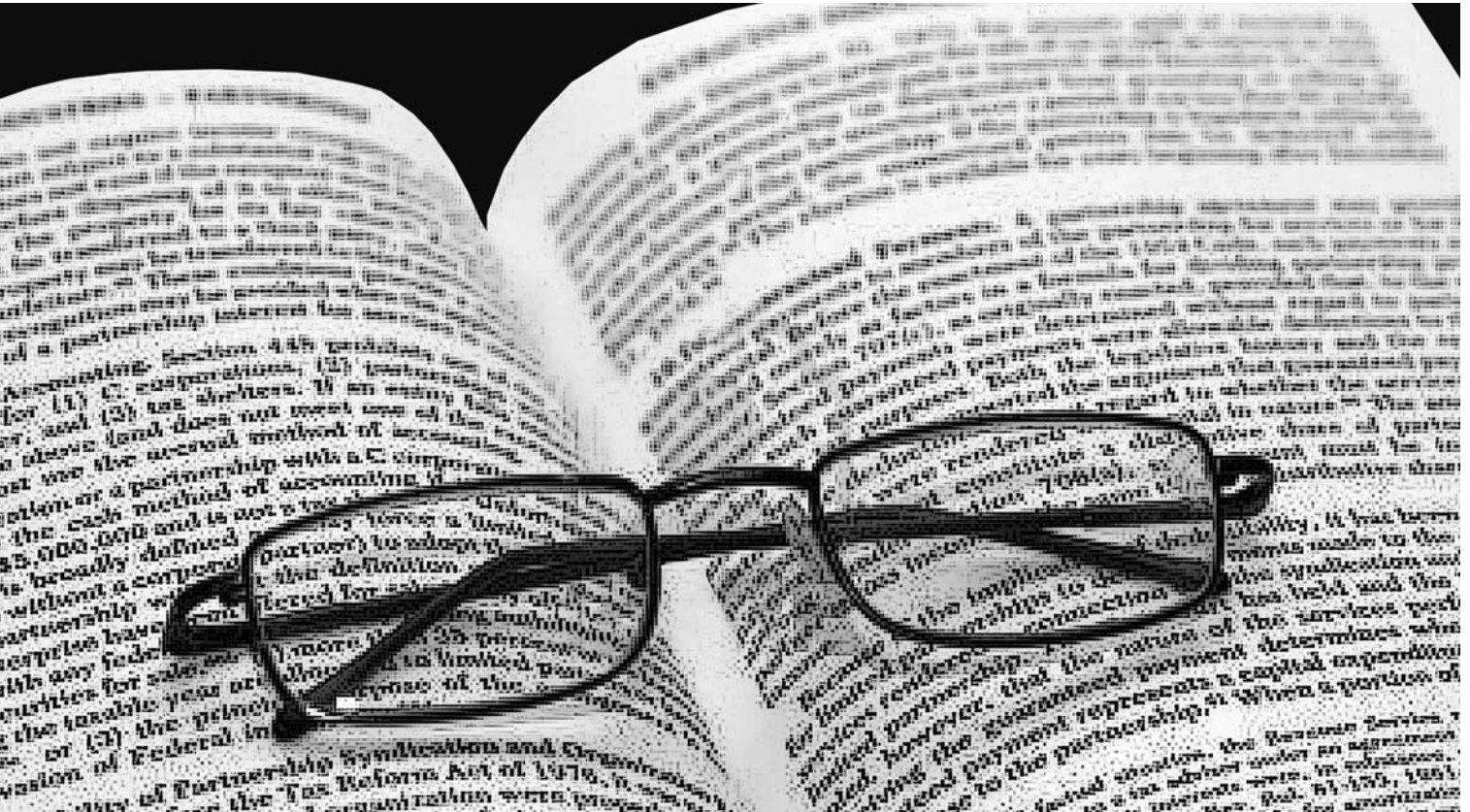


# Bible and Adventism: *A Monocentric or a Polycentric Unity?* | BY HANZ GUTIERREZ



**T**he starting point for Adventist belief and living is the Bible. Therefore, the search for today's much-needed church unity must start here. Yet is our access to the Bible as immediate, direct and neutral as we Adventists presuppose and would like it to be? Certainly it is not—because we only understand the Bible through Adventism itself, and through our roots in Western culture. The widely praised nineteenth-century “objective” reading method does not exist, because it is actually an extremely biased approach to reading the Bible insofar as it is unaware of its own historical limitations. We Adventists have managed to develop a kind of pre-lapsarian hermeneutics, i.e., the belief that our interpretation of the Bible has the objectivity and purity of the

pre-Fall Adamic situation that is by no means conditioned, modified, or biased by our current cultural, sociological and epistemological limitations.

