

The Society of Adventist Philosophers Addresses the Issues of Race and Gender

BY ZANE YI

What, exactly, are humans? Aristotle influentially classified us as “rational animals.” It is our rationality that distinguishes us from other animals and makes us what we are; it is our “essence.” According to Aristotle, however, it turns out that some humans are less rational than others, and therefore less fully human than others: “The slave is wholly lacking the deliberative element; the female has it but it lacks authority” (*Politics* 1260a11).

There are some humans who, because of their gender or race (Aristotle thought non-Greeks, i.e., “barbarians” should be slaves), should naturally be “ruled over by others.” Aristotle’s views strike us today as being naively patriarchic and ethnocentric. Yet we know they have been tremendously influential in the West, and through followers like Thomas Aquinas, also shaped Christian thinking on these matters.

How influential has Aristotle been in Adventism? To what extent must we disentangle ourselves from his way of thinking about human nature?

For the past several years, Adventist scholars have gathered annually to broach a variety of philosophical themes—epistemology, the teaching of philosophy in Adventist institutions of higher education, and the relationship between faith and reason. This year, our focus (broadly speaking) was metaphysical. One of our reasons for narrowing our focus further was the issue being examined by a sister scholarly society, as well as the world church—ordination. We want-

ed to explore the philosophical issue undergirding the theological debates. Hence our theme “Essentialism: Adventism and Questions of Race and Gender.”

Although papers were presented on both race and gender at our conference in Baltimore, Maryland (November 21, 2013), the essays published here focus on the former of the two issues. The reasons for this are primarily practical (space and time), but the similarities between the ideological and social challenges of addressing both racism and sexism in our faith community makes a philosophical examination of race relevant for understanding the ways we think about gender.

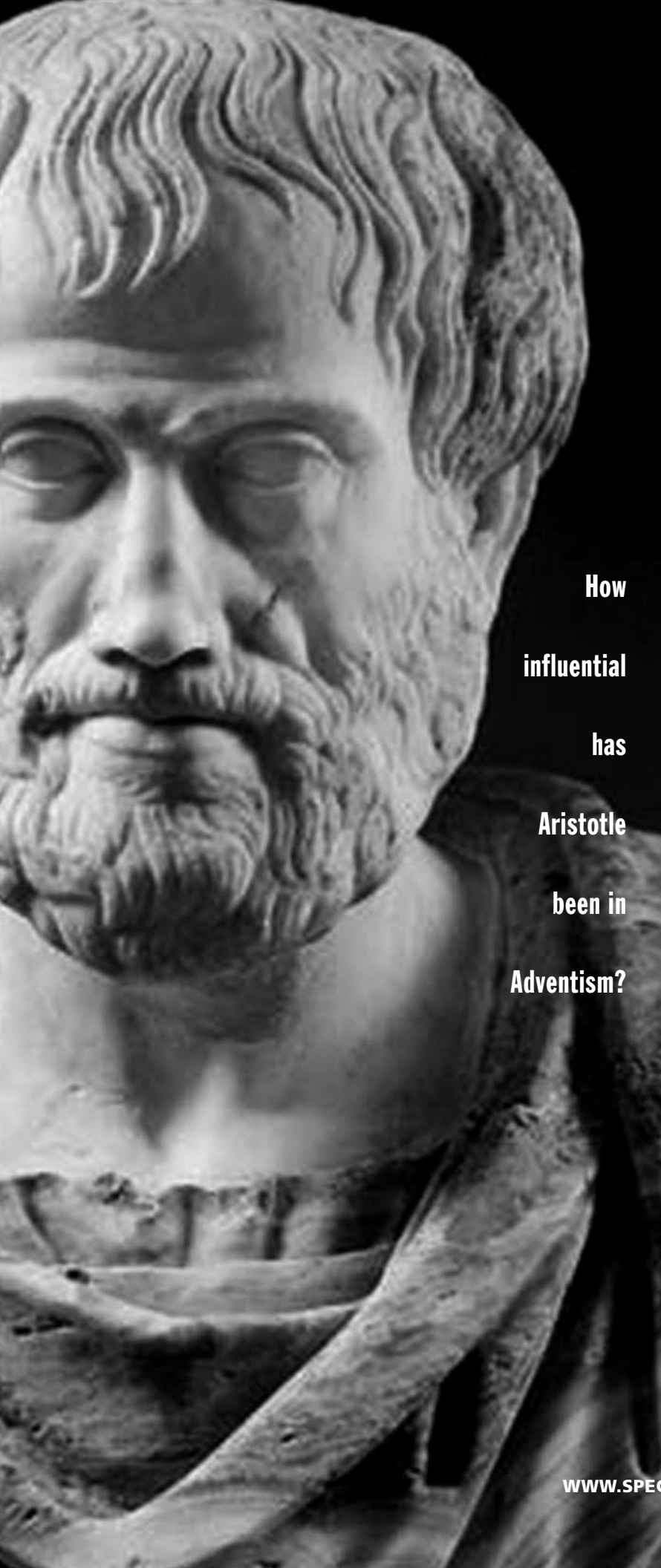
G. Russell Seay, associate professor of religion at Oakwood University, observed the following before offering his response to this year’s keynote speaker:

“The Society of Adventist Philosophers, perhaps the youngest of the Adventist scholars’ societies, is the first to raise (to my knowledge) the issue of race for analysis and critique in the Adventist church. The seriousness of your effort to enter thoughtful conversation around this pervasive, distracting, and demoralizing issue is demonstrated in your choice of a plenary speaker, George Yancy, one of the leading philosophers of race in America.”

Professor Yancy’s gripping presentation, “Speaking from Behind the Veil,” drew on phenomenological, logical, and theological analysis to help those in attendance not just understand, but feel what it is like to be “black” in America.

Yancy’s address was preceded by other thought-provoking papers, three of which are

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shared here. Matthew Burdette's essay, "Adventism and American White Supremacy," clarifies that race is not simply biological and racism is not simply mistreating others. Both have to do with the way we look at each other and this has a lot to do with our collective sense of where we have come from and where we are going. We have to retell that story, perhaps radically, in order to overcome racism.

In "Do It Yourself," Timothy J. Golden examines the two conflicting interpretations of Scripture offered by Adventist leaders regarding involvement in the civil rights movement: African-American church leaders demanded participation while white Adventists advocated withdrawal. After his analysis and explanation, Golden draws out some implications for our reading of the Bible today.

Lastly, Aleksandar S. Santrac provides a historical overview and analysis of Adventist leaders John Harvey Kellogg and Ellen G. White's views on race, contextualizing these views in nineteenth-century America.

While these essays do not represent the consensus of the members of our diverse society, they are presented here in the hopes of advancing a shared vision articulated by G. Russell Seay in his concluding comments at the conference:

"Is it possible that this conference, willing to address this important issue facing the Seventh-day Adventist Church, is the beginning of God showing us a better way? A better way may not be getting to a place where race is no longer an issue, but a place where we acknowledge its powerful gravitational pull to view the other with contempt, while affirming our value to their detriment." ■

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