd and tran-

sient condition that we have to endure until the kingdom comes. Such is again the Greek conception of exile. Exile for the Greeks was a decadent state, a lesser state that had no value in itself but had to be overcome by a return to one's divine origin. This conception of exile as a negative and transient state is not the understanding of this passage. Exile, according to this passage has a value in itself, it has a calling of its own: To live “good lives” and to “glorify God.” But we must now better understand these two orientations of our exile.

To Live Such Good Lives

OUR CONDITION AS aliens and exiles must be understood not as a lesser form of being, but as a call to “live good lives.” The life of the exile is not a life of nostalgia for a paradise lost but a life entirely grounded in existence and dedicated to doing good. Exile entails a call for ethics. Our exile has an ethical connotation, that of a doing good, of a responsibility for the matters of the world. Interestingly, for us, the text emphasizes here the need for *action*. Too often, our contribution as exiles in the world has been limited to a verbal testimony of a better reality, of another order or kingdom. We feel, as citizens of that other order, called to *speak* of that new order. Thus, we speak of a soon-coming judgment, whereby the oppressed will be delivered, justice will be rendered to them and their oppressors will be overcome. We speak of a soon-coming re-creation, whereby the environment will again be restored to its original state of beauty and purity. We feel that our responsibility as exiles is to testify, to speak of our hope of a better world.

Our passage, however, does not talk of *speaking* but of *doing*. The destiny of the exiled is to *live* a certain way, is to take an ethical stance in this world and not just speak of a better world. As exiles, we are called to be more than speakers of hope, we are called to *enact* our hope. To *do* good would signify here working concretely for the making of a better world: to actively work for justice, for the environment, for peace, and not limit ourselves to speaking about it. Only in this way would we become genuine imitators of Jesus who did not simply *speak* of another kingdom, but enacted it: healing the sick, raising the dead, feeding the hungry, and delivering the oppressed. The calling of exile resides in this enactment of our hope. As a stranger in the world, the Christian has a calling: not to escape and separate himself or herself from the world, but to work within the world and for the world; to enact the

hope that he or she is waiting for.

This enactment raises, however, a number of objections: was not this idea that we can work towards a better world, that we can enact our hope for a better world, precisely the temptation and pitfall of secular humanistic philosophy? Indeed, the making of a better world was precisely the dream of humanism. The idea that we, as a human race, could enact our hopes of a better world, could work out our own redemption, was the leitmotif of the Enlightenment and humanist project. Is the text posing such a philosophy, which, incidentally has completely failed us? Indeed, the two world wars have forever snuffed out the humanist dream of our successfully working out our salvation and making for a better world. As Barth pointed out in his essay on 19th century theology: "Modern man can no longer impress us." The humanist project is forever destroyed by the events of the two world wars. Human solidarity, we now know, will never bring about the kingdom of God. Why then does the text exhort us, nevertheless, to engage in a doing, in ethical action and engagement within the world? The answer is found in the second part of our passage.

To Glorify God

CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH the importance of living "good lives" is the injunction to "glorify God." For our passage, the two are closely connected. The impulse for living a good life must be understood in the light of this second proposition: "to glorify God." The question that arises, however, pertains to the meaning of "to glorify." Indeed, such a word must first be defined if we are to understand the why of an ethical engagement in the world. To glorify comes from the Greek *doxa* which has the connotation of brightness and of light. To glorify can be associated with shedding light upon, with bringing light to. To glorify God amounts to revealing Him, to shedding light upon His presence.

In our text, this revelation, this glorifying of God is however intimately connected to our living good lives. It is as if God's presence were revealed through our deeds. To glorify God, to reveal His presence, does not consist in describing who God is, but in the enactment of godly deeds. Indeed, no words can come close enough to describing a God, who Himself, escapes all definition. Genuine testimony to God, according to our passage, does not reduce God to a verbal definition such as: "God is

love," but reveals Him indirectly through *deeds* of love. And indeed, the proposition "God is love" cannot be grasped outside of these deeds of love which give meaning and denotation to that phrase. Without the human deed of love, there would not even be a concept of love and, by extension, of a loving God. Authentic testimony, glorification of God passes, according to our text, through human actions, through loving deeds.

We now better understand the *raison d'être* of living a good life, of acts of responsibility towards the world. Although we realize that these acts of responsibility can never solve the ills of the world, can never bring about the kingdom of God; they retain their significance inasmuch as they testify to the *possibility* of such a kingdom; inasmuch as they glorify, or reveal, God in the world. And indeed, without these acts of responsibility, without a concrete working towards justice and environmental restoration, we would not even have a concept of what judgment and restoration mean. Our message—which precisely revolves around these two concepts—would have no meaning, no denotation. People would not understand what we are talking about. These actions are thus the only tangible signs of the kingdom of God. They serve as a trace, a sign of another reality, of another order. Acts of responsibility do not solve the world's problems, but they kindle our hope. Without them, there would be no sign, no evidence that another reality is even possible. We would not even have the concept of an alternative and would be left to a dark, oppressive reality.

