

Adventist Identity in a Postmodern World | BY REINDER BRUINSMA

The following is based on a lecture presented during the Church and Adventist Identity in the 21st Century Conference, at Avondale University in Cooranbong, Australia, on January 16–18, 2011.

Through the centuries, some simple but profound questions have been asked: Who am I? Where do I come from; for what purpose do I live? Will I continue to exist after I die? How is a human being different from other living creatures? Or, is he or she really different?

What is it that makes me different from you? Is it my body shape, my face, my voice, that makes me a unique me and no one else? Or, are there other things that determine who I am? We may agree that humans differ from everything else that exists, and that they differ from each other—

but does that also apply to the specific social group, or groups, to which we belong? I may be unique, but is that also true for the group(s) in which I participate? All these questions may be summarized in one fundamental question: *What is identity—individual identity and corporate identity?*

Many definitions have been given. Most of these stress that identity is a definition, an interpretation of yourself that tells you who you are, socially and psychologically. One definition explains that identity is “the distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity.”¹ Another says, “In philosophy, identity (also called sameness) is whatever makes an entity definable and recognizable, in terms of possessing a set of qualities or characteristics that distinguish it from entities of a different type. Or, in layman's terms: “*Identity is whatever makes something the same or different.*”² A social scientist, Vivienne Jabri, points out that the identity of an individual is not static, but is a developing framework that is based on the communication, back and forth, between the individual and his or her social milieu.³

To put it in very simple terms: a person has an identity, because he or she has certain unique characteristics that stay with that individual throughout his or her entire life. But things seem to be a bit more complicated. A person may suffer from a serious mental disorder, and that may require some refinement of these definitions of identity. And the Christian will pose the question of whether his identity can persist through death. The definitions just given will, however, suffice for the time being and will guide us.

It is clear that our identity is not something that can be fully described on the basis of objective analysis and empirical studies. It is very much a matter of *perception*: how others perceive us, and how we *perceive* ourselves. In other words: it is first of all a matter of our *self-concept*. That, by the way, is not the same as our *self-consciousness*. We are

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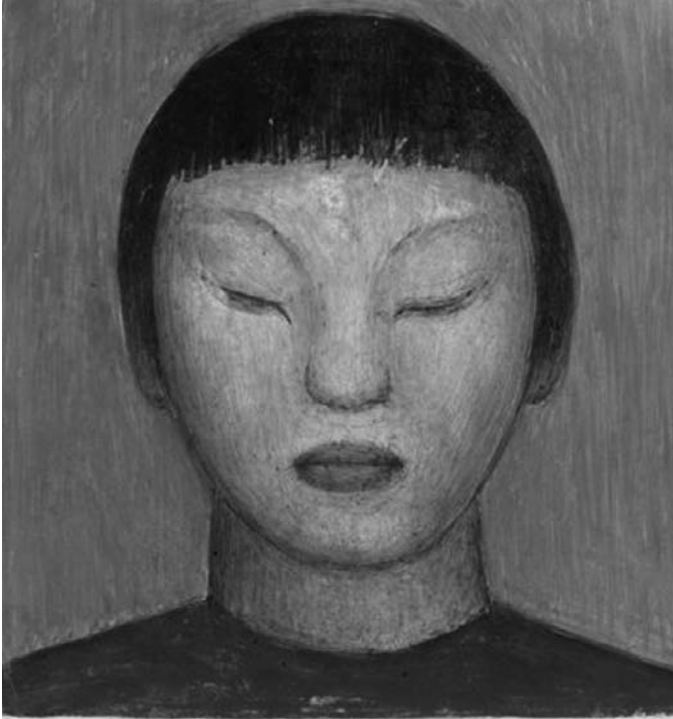


aware of the fact that we exist as conscious beings. The identity question is: *As what kind of beings* do we see ourselves? Here, we touch on such issues as self-image and self-esteem. What we “see” may cause us to be quite happy, or, on the contrary, to be disappointed or even disgusted with ourselves. There may be moments when we feel that some basic elements of our identity are at risk, or we may face developments that make us uncertain or even frighten us. This may lead to an identity crisis: a fear that we have no clear identity or are losing our identity. Tahmina Rashid, an associate professor in international

studies at the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra, Australia, made this helpful comment:

