

Adventism and American White Supremacy

BY MATTHEW BURDETTE

The argument of this essay is that Seventh-day Adventist theology is inherently white supremacist. This argument rests on two basic observations: that white supremacy is inherent in the American political project, and that Adventism is a defense of that project.¹

Theology is never politically neutral. Often, it unwittingly buys into certain political commitments and inherits their problems. I hope to demonstrate that Seventh-day Adventist theology exemplifies this problem.

I will go through this in three steps. I propose how to think about what makes a community political. Then I examine the American and Adventist political narratives, and consider how race operates in each. Finally, I outline what it would mean for Adventists to disentangle their theology from Americanism.

What makes a community “political”

I’ll begin with a few simple assertions and then unpack them. The central and most important: the political emerges from collective remembrance and anticipation. To remember and anticipate is to construct a narrative; therefore every politics has a narrative, which helps determine a community’s life and moral judgments. Communities agree politically to the degree that their narratives converge, and differ to the degree that their narratives diverge. Thus storytelling is essential for the politics.²

The church is political, for it remembers Christ’s death and resurrection, and anticipates

his coming. It is an unfortunate development in public and ecclesial life that the political is assumed to be limited to the workings of government. This actually signals the victory of a particular political system, which says that the revolution is behind us, and that all that is left to do is debate *policy*. But to conclude that politics is limited to the state, one must accept the state’s particular narrative about the past, and particular hopes, fears, and expectations for the future. But surely the church’s memory and anticipation is not the same as the state’s, and it is this stuff, which lurks quietly in the background, that is the substance of politics.

The meaningfulness of any moment is bound up with its relationship to the past and the future; therefore meaning is always embedded in narrative. And because communities need meaning to cohere,³ collective life requires a collective narrative. This narrative shapes the identity, and therefore the politics, of a community, because politics is concerned with realizing hopes and averting fears. For example, the narrative told by Marx is that all of the past has been characterized by the class conflict between oppressors and the oppressed, and the future that is anticipated is a classless society; and it is this narrative that transforms workers into the *proletariat*, and motivates revolutionary action.

This means that a chronology of events is not yet a history. Things happen in time; but the *interpretation* of these happenings—which involves choices to remember and to forget—is what history is. So all history is mythology, and every



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mythology is a politics. And these narratives are asymmetrically future-oriented. We interpret the past and present in light of the hoped-for future, and this is always for particular people.

However, because individuals are always members of multiple communities, they are also members of various political bodies. This is why those communities that are self-consciously political always demand allegiance in some way, whether by pledging to a flag, taking up arms, forming a “Super PAC,” or choosing to die rather than burn incense before images of Caesar.

So there is no such thing as a non-political community. When a church thinks that it is not political, it leaves its members to support the political aims of other entities, whether corporations, or military or prison industrial complexes, or for-profit healthcare. One of the church’s political questions for itself is whether it has adopted the political aims of another community, like the state. The way to evaluate this is to examine the divergence of the church’s narrative with the state’s. If there is a great degree of convergence, then the church is providing religious legitimacy to the state. And in the American context, the church giving the state legitimacy is also giving legitimacy to its white supremacy. This is because race and racism are essential in America’s narrative.

Race and the American political project

In American history, the notion of whiteness has always been central to collective identity. As an Enlightenment project, the collective identity of the American people—those who would remember and anticipate together—was a specifically white identity since racial slavery.⁴ American white supremacy is *not* defined by an attitude toward non-white people, but by an attitude about whiteness, seeing *it* as normative, because white people are the central subjects of history.

White identity was forged in America. This is abundantly clear in the way that different ethnic groups had to “become white” in order to become fully a part of American society,⁵ and in the way that white Americans often work so hard to

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recover an ethnic identity.⁶ Whiteness is very real in America, which is why it is not enough to simply say that race is socially constructed. This is what is attempted by “color-blindness,” which tries to erase the categories without altering the narrative of history. Color-blindness is white society’s offer to black people to become white, just as the Irish, and Italians, and Jews had been welcomed into the white fold. The underside of this reasoning is clear: A white person saying to a black person, “I am not racist; I don’t even notice you’re black,” is in fact saying, “I see you as equal because I see you as white. But were I to notice that you are in fact black, then we’d have a problem.” And those who try to appeal to biology to prove that race is not real are only ontologizing this color-blindness. This normativity of whiteness is racism. The only way to deal with it is to rethink the interpretation of history that enabled it in the first place. And I suggest that America’s narrative has enabled and perpetuated its white supremacy.