For this reason, a true and solid Adventist reading of the Bible cannot be achieved by a resolved, persuaded and inflamed declaration or an outspoken defense of the “Sola Scriptura Principle” in any of its forms, as much as one doesn’t become American, Peruvian or German just by singing a country’s national anthem. Adventism’s relation to the Bible is not an easy one, yet we have unfortunately oversimplified it by underestimating all its theological and cultural implications.

We keep clinging to a simplistic and linear model of our relationship to the Bible. This linear model has

become, among our members and pastors and also among some theologians, a kind of magical amulet that by itself gives somebody an immediate patent of unquestionable orthodoxy. In reality, our relationship to the Bible is not linear but circular (see the hermeneutical circle).<sup>1</sup> Not only does the Bible influence us, but it is also the other way around. As rooted historical beings, we tend to privilege and foster our own personal or communitarian ideological context as intermediary between us and the Bible. Said differently, ours is just an Adventist reading of the Bible that we naively try to elevate to a universal reading. There are in the Bible numerous categories and other heterogeneous material we don't see and we don't use simply because they don't belong in our Adventist mindset—for instance, ecology, emotionality, instinctiveness, corporality, corporatism, hierarchy or, as is the case, alternative and parallel forms of unity as the “polycentric unity.” We read the Bible just as Adventists, and this reading makes us even more Adventist. Our situation is worse today than in the past because, in opposition to our Adventist forebears, we are now conditioned by a larger and heavier Adventist tradition accumulated over time.

This is not the worst news for our so-called purist Adventist hermeneutics, because what conditions our biblical reading even more than Adventism is our Western cultural imprinting. We read the Bible as Westerners, and the fact that we try to label ourselves as illuminated post-modern theologians only highlights our cultural belonging even more. We post-moderns may be less modern, but our post-modernism doesn't make us less Western. On the contrary, our post-modernity radicalizes our Western-ness.

Are we, then, ineluctably determined by our culture? Not necessarily. We can't avoid being culturally influenced, but at the same time we must resist any kind of cultural determinism. This is not only because the force of the Gospel would therein be denied, but also because we would unduly elevate one culture

above the others. Though cultural determinism is an ugly anti-religious ideology, it is also a diffuse and implicitly-working religious attitude found both without and within Adventism.

Our search for a current Adventist biblical model of unity has become, at present, a circular endeavor. We find in the Bible apparently “new” motives for unity that are in reality just updated re-elaborations of classical Adventist and Western concepts of unity. To break this cycle, we need to deconstruct our understanding of unity in order to evidence its biased limitations. To do that, we will proceed in three steps. We will consider our current understanding of the biblical, Adventist and Western paradigm of unity.

### **Adventist biblical reading on unity**

We Adventists like to underline the heterogeneity of the Bible. Compared to other sacred texts, the Bible appears to be a pluralistic book containing various authors, different periods, diversified historical settings, a plurality of characters and even a variety of theological viewpoints and perspectives. More so than in the past, Christians today can appreciate this enormous plurality thanks to the visionary and disciplined research going on in biblical history, linguistics, literary and psychological studies. In contrast, the Koran appears to be more homogeneous, synthetic and linear. The Bible has a more fragmented, sinuous and tortuous profile in comparison. But the point is precisely this. The miracle is that all this radical and structural diversity and plurality seem to have been superseded and overcome by a miraculous theological unity. In other words, we take biblical diversity just as a circumstantial and transitory condition that cannot contain the final message of truth. Yet for Adventist reading, diversity is not a noble theological category. Rather, the Bible's diversity is accepted only because it allows the power of the final theological unity to emerge. Reading the Bible like this makes us overlook the enormous biblical relevance of its own diversity, and leaves us with a depleted concept of theological unity.<sup>2</sup>