Identity is self-definition and confers a sense of self or personhood, usually found in daily interactions and public discourse and is a continuously evolving process of negotiation, not a rigid entity. Identity turns on the interrelated problems of self-recognition and recognition by others. It's not a harmonious process as there remains a tendency to underestimate the struggle involved in forging identities and the tension inherent in the fact that most of us have multiple, incomplete, fragmented, even conflicting identities.⁴

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We will return to a number of the issues hinted at in this quotation. But before we do so, it must be stated that the concept of identity does not only refer to the individual person. Just as an individual possesses an identity, which sets him or her apart from others, it is generally accepted that a group of persons, small or large, has certain specific characteristics that set the group apart in such a defining way that we may speak of a *corporate* identity. Most of what Rashid says about personal identity applies in a similar way to corporate identity. And, we should add: just as an individual may experience doubts about his identity or may face an identity crisis, so a social group or institution may struggle with defining its identity, or fear that it is at risk of losing its identity, or suffer from an identity crisis.

In this introduction to our subject, we do well to list a few of the core elements of individual and corporate identity. They are listed without an attempt to assign any order of importance:

- **Gender.** Most of us are either male or female. Although the roles of males and females have changed considerably in recent times, being a man or a woman, or experiencing oneself as having a particular gender, is an important aspect of our identity.
- **Sexual orientation.** Whether one is heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual may for many be one of the defining aspects of his or her identity.

- **Ethnicity or race.** In many cases, this is an important aspect in determining one's identity. Being African or Chinese, being white or black, or being of mixed descent, etc., may to a large extent determine one's self-concept. The same may be said about "belonging" to a certain geographical region, or being a member of a particular tribe, or speaking a particular language.
- **Nationality.** This is a relatively new aspect of human identity, since the modern nation state, as we now know it, dates only from the eighteenth century. But today, people define themselves as Australian or Dutch, Japanese or South African. How important this aspect is in relationship to the other factors that were mentioned above will differ from person to person. World history has repeatedly shown that ethnic, racial, or cultural identity may clash with, or supersede, national identity, which may lead to catastrophic consequences.
- **Religion.** This has always been, and for many people still is, a factor that to a large extent—or even in the first place—determines individual or corporate identity. Many will describe themselves as Christians, Muslims, Catholics, Adventists, etc., and consider this as the overarching element that determines who they are. For many, all other aspects are subordinated to their religious allegiance.

Four Elements

With these preliminary remarks in mind, let us look a little closer at our theme: "Adventist Identity in the Postmodern World." This title indicates that we have four elements to consider. There is not just the issue of *identity*, which we briefly discussed in our introduction. We are not just looking at who we are, but asking how our *Adventist affiliation* impacts who we are, or more specifically, how we see ourselves and how we are seen by others. How important is our being Adventist in the hierarchy of factors that determine our identity? And other questions follow: Does being an Adventist today, for the average person who belongs to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, play a more or a less important role in defining his or her identity than it did for Adventists in the past? And: Has the sense of corporate identity in the Adventist community become stronger, or has the opposite happened, as many suggest or fear? We hear voices—and not only at the fringes of the church—about the danger that the church may lose its true Adventist identity.

One of the main topics that we are supposed to address

is: How does the transition of much of the Western world (and increasingly parts of the non-Western world) from “modern” to “postmodern” impact the Adventist element of our individual identity, and the Adventist identity of our faith community? Note that when we use the word *modern* or related terms to refer to the period that followed the Middle Ages, we do so in a particular way, and not as the opposite for the term *old-fashioned*. Modernity is a label for what has also been called the *Enlightenment Project*, which got underway when people were leaving the Middle Ages behind them, and began to think differently. It is widely believed that in recent times this period of modernity has given way, or is in the process of giving way, to another manner of looking at the world: i.e., *post-modernity*.

We will probably agree that the impact of this transition is considerable, but may disagree about whether we see this development as mainly positive or mainly negative. And while we discuss these matters, we should not fail to notice that we are speaking of the postmodern *world*. Being citizens of a *global society*, with all that it entails, calls for certain postmodern reactions, individually and collectively.

We will now address some aspects of the concept of identity that are particularly relevant for our discussion. Subsequently, we will try to describe what “Adventist identity” might mean, and then we will list the main characteristics of postmodernity and will attempt to indicate how these postmodern characteristics have impacted individual and corporate Adventist identity.