Summarizing the American political narrative is obviously too big a task for a single essay, so what I will do here is give the broad outline of a narrative that lies at the heart of the American experiment.

America is an Enlightenment—and therefore Protestant—project. At its roots lies a “revolt against the authority of the church and the search for models of unrestrained criticism... a recovery of classical antiquity, and especially... a new appreciation and appropriation of the artistic and cultural heritage of ancient Greece.”⁷ Not only is this a source of modern white supremacy, which has whiteness as a measure of what Cornel West calls the “normative gaze,”⁸ but it also has a particular liberal notion of political liberty as one of its central elements. American colonists saw the “New World” as a place to escape political persecution. If there is a “fall” in the American narrative, it is a mythic past in which once naturally-free peoples were overtaken by political tyrants—acts which were usually religiously-motivated. The salvation from this was the liberal revolutions in Europe. More particularly, the American state was

founded, which prized freedom from such tyranny. This freedom is achieved in at least three ways: rejecting a monarchy, rejecting the authority of the church, and protecting private property (including slaves). Having secured its freedom, America’s revolution is in its past. The future America anticipates is just this freedom; it seeks to preserve its freedom against the threat of tyrannical political or religious authority.

But remember that Americans were slave owners. This was not in contradiction to this political hope, but precisely because of it. As Domenico Losurdo demonstrates, slavery was at its height during the formation of the liberal state.⁹ American freedom has always been freedom for white people, and the American political hope has always been the preservation of this group’s freedom, which has always included the un-freedom of those outside the group, as evidenced by chattel slavery, and now domestic wage labor, the prison system, and the exploitation of cheap foreign labor. In America’s history, the villains are those who threaten the basis for arrangement: the communists, who challenge private property, or now Islamists, who reject the separation of religion from public life, and so threaten the secular state which guarantees American freedom. Consequently, America has never hesitated to vilify and punish these groups and others like them, who dare to envision a different end to history than that projected by the American revolutionary story.

Adventism and Americanism

What about Adventism? It would be a mistake to identify the founding story of Adventism with the events in 1844. What actually matters more than how Adventism itself came into existence is how Adventists understand the Christian church’s history leading up to its birth. In the Adventist narrative, the church began well, worshipping God as Scripture intended, and suffering for it. The church’s “fall,” in this narrative, is what happened with Constantine, for here the church joined hands with temporal power, symbolized by blending

human laws with the law of God in the change of worship from the Sabbath to Sunday. The beginnings of the church's salvation from its fall were the few voices of dissent against this power in the medieval church, and then finally the Protestant Reformation. But the reformers themselves did not finish the job they started, and it is this job that Adventists understand themselves to have inherited. Adventists understand themselves as a part of the radical reformation, or even the final agents of the reformation. Central to their reforming work is to protect the separation of church from state, restoring what was lost after Christianity was transformed into the imperial religion by Constantine.¹⁰ Note here that this separation is because the church thinks of itself as non-political. Moreover, the liberal secular state—especially the United States—plays a key role in the very salvation of the church.

Nor can we miss Adventism's apocalyptic expectation. The *catastrophe* that Adventists anticipate is the reversal of what *America* has accomplished; the coming Beast is the revived Constantinian church, upheld by the power of the United States, which is expected to betray itself by supporting the papal church, the legal enforcement of Sunday worship, and the confiscation of private property. In other words, the return of monarchy, ecclesial authority over temporal power, and the violation of private property—the undoing of the *American* project!¹¹

What one must notice is that this narrative about the future functions to defend the merits of the American political project and its current arrangement by averting a catastrophe (not unlike the possible catastrophe that the American state seeks to protect itself against) based on its own narrative. The American understanding of freedom is built into Adventist theology, for the God of the Great Controversy is one who so values freedom that he would rather respect that freedom, even to enslave others, than violate that freedom in order to protect the well-being of those whom some intended to enslave. How so? The Adventist cosmic conflict is quite

literally a narrative in which God proves that he is good precisely by respecting freedom and calling for his followers to do the same, just as the American political arrangement calls for.

