

## From Montevideo to the New Jerusalem: Herold Weiss's Rediscovery of Apocalyptic | BY ROY BRANSON

A review of *Finding My Way in Christianity: Recollections of a Journey* by Herold Weiss (Gonzalez, FL: Energion Publications, 2010).

It is 1968 in Southwestern Michigan. Herold Weiss, teaching Old Testament Theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, sits across from Richard Hammill, President of Andrews University. Herold tells President Hammill that he does not think that the first chapter of Genesis is trying to argue that the earth was created a certain number of years ago. Weiss pleads for the academic freedom to teach that Genesis, chapters one and two, are theological documents affirming that God has created everything that is. He is taken aback when President Hammill, an Old Testament scholar who has known and mentored him since he was a college freshman, begins to cry. They agree to resume their conversation later. When they convene a second time to discuss whether or not Hammill will tell the incoming president of the Adventist Church that Weiss can remain a professor at the Seminary, Weiss is the one who is overwhelmed emotionally and breaks down crying. In the end, Hammill does tell the General Conference President that Weiss deserves to remain teaching at Andrews. But at the end of that 1968-1969 school year, Weiss leaves the Seminary faculty. He moves 20 miles down the road to join the religion faculty of St Mary's College, a Catholic school affiliated with Notre Dame University, where he had a distinguished career.

For Adventist readers these scenes are the emotional heart of *Finding My Way in Christianity: Recollections of a Journey*. Herold Weiss was a formidable presence at the SDA Theological Seminary. With a solid frame, a hearty personality and a booming voice, Weiss galvanized classes by saying what he believed—bluntly and passionately. Some students hated what he said; others loved him. All respected him for being authentic—at a time when authenticity reigned as one of the very highest of virtues. This book tells the story of the man who came to Andrews and left

it—a man who has since become even more proud of his Seventh-day Adventist beliefs than he was before.

Weiss's memoir is an Adventist pilgrim's progress, and gives us a glimpse of a great Adventist clan—one of many whose sagas deserve to be told and retold—for example, the Oliveiras of Brazil, the Hassos of Iraq, the Wilsons of America, the Maxwells and Murdochs of Britain. He points out several times that his maternal grandparents, the Rifels, in 1898 established the first Seventh-day Adventist congregation in South American in their home. Evening devotions in Montevideo were dominated by studying the Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly, “undoubtedly,” he declares, “the most important formative element in the denomination” (13). Listening to relatives recount stories of missionary work up and down the Amazon, Weiss made a characteristic Adventist commitment to be a missionary. From his teen years through his doctoral program at Duke University, Weiss understood himself to be preparing to return to the Amazon to translate the Bible into the languages of the tribes along its banks.

Looking back, Weiss introduces every stage of his pilgrimage, with variations of the same refrain. “There was no doubt that God's hand kept opening doors for me” (101). He attended what is now Southern Adventist University, enrolled at the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary, studied the New Testament at Duke, received an invitation to be a visiting professor at Andrews University, and pastored a Spanish Adventist congregation in New York City.

Weiss's first internal crisis came during his doctoral studies at Duke University. Studying how to analyze the New Testament, Weiss became convinced that he must understand the Bible within its historical context, specifically the ideas, concepts and symbols of the time in which it was written. But what, then, to do with apocalyptic books such as *Revelation*, so filled with metaphors and symbols of the

ancient Near East and so central to Adventism? “The struggle within me was quite intense.” Indeed, he was “being torn apart” (117).

One answer Weiss found at Duke persists to this day: participating in the life of a local Seventh-day Adventist congregation. In Durham, the pastor often invited Weiss to preach on Sabbath, reminding him that the parishioners were not graduate students. He devotes a whole chapter to his three years pastoring a small Spanish SDA Church in Manhattan. While finishing his doctoral dissertation, Weiss translated for poorly educated parishioners at immigration and labor proceedings, advised them about the education of their children, and negotiated peace among warring street gangs.

When he arrived at Andrews University to teach, Weiss was one of the founders, then building manager, Sabbath School teacher and first elder of the Spanish Seventh-day Adventist Church in Berrien Springs, Michigan. For the last 37 years, this mixture of migrant farm workers, graduate students, immigrants and professors, has been Weiss’s “congregational home.”

**T**he second time in his life when Weiss says that his “inner self felt torn,” as it had at Duke, was when he was “severing his professional ties with the denomination.” The latter part of the memoir shares how Weiss has progressed—as a person of faith, as a Christian, as a Seventh-day Adventist.

One affirmation important to Adventists that has expanded in Weiss’s thinking is the doctrine of creation. Not only does God create the whole individual person—body, mind and spirit, but God is the creator of communities of persons—the creator of “the cultural achievements of the human race” (175). Weiss has come to connect the resurrection of persons to God’s ongoing creative power to create civilization, to inspire “the imagination, creativity, the vision of the beautiful, the need to lift one’s existence to the realm of the spiritual” (176).

Since leaving the SDA Theological Seminary, Weiss has produced the most complete historical and literary analysis ever written of the richly distinctive theologies of the Sabbath found in the four gospels and the writings of Paul. *A Day of Gladness: The Sabbath Among Jews and Christian in Antiquity* (University of South Carolina Press, 2003) is the scholarly achievement that lies behind Weiss’s affirmation in his memoir that “I still retain a particular appreciation for the Sabbath as a tangible metaphor of the connection that

humans must have with the source of life . . . the Sabbath is an incomparable gift . . . a compass that points both to the past and the future as a remembrance and an anticipation of God’s purposes.” He places the Sabbath in the category of worship, where its seventhness has a particular meaning. “Human beings give significance to their lives when they mimetically repeat divine archetypal acts . . . My neighbor and I just happen to pay attention to two different and very specific acts of God.” Worship on the seventh day celebrates God’s resting on the seventh day. Worship on Sunday honors God’s raising Christ on Easter Sunday” (214–215).

In his last chapter, Weiss expands on perhaps the most important direction he has taken as a believer, a Christian and an Adventist: rediscovering the power of biblical apocalyptic. His memoir, he says, is not an autobiography; it is a narrative making an argument: “We are in need of transforming our apocalyptic visions” (227). For too long, Weiss declares, fundamentalist Christians have constricted apocalyptic visions in books like *Revelation* to signposts of the End Times. Simultaneously, other mainstream Christians have separated Jesus from apocalyptic.

Weiss had confronted that possibility at Duke. But now a “transformed” apocalyptic has become for him not a crisis but a conviction. All Christians must realize the centrality of apocalyptic. After all, “the death and the resurrection of Christ was an apocalyptic cosmic event” (227). If Christians appreciate the apocalyptic vision of the Bible, they can share in its confidence that evil is weaker than good and that God’s peace and justice will triumph. Weiss says in the penultimate sentence of the book, his purpose in writing his memoir was “to be an agent of peace” (228).

Some analysts of the Seventh-day Adventist community emphasize those born into Adventist families who ride the escalator of education and professional recognition out of the church. Weiss is one of those many, often overlooked members who love their Adventist community so much they insist on expanding and enriching its vision. ■

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