Aspects of Identity

It is important to underline that identity formation is a *process*. According to E. H. Erikson (1902–1994), a famous German psychoanalyst, identity formation is a lifelong developmental process involving a number of distinct stages in which the person learns to balance his individual needs and social demands. Most people, he suggests, experience some form of identity crisis around the time of their adolescence, before they succeed in attaining mental maturation.⁵

Although the details of his theory have been criticized,⁶ the idea that identity is not something static, but something that may develop and change, is generally accepted. In his book *Stages of Faith*, James W. Fowler, a developmental psychologist at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia, proposes a faith development theory that is akin to Erikson’s.⁷ If we accept that identity is subject to development, the idea that postmodern thought, in the context of the globalization of our society, will therefore have a major influence on our individual and corporate identity, seems more than plausible.

One factor that is not directly related to postmodern thought, but mostly dependent on political and economical circumstances, is the phenomenon of *large-scale migration*. In many countries, this has resulted in a multicultural society that has seriously affected both the traditional and the new population segments. The result has been a multicultural society with all its accompanying blessings and challenges. In many cases it has, unfortunately, led to considerable conflict and animosity, with a strong sense of *us versus them*. This has undoubtedly impacted certain aspects of the



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identity of the traditional population, as well as that of the immigrants. It has also highlighted the phenomenon of *multiple identities*. The identity of the “new” citizens remains very largely determined by the culture of their country of origin, but this loyalty does not preclude a strong, often growing, simultaneous loyalty to their host country. Thus we have the phenomenon of American Jews, Dutch Moroccans, *pid noirs* (French citizens, but born in North Africa), Chinese Australians, and so on. We will have to say more about this aspect.

With regard to the religious component of individual or corporate identity, it must be noted that it is not just a particular religion as such that is a decisive part of that identity. It is not just a question of whether one is a Christian, a Muslim, a Hindu, or a Rastafarian—or an agnostic or atheist, for that matter. One’s religious identity is strongly influenced by the *local* characteristics this particular religion has acquired, and by *historical* developments that may sharply differ from place to place. That means that there is, for instance, a major distinction between a conservative born-again Protestant Christian of Calvinistic vintage in the United States and a Dutch Calvinist, or between a Southern Baptist in the United States and an Australian Baptist. Whether one belongs to a minority religion or to a majority religion may also make a significant difference. It is not the same to be a Catholic in Sweden as being a Catholic in Italy, or to be a Muslim in Australia as being a Muslim in Saudi Arabia—or to be a Seventh-day Adventist in Loma Linda as it would be in New Delhi.

Adventist Identity

A former General Conference president, Robert S. Folkenberg, once wrote an article in the *Adventist Review*, entitled, “Will the Real Evangelical Adventist Please Stand Up?”⁸ It is a question that is frequently heard, albeit in different forms: What makes someone a true Seventh-day Adventist? Some time ago, it was the topic of an insightful blog on *Spectrum’s* website. A short quote will rephrase the question in a way that will resonate with many of us:

*There are a number of ways to describe a Seventh-day Adventist. This is a person who finds special meaning in the seventh day of the week, observes a practice of rest on that day, and has a special hope for the future. A Seventh-day Adventist is likely a vegetarian and adopts other healthy lifestyle habits. Adventists are generally known for fostering their own sub-culture, operating church-affiliated schools and universities, defending creation as an event that occurred in seven literal days, and, in the past, registering for non-combatant status in the military. But what is a real Adventist?*⁹

Some would want to define “real” Adventism mostly in theological terms. Adventist identity, they say, is linked with Truth (capital T), with the 28 Fundamental Beliefs, or at least with the Adventist “landmark” doctrines. (It is significant that George Knight titled his book, in which he outlined the history of Adventist doctrine, as *A Search for Identity*, emphasis on “A Search for.”¹⁰) Many will say that our denominational name is the label *par excellence* that identifies us! (That, of course, begs the question of why we so often avoid using it when referring to denominational activities!)