It is no accident, therefore, that Adventists have a theology that still usually ignores the existence of Native Americans, that largely Adventists did not participate in the Civil Rights Movement, or that Adventists are still largely segregated, even institutionally. Moreover, it is difficult not to notice that the sort of theological purity that Adventism strives for by disentangling itself from the operations of government is wrapped up in notions of racial purity, for the purity of the American project has always revolved around the purity of the white race. White racial purity was the quest that emerged from the Enlightenment's "normative gaze," and Adventism's inheritance of America's Enlightenment goals retains that racial logic.

And perhaps most troubling is the role of Ellen White in Adventism—not simply in general, but because of White's particular understanding of the history of the Christian church, as well as her particular apocalyptic expectations. By inheriting (and effectively canonizing) *her* understanding of the meaning of history, which for the most part converges with key elements of the American narrative, Adventists have frozen into their theology Ellen White's nineteenth-century American racial reasoning. To the degree that race—and class—are viewed as socially essential parts of American society, this remains the case with Adventism. The only way forward is to rework the Adventist narrative by reinterpreting the past and rethinking hope for the future.

Conclusion

For Adventism to shift its racist politics, it must change its understanding of history. The only way forward is a new narrative: a new past and a new future. This has implications for our theology. I do not believe it is possible for Adventist theology to remain unchanged or change only a little if it is to overcome its white supremacy.

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The racism is built into the only narrative within which current Adventist theology is meaningful.

I suggest that Adventists must learn to transform their theology of *cosmic* conflict into *class* conflict, seeing the revolution not as an event of the past, but as one that lies ahead. This means embracing a future that overcomes the determinations of the past. More explicitly: Adventism must abandon notions that the future has already been decided and made known.

Further, Adventists must rethink their understanding of the church's past and overcome Ellen White's particular reading of that past. This will involve rethinking her role and authority in the tradition. The church must learn to ask what Ellen White now means in light of the moment we now live in, and in light of the future we now anticipate. The church will be enslaved to Ellen White so long as the current moment and anticipated future is interpreted by her. She must be de-canonized, and placed alongside other figures in the tradition, to be remembered or forgotten as the church needs at each moment in history.

Finally, Adventists must come to think of themselves as a political entity that is automatically in tension with the state, and that its job, as a community that believes in the Gospel, is to disturb the political status quo, and to challenge any entity which claims itself as the savior of history. Only in this way can Adventists come to see their political complicity in Americanism, with its racism, classism, militarism, imperialism, and ongoing oppression of the poor—especially those of color. And only then can Adventists actually offer the critique of Americanism that they have for so long believed themselves to be offering. ■

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References

1. Though these observations are finally basic, the actual work to coming to these is not simple. In one respect, this short essay is probably best thought of as a short outline for a book that would not rush through all the details.
2. The main insights that make up the argument of this section are drawn primarily from Robert Jenson. See especially "Eschatological Politics and Political Eschatology," *Dialog* 8, no. 4 (Autumn 1969): 272–278; *Story and Promise: A Brief Theology of the Gospel About Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 62–102, 177–198; *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 73–94; "Eschatology," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 407–420.
3. Only the nihilism of postmodernity would deny that this is self-evident. After all, one wouldn't call a group of people coerced into association with one another a "community."
4. See Allen, Theodore, *The Invention of the White Race* (London: Verso Books, 2012); West, Cornel, *Race Matters*, 1st ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).
5. Ignatiev, Noel, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Roediger, David R., *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
6. Waters, Mary C., *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
7. West, Cornel, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 53.
8. *Ibid.*, 54ff.
9. Losurdo, Domenico, *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (London: Verso Books, 2011).
10. Recent evidence for this is an article written by the church's president, Ted N. C. Wilson, "Keeping Church at Arm's Length From State," *Huffington Post*, November 6, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ted-nc-wilson/keeping-church-at-arms-le_b_4226809.html.
11. This is a basic summary of what Ellen White describes in *The Great Controversy*.

Note: This essay prompted a vigorous discussion at the SAP session and when it was posted on spectrummagazine.org. Read the online discussion at: <http://spectrummagazine.org/blog/2013/12/03/what-white-supremacy-part-1-2>