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### Western Adventism reading on unity

The Western model of unity applied to biblical reading is just the application and extension of a more primitive model—that of Adventism itself. In fact, Adventism looks into itself the same way it looks into the Bible. It starts by listing and proudly counting the enormous diversity existing in the Adventist community around the world: ethnic diversity, linguistic plurality, diversified witnessing strategies, heterogeneous family organizations, multiform historical sensibilities, etc. Adventism, we like to emphasize, is only second to the Catholic church in securing an international transversal presence in almost every country in the world. But here as with the Bible, all this diversity easily evaporates and disappears at the altar of the Church's main Moloch: unity. Diversity in Adventism seems to be only transitory and circumstantial; we Adventists believe that the essence of Adventism can only be expressed in unity and by no way in diversity. In fact, we become rapidly suspicious and even administratively repressive toward whatever kind of theological diversity may emerge in the church. Our prized linguistic and ethnic diversity is in reality just a folkloristic and aesthetic manifestation without any serious theological validity or relevance. Our theology, as much as our liturgy or hymnology, is universally the same in South America,

Cameroon, Florence and New York. Unity always manages to resist and win, but which unity? In the end, it is an impoverished unity that overlooks and supersedes diversity, and by this diminishes its motivating and inclusive power. Great is our Adventist diversity, but even greater is its overcoming unity. A typical example of this reductive Adventist unity is the anachronistic, naïve and caricatural Sabbath School lectionary imposed, in content and even in form, to every Adventist in the world.

### Western cultural reading on unity

This model of unity applied by Adventism to Adventism after having been applied to the Bible itself is also the application and extension of an even more primitive cultural model—that of Western culture.

As no other culture before, Europeans discovered cultural diversity on a massive scale: in geography, radical ethnic differences, linguistic plurality, differentiated kinship systems, parallel religious mindsets, alternative medicines, diversified and sophisticated economical organizations, etc. But much like Adventism with the Bible, Europeans managed to overcome and dismantle this great diversity by imposing onto every culture and nation in the world their normative European abstract universalism.<sup>3</sup> This type of abstract universalism can be found in arts as much as in lit-

erature, science and theology. This reductive type of unity would like us to naively believe that polyphony, sociology, philosophy or science just started two or three centuries ago in Europe. This Western abstract universalism has been diffused and disseminated through a couple of powerful and sophisticated cultural strategies: namely, assimilationism and multiculturalism.

#### **The assimilation model<sup>4</sup>**

Coming from the French liberal tradition, this first model of Western universalism is based on the idea that equality can be achieved through the full adoption of the rules and values of the dominant society and through the avoidance of any consideration of diversity. It promotes the need to respect common legal values and principles that are shared by all in order to foster a cohesive, inclusive society. This republican assimilationist model is based on the idea of monoculture and the full adoption, either by submission or absorption, of the rules and values of the dominant society so that the minority group becomes culturally indistinguishable from the dominant society.

#### **The multicultural model<sup>5</sup>**

This second model comes from the Anglo-Saxon pluralistic tradition, which was also present in countries like Sweden, the Netherlands and Canada. It is based on the respect and protection of cultural diversity within a framework of shared belonging. Cultural diversity is acknowledged, protected and even promoted. The state doesn't try to eliminate or stigmatize diversity or cultural differences, but rather tries to adequately administer diversity by assigning appropriate spaces and moments in which it can be freely manifested and cultivated. Here monoculture is apparently overcome and gives way to cultural pluralism. But the problem remains that this, too, is a non-communicative and a non-dialogical pluralism. In this model, each culture grows up in its own corner segregated and excluded from the real present history, while cultural supremacy belongs to the dominant culture with the ironic alibi that it

formally and juridically recognizes other cultural sensibilities. But formal recognition of cultural diversity is just an elementary and rudimental kind of recognition that paradoxically can cohabit and even justify cultural subordination and segregation.

#### **The discovery of the complexity of unity**

In opposition to classical Western abstract universalism, there are also parallel movements in the biblical sciences. The discovery of complex systems presupposes a different kind of unity that we will call a "polycentric" unity. We'll just briefly refer to two scientific disciplines: physics and anthropology.