Some would stress, in particular, the importance of staying closely with Adventism *as it used to be* (or, as they *think* it used to be, or should have been), if we want to protect our identity. Others allow for, or welcome, much more diversity, and will emphasize just a few major doctrinal characteristics, together with the main aspects of the Adventist lifestyle and the subculture that has arisen. Few would show such leniency as one blogger who recently indicated that he regards himself as both an agnostic and a Seventh-day Adventist.¹¹

On the other hand, there is a substantial part of the church that insists that the *remnant concept* is the key to a correct definition of our individual and corporate identity. In this view, only those few who meet a clear set of doctrinal standards have the right to identify themselves as true Seventh-day Adventists! Those who hold this opinion do

not seem to be overly worried about the clear injunction of Christ, that making a sharp separation between those who are truly his and those who are not is not *our* privilege, but is *his* prerogative, which he will not exercise until the moment that he comes in his glory!

Defining our identity in such exclusive ways emphasizes an element that, admittedly, tends to be rather prominent in most discussions of identity: it stresses the *distinction* between you and I, between them and us. It seems to return to an element that characterized Adventism of the past—certainly the Adventism of my youth—when the Adventist self-understanding seemed to be in constant need of an enemy. It has the unfortunate (I think) tendency to see Adventism largely in terms of what it *opposes*.

It is clear that our corporate Adventist identity has, over time, undergone major influences. In many parts of the world, the Adventist denomination is no longer regarded as a sect, but as a *bona fide* part of evangelical Christianity, or, in any case, as a “normal” Protestant faith community. This has, no doubt, reinforced our self-understanding as a movement with sound Reformation roots.

Adventist history did not follow the same course in every region of the world and in every country. In many developing countries, Adventism still shows many traces of its missionary origins. Adventism in my own country, the Netherlands, was for several decades highly influenced by German Adventism, and is currently experiencing the results of a major influx of Adventists from the Caribbean and Africa. These two factors have certainly influenced the character—the identity—of the church in my country. American Adventism developed along a path that differed in many ways from the kind of development we currently see, for instance, in the church in China. It does make a difference whether Adventism developed and grew in a mainly Catholic context or in a predominantly Lutheran society; and the Adventist Church in a predominantly secular environment will respond to many questions in ways that differ from how the church

might respond to the same questions in a strongly religious milieu. How quickly these developments may occur as a result of external circumstances is illustrated by the recent landslide changes in the Adventist Church in many countries that once were behind the Iron Curtain.

And thus, quite naturally, the fact that many church members—young and not so young—have not only become quite secular, and have in many ways been affected by postmodern ideas and societal trends, and the fact that in much of the Western world the church must exist and must seek to fulfill its mission in a society that shows many postmodern trends, is a significant factor in shaping—or reshaping—Adventist identity.

What Is Postmodernity, or How Can One Recognize a Postmodern Person?

Many readers of *Spectrum* are probably postmodern in some ways, or may even consider themselves fully postmodern. But let us briefly summarize what postmodernism is.¹² What is a postmodern person? What does he or she think? What do postmodern people do? Where are they to be found?

There is no shortage of books that list the



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Postmodernism

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main characteristics of the postmodern man and woman. Most authors will indicate that there is a superficial kind of postmodernism, which is almost synonymous with consumerism and hedonism, and which allows its adherents to live a significant part of their lives in a virtual world. But there is more to it than that, and in most cases such a description of a postmodern person would be unfair and inadequate.

Below are some of the most noticeable characteristics of the postmodern approach to life.

These are given in summary form, and the list is by no means exhaustive, but it may be helpful in understanding or recognizing postmodern trends.

1. The postmodern person does not believe that everything will become better and better. The idea of progress is largely abandoned. Science is no longer seen as the unmitigated blessing it once was thought to be.
2. There are no absolutes. We all have our own private truths (lowercase t). Communities and cultures have their own “language games.” What they talk about and believe in does not necessarily relate to any absolute reality. Everything is subjective, relative, uncertain, contingent, and ambiguous.
3. The metanarratives (grand stories) and the grand ideals of the past have disappeared, and no new metanarrative will take the former’s place.
4. Postmodern people like combining all kinds of seem-

ingly incompatible elements. In architecture, as well as in the visual arts, we find a great interest in collation, a mixing of artistic styles, a blurring of the lines between real life and fiction, the real and the virtual. We also find such a blending of styles from different periods in literature and music, and, not to forget, in fashion.