Far from occulting God's action and redemptive work, our concrete acts of responsibility pave the way to this redemptive work; they signify towards it. Indeed, it is these very acts which give meaning and strength to our hope. Without them, our hope would remain unintelligible and feeble. Environmental, political, and social actions, whereby our solidarity with the plight of nature and humans is affirmed, are the only tangible signs of the kingdom to come and of the future redemptive actions of God. In this sense, although it does not resolve the problem, human solidarity opens a window of hope in a world which would otherwise sink into despair. Human solidarity is the only testimony to the possibility of the kingdom of God and, it is in this sense, that it "glorifies God." It shines in the world as an incomprehensible, absurd, unexplainable, and infinitely fragile light pointing us to another kingdom and to a God who otherwise would remain hidden.

Exile as a *Calling*

THE TEMPTATION OF exile is always escapism—it is a common mode of survival within an alien and threatening world. The temptation of the exiled is always to escape to another reality; it is always the temptation of other-worldliness. The exiled dreams of a better world; he or she tells stories of that world in an attempt to forget the pains of exile, the surrounding threats of the alien world he or she is now condemned to live in. But thereby the exiled is only trying to numb his or her exile and to forget it through pleasant dreams and stories. On the contrary, the first epistle of Peter serves to remind us that exile is a *calling*. It was the calling of Jesus; and it is our calling today. Only by assuming this exile will we again share Jesus' burden of carrying and caring for the world. Only by recovering its exilic condition, will our church again become a haven for the oppressed of the world, for the poor, the marginalized. Only then will it again keep the commandment of old: "You shall welcome the stranger as you yourselves were strangers in Egypt" (Deut.). And only then will the ultimate Stranger, the ultimate Other, God, find a home within our world. ■

Abi Doukhan earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Paris X-Nanterre with a focus on ethics and philosophy of religion. She is currently teaching philosophy at Elon University, Elon, North Carolina.

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gestions were made from the floor. During the months that followed, we continued to entertain new ideas from anyone. Eventually the statement, with some changes from the Spring Meeting draft, went to the Annual Council where it was adopted with strong support.

Q: *How and why has the church changed its approach to world religions? How is the new policy impacting the work of Adventist pastors on the ground?*

A: I see the roadmap as solidly in the line of Adventist mission from the earliest days of our history. We are a distinct people with a distinct message to give to the world: we believe that Jesus Christ is coming again soon; and we invite everyone to join us in proclaiming this good news. The roadmap reiterates this under-

standing in the context of today's church, where we are now a significant player on the world scene. In the past, our engagement with the world religions has been slight, with foreign workers taking the lead. Now we have national leadership at every level of the church. The roadmap challenges everyone to get involved: it calls on administrators to refocus funding for the development of experts in understanding and appreciating the scriptures of other religions, and so on. This is really not a new approach; rather, it is a call to more thoroughgoing mission in light of the times and the modern Seventh-day Adventist church. The roadmap was voted only last November; it is too soon to speak about its impact.

Q: *What is the future of the church and interfaith relations? What are your own hopes and dreams?*

A: I think that by putting his weight behind interfaith relations, Dr. Paulsen has made a major and lasting contribution to the task of Adventist mission. The Adventist church must not turn back. We are here; in ever-increasing numbers, we are here. We have a message of hope and a lifestyle that people everywhere need to hear about. We should seize every opportunity to meet with government and religious leaders—up to the very highest levels. We should be open, honest, and genuine, commending our message by the grace and friendliness we bring to the table.

Three years along, I have been amazed at the way in which Muslims in high—and some very high—positions have received me. I have been surprised by their deep appreciation as I have shared who we are and what we are about. Their kindness, lavish hospitality, and friendship give the lie to the stereotypes and myths that too many Americans, Adventists included, have bought into. Interfaith work has opened up new vistas in my experience. It can do the same for the whole church, helping to make us a more tolerant and loving people. ■

William Johnsson was editor of the *Adventist Review* from 1982–2006 and has written over twenty books and 1,000 articles. He is currently the assistant to the president for interfaith relations at the General Conference.

Rachel Davies is a member of *Spectrum's* web team and is the youth and children's pastor at the Toledo, Ohio, First Seventh-day Adventist Church.