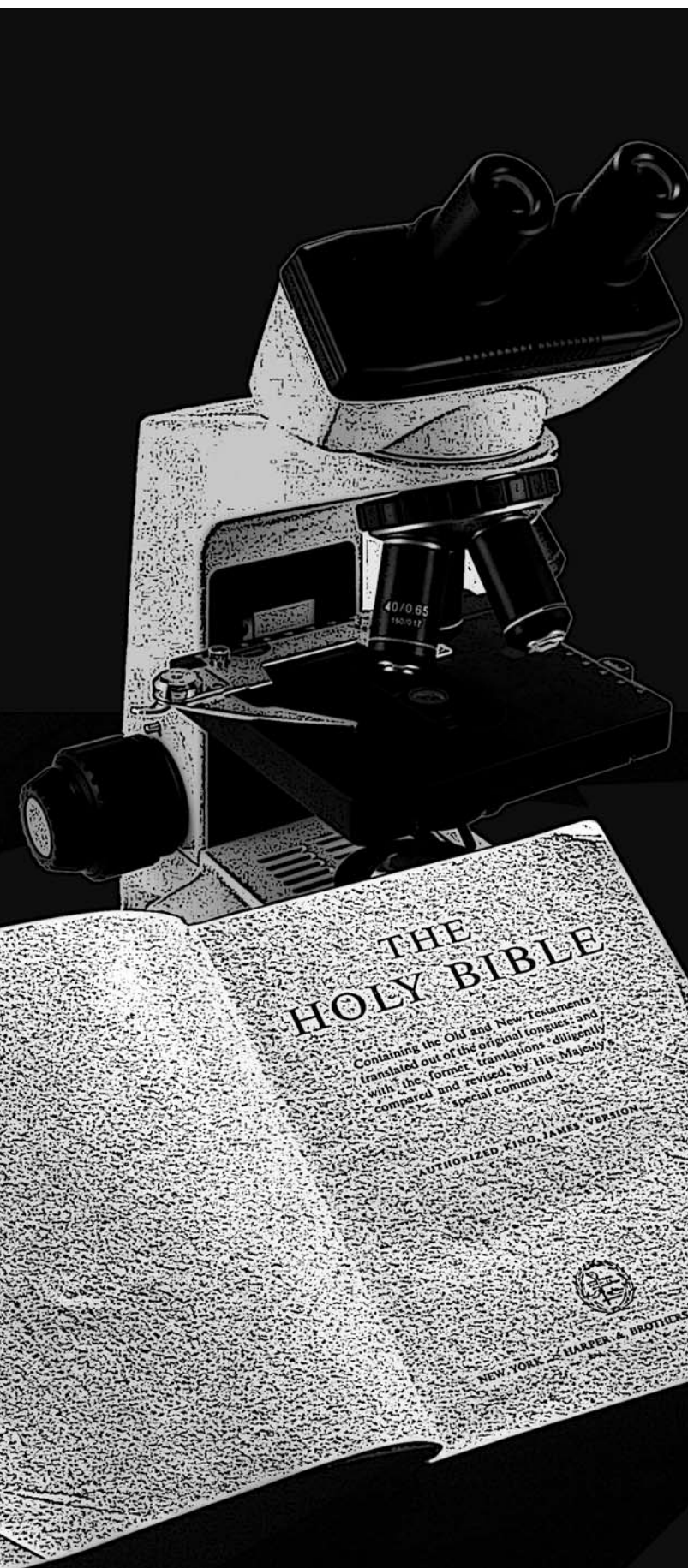
Classical Newtonian physics worked with a mechanical, homogeneous, Unitarian and predictable understanding of time-space reality. Twentieth-century theoretical physics came out of the relativistic revolution and the quantum mechanical revolution. But it was still all about simplicity and continuity (in spite of quantum leaps). Its principal tool was calculus. Twenty-first-century theoretical physics is coming out of the "chaos revolution." Its principal tool category is complexity.

The same goes for other fields of study, such as anthropology. Italian anthropologist Francesco Remotti<sup>7</sup> of the University of Turin claims that Western societies are not complex but complicated societies, because they obsessively privilege one culture above all others—therein creating monocentric societies only interested in quantitative growth (as the GDP obsession shows). Non-western societies are slower societies not because they are lazy but because they try to maintain a sophisticated equilibrium of the various contradictory levels of human existence: relations to others, to nature, to God. Their complexity is a result of the polycentric organization and orientation of their internal life.