5. Scientists are becoming more modest in their claims, and confess that many of the so-called foundations of science may not be so certain after all. It is recognized that scientists may often be inclined to find what they are looking for, and that commercial interests may be a major factor in shaping a research program.
6. People know they live in a global village. The computer—the symbol of postmodernity—gives them instant access to the world. Yet at the same time, global strategies and alliances are under suspicion, and there is a strong interest in regional and local issues.
7. The postmodern person has a strong dislike for religious institutions, but is open to spirituality. In fact, some advocate a re-enchantment of the world. Mystery is OK. The nonrational, New Age-type approach to the questions of life is popular. (Even though it should be pointed out that postmodernity and the New Age movement are distinct phenomena that only partly overlap.)

Postmoderns have an approach to religion and to the church that sharply differs from that of their parents and grandparents. Religion is *in*, but the institutional church is *out*. Experience and emotions are OK, but doctrines are considered largely irrelevant. Absolute, propositional truth is replaced by what “works for me,” and it is argued that there are as many legitimate ways to interpret the Bible as there are readers. Christianity is one option among a series of religious choices; all are historically and culturally conditioned, and equally valid responses of the human self to the “Beyond.” Sin has been reduced to a sense of regret that things have not quite gone as expected, with little or no room for something like atonement, where Someone steps in on my behalf. More often than not, those who do turn toward Christianity want to pick and choose the teachings they are willing to accept, and will often be reluctant when it comes to manifesting full and permanent commitment.

The contrasts between “modern” and “postmodern” may be summarized as in the following two columns:

Modernity

Emphasis on mind, reason, logic, science

Confidence in human abilities

Systematic order in everything that happens/exists

Belief in "grand stories"

Absolute Truth

Belief in technological and economic progress

Church

Harmony

Unity

Commitment

Organizations

Postmodernity

Open to the nonrational: emotions, intuitions

Suspicion about human abilities

Emphasis on "deconstruction"

Rejection of "grand stories"

Each person has his or her own truth; relativism

Pessimism; sense of fragility and vulnerability

Spirituality

Difference

Fragmentation

Reluctance about commitment

Interpersonal relationships

So, How Does This Impact Adventist Identity?

The postmodernist wave has not bypassed the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Clearly, for a growing number of Adventist believers in the West the "metanarrative" of Adventism as a worldwide, divinely ordained movement, united by one theology and one organizational model, with uniform programs and resources, has outlived its sell-by date. More and more church members tend to think and act locally. They have little or no interest in the church's hierarchy and are suspicious of centralized institutional structures.

Many are increasingly weary of doctrinal fine print and establish their own version of the truth, largely, but not exclusively, within the framework of the Adventist tradition. They tend to regard Adventism as one option among other Christian options, and would be reluctant to call their tradition the one and only true church.

Worship styles have significantly changed, with an increasing emphasis on experience, and on contemporary music, drama, and informal small group meetings. Traditional church disci-

pline has lost much of its corrective power, and an increasing amount of spiritual cross-border shopping takes place.

It has often, justifiably I think, been noted that Adventism has an underdeveloped ecclesiology. This fact will increasingly haunt us, as this happens to be the arena where many of the postmodern questions of our church members are asked. What is the church? Is it the church universal? Is it the visible, historic, institutional church, or the invisible church of all ages? Or is it a small remnant, with a message that changes in emphasis and focus as one Christian era gives way to the next?¹³ All these questions are directly related to our Adventist identity. Is the Seventh-day Adventist Church the only true church, and are all other Christian organizations to be labeled as Babylon? Or is Adventism simply one option amidst a whole gamut of other Christian options, which may be equally valid? Many church members (and I would be among them) will maintain that Adventism represents something special: it is part of Protestant Christianity, but offers a series of insights not readily available elsewhere.

For those who are influenced by postmod-



LEONARDO DA VINCI: HEAD OF A YOUNG WOMAN

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ernism, the question probably goes like this: Does Adventism possess the absolute Truth in all areas of theology, or should we be more modest and claim at most that our church makes a significant contribution to the rich diversity of Christianity? There is much confusion and disagreement about these matters, and the response one gives is largely determined by whether one is a *modern* or *postmodern* Adventist!

The Modern Versus the Postmodern Adventist

Categorizing people is dangerous. Most of us simply do not fit neatly into any one category. This is also true when we try to separate *modern* from *postmodern* Adventists. So, we must remember that the profiles given below are inexact and may, at least to some extent, be caricatures. But, nonetheless, they are, I believe, basically true in outline.

In most regions of the world, the (mostly) modern Adventists are in the majority, and will be for some time to come. They are the traditional Adventists, mostly conservative in their beliefs and in the way they view their church and the surrounding world. They believe in the grand story (the “metanarrative”) of Adventism as God’s “remnant church,” with its sacred worldwide mission mandate—a

movement called forth by God at the appointed time and assured of its ultimate success. Modern Adventists believe in absolutes. They tend to dislike questions that may undermine the certainties of the believers. They defend the historic positions of the church with regard to doctrine, organizational structure, worship, and ethics. They welcome a strong emphasis on eschatology and are staunchly antiecumenical. They hold a very “high” view of inspiration, often bordering on a fundamentalist stress on inerrancy, both with regard to the Bible and to the writings of Ellen G. White. They are strong on policy and on the *Church Manual*. They want their church to remain united and believe that this unity is fostered by uniform programs and a solid central system of governance.

But postmodern Adventists are a growing segment of the church, in particular in Western countries: the United States and large parts of Europe and Australia, with smaller groups in other parts of the world. They tend to be well educated and to live in more affluent areas.

They do not have the same interest in the metanarrative of Adventism as their “modern” brothers and sisters. Their focus is much more regional or local. They are often suspicious of the church’s hierarchy and are not very interested in the upper layers of the church’s organizational structure. They have little affinity with ecclesial authority and do not unduly worry about church discipline, policy, or the *Church Manual*. They tend to allow for diversity in doctrine, and tend to pick and choose which of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs of the church they will embrace. Their religion is much less rational than traditional Adventism. Experience, celebration, praise, and the Holy Spirit are the catchwords for the way that many of them want to “do” church.

Postmodern Adventists are open to outside influences, and even tend to engage in some cross-border shopping, for they usually view other, in particular evangelical, Christians in a much more positive light than modern Adventists do. The postmodern Adventist will often tend to postpone or have reservations about making a total commitment to the church and its message, or to any active role in the church.

Multiple Identities

I would argue that there is a sharp divide between the modern Adventist and the postmodern Adventist. It goes beyond classifications in terms of conservative, liberal, historical, progressive, middle-of-the-road Adventism, or whatever labels may be given. It is, what I have called “the

absolute divide,” which is extremely difficult to bridge, because it not only touches on *what* people believe, but also on *how* they believe and on what kind of people they *are* deep down. It is very much a matter of identity.

I want to briefly focus on one important postmodern characteristic that has a very close relationship to the shaping of the identity of many more or less postmodern Adventists. Postmodern people value *diversity*. Unity is primarily thought of in terms of (local) communities and relationships, of communities of individuals who have their own opinions and their own truths. It is a unity *in diversity*, and this has ramifications in the areas of doctrine, as well as lifestyle and individual ethical decisions. But *there is something beyond that*. Postmodernism also *values diversity within our own selves*. The postmodern person is, in many ways, a *fragmented* person.

The postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998) introduced the metaphor of the archipelago to characterize human thought and life. We do not inhabit a solid landmass, with clear borders, he said, but our life rather resembles an archipelago with scattered islands, with only here and there a small strip of land between them. Commenting on this, Dutch scholar Richard Brons preferred to replace the archipelago metaphor with that of a volcanic landscape that has been formed by the fiery stream of the lava of our reflections, and has then been solidified into clots, but is constantly being visited by the vigorous eruptions of all kinds of events that we experience.¹⁴ Both metaphors make the same point: the diversity and fragmentation of who we are—of our identity.

The idea of multiple identities is today widely accepted as something that is both real and basically positive. Some political parties in my country frown at the concept of “dual nationality,” since they contend that a person can only be loyal to one country and to one set of political ideals.¹⁵ The realities of large-scale immigration, and, in particular, of the experiences of

second-generation immigrants, have, however, resulted in the fact that many eagerly receive a new passport, yet also want to retain that of the nation they, or their parents, or one of them, may have left, but which is still an essential part of who and what they are. Today, it is much more readily accepted by many that having dual nationality does not necessarily result in conflicting loyalties, and may actually not be such a negative thing.