The same can be said of the Bible. The new developments, particularly in the synchronic approaches to biblical interpretation, evidence

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the irreducible complexity of the biblical narratives. In opposition to this complexity, the Koran, for instance, offers a different image: the image of a strong and compacted unity and homogeneity. The problem is that many Adventists read the Bible as if it was the Koran—but clearly, it is not. I would like to describe the indubitable unity in the Bible as three words: polycentric, developmental and paradoxical.

### **A polycentric unity**

The Bible is polycentric not only because it has integrated structurally-varied narratives of the same events or because it has included a diversified list of authors. The Bible is theologically polycentric because it gives way to diversified theological projects that cohabit together despite their mutual excommunication (specifically, the Jewish-Christian community and the Gentile-Christian community in the New Testament canon). The same could be said of the pneumatology issue. Is the epistles' subordinate, ethically-oriented pneumatology the only pneumatology possible? Certainly not, because in Matthew, for instance, we have a pneumatology that is not subordinated to Christology but is rather life-oriented. In fact, Christ is born by the action of the Holy Spirit. Both pneumatologies are licit and cohabit together. This polycentric unity creates a plurality of the various existing theological options.

### **A developmental unity**

The Bible is written in such a way that it doesn't end this theological discussion, but rather fosters and facilitates it. Contrary to what is generally thought and said, the Bible never says the last word but wisely articulates its discourses to enhance further theological thinking. This developmental strategy is seen especially in the Creation narratives. The Creation is not a homogeneous story in the Bible. It has various versions, each with different contexts and periods. There are theocentric versions of Creation such as the book of Genesis or those of the last chapters of the book of Job. There are anthropocentric versions of Creation such as evident in Psalm 8. There are also soteriological versions of Creation as witnessed by various New Testament hymns and prayers. Finally there are cosmo-centric versions of Creation like the one we find in Psalm 98. This "developmental" unity allows a diachronic plurality of the various existing theological options to emerge.

## A paradoxical unity

The Bible is not obsessed, as we Adventists are, with theological synthesis. While the Koran works out a final synthesis of the various reported narratives, the Bible leaves the various versions of the narrated events untouched, thereby integrating a structural tension that increases the possibility of theological meaning. A theology that is not able to cohabit with this tensional element derived from the structural heterogeneity of biblical material (such as Adventist theology, unfortunately) is just a poor theology. Sure, the final editor of a biblical book or passage doesn't remain passive in registering this heterogeneous material. He does his theological work by creating a common theological horizon and mediating perspective—not a corpus of formal theological statements and declarations. Such is the case for the two Creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2. The stories are not altered by the editor but are linked together in their diversity by a theological and editorial bridging strategy. This paradoxical unity creates a positive tensional plurality of the various theological options.

## The new paradigm needed for unity today

Even this beautiful biblical paradigm of unity—a polycentric, developmental and paradoxical unity—is not enough by itself. We can't always submit to historical reality and relate it to the biblical paradigm in order to preserve the validity of the biblical model. This would actually represent only the "centripetal dimension" of the Bible that needs to be maintained but not absolutized. The Bible has a strong "centrifugal dimension" by which it tries to accommodate itself according to the external historical reality.

The limits of the biblical model of unity are mainly that it cannot directly comment on current events, such as what is happening today in Adventism or in today's societies. The same goes for other topics such as women's ordination, homosexuality, or lifestyle issues. For instance, the Old Testament unity is "temporarily" long, but at the same time just an intra-ethnic unity that can hardly be the final model for us Adventists, who are an

inter-ethnic community. The New Testament unity has become a true inter-ethnic community that remains "temporarily" short, which can hardly become a model for us who are celebrating our 150-year anniversary of existence and all it implies in relationship to unity.

In other words, the Bible will not do what we ourselves are called to do, i.e., invent a new paradigm of church unity. We will get the best ingredients from the biblical testimony, from a realistic reading of ourselves as a multicultural religious community, and finally, from accurate and intelligent perceptions of today's society that represents, more than we believe, the historical arena from which every theology is born. ■

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