There is a growing awareness that human beings cannot be defined by just one aspect of who they are. For instance, we have a particular nationality that sets us apart. Yet, we may feel that we are just as much defined—or even more so—by our ethnicity, or our gender. Many feel that they are to a substantial degree also defined by their occupation or profession, their hobby, or their sexual orientation. They may find it at times difficult to bring all these aspects together, and may live their life in various “compartments.” They may be a totally different person at home—as a mother or spouse—than at work among colleagues, or when engaged in sports with friends. They may have different sets of



HENRI MATISSE / GREEN STRIPE (MADAME MATISSE)

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friends and acquaintances, even different sets of moral standards, depending on what compartment of their life they happen to be in. If one were to ask Jacques Derrida, a key postmodern philosopher, the simple question, “How are you?” he would often reply with a counterquestion, “On what floor?” He liked to compare his life with a house, and a regular visitor might meet him on different floors and in different rooms. His mood and interests would tend to vary, depending on “what floor” of his life he happened to be at that moment.

When I grew up, my world was to a large extent divided into Adventists and non-Adventists. That to me—and to most people I knew in church—was the one, single identifying factor. All other elements of my identity and that of others were far less important. Today, I have—at least in this respect—become much more postmodern. Being a member in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is still an important part of who I am, but it is just one of several key aspects. I am also defined by myself and by others by the fact that I am an adult married male, a husband and a father, and a retired pastor, a theologian with particular views, a Dutchman with a political leaning somewhat to the left of the spectrum, a lover and author of books, someone who has travelled widely, etc. These various elements that define who I am may be configured in different ways, depending on where I am and whom I am with. One thing is sure: as a more or less postmodern person,

I am much more “fragmented” today than I used to be. What is true for me, I think is valid for many more or less postmodern Adventists at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Postmodern people are living between two poles. They are part of the global community. They travel and experience other cultures. They communicate with the entire world. They use the new social media and belong to several virtual communities. Through the Internet, they gather information and pick and choose what they like and find useful. The Internet and other aspects of contemporary communication technology in themselves are significant factors in the development of individual and, by extension, of corporate identity.¹⁶ But, paradoxically, postmodern people are very much interested in what happens locally, in the community of their choice, where they feel welcome and accepted—whatever way they look and irrespective of the opinions they hold.

The postmodern Seventh-day Adventist still appreciates that he is part of a global faith community. But his first priority is closer to home. His concern is not primarily with a smooth functioning of the bureaucracy of the higher echelons of the Adventist Church (the General Conference, division, union, and to some extent, even the conference). He will be looking for a local church that fits with his spiritual interests and where he feels at home. He will subscribe to the main tenets of Adventist doctrine, but will claim the freedom to interpret these according to his own convictions, and may well put question marks behind some of the traditional Adventist views. He wants to be respected by other Christians and non-Christians, and wants to see that his church treats others with respect. He will not fight if his views meet resistance or spend a lot of time in debate about doctrinal minutiae. Chances are, he would rather retreat to the fringes or quietly leave altogether, if he does not get the space his postmodern identity requires.

Many more traditionally inclined church members and leaders will find it difficult to deal with this situation. They are convinced that these postmodern Adventists are simply in danger of losing their Adventist identity, and may pull others with them. Their message is one of revival and reform, lest we are corporately adversely affected by the dangers of this postmodern relativism.

I am convinced this is not an adequate reaction. The first priority for twenty-first century Adventism is to help moderns and postmoderns to understand and respect each other. Postmoderns need to realize that the postmodern position has weaknesses, and that not everything from the past should be “deconstructed.” They must also realize there is a propositional element to Truth that must be safeguarded; that we need a new Adventist apologetic.

But those who are solidly “modern” should at least study the phenomenon of postmodernism. They may discover that many postmodern ideas are actually much closer to the message Jesus of Nazareth preached than they had previously thought. And they may find that many postmoderns, in and outside of the church, have much to contribute to the Adventist faith community that, from its inception, has claimed to have a message for the head, but also for the hand and the heart. Postmodernity, I am convinced, presents us with challenges, but also with major opportunities, if we allow the Spirit to lead us into the future, that—and here speaks the postmodern—is at once very uncertain but yet very certain! ■

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12. In the following paragraphs I borrow, at times almost verbatim, from an article that I contributed a few years ago to *Ministry* magazine. See: "Modern versus postmodern Adventism: The ultimate divide?" *Ministry* (June 2005), 17, 19-21.
13. For a recent attempt to contribute to an Adventist ecclesiology, see my book, *The Body of Christ: A Biblical Understanding of the Church* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2009). Another relevant, recent, publication is: Angel Manuel Rodriguez, ed., *Towards a Theology of the Remnant: An Adventist Ecclesiological Perspective* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2009).
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