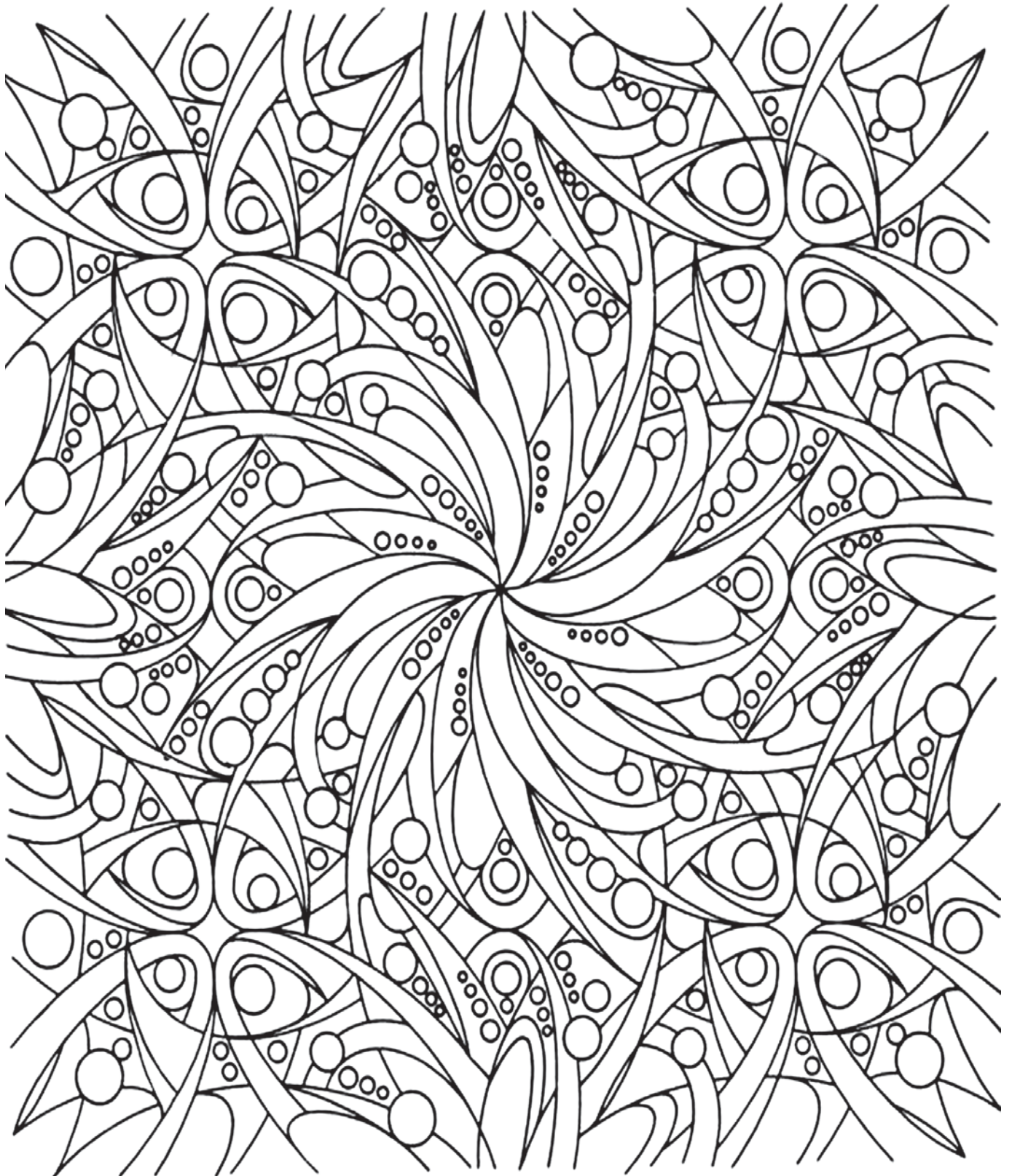


ATHEISM AND ADVENTISM



Too Adventist to be Adventist?

Catch-44: The Paradox of Adventist Atheism | BY TOM WEHTJE

*"There lives more faith in honest doubt,
believe me, than in half the creeds."*

—Alfred Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam"

In a dystopian nightmare that doubles as an apocalypticist's fantasy, the inquisitor (an Adventist witch-hunter in one scenario, persecuting priest in the other) places before you an ultimatum with the following stark choice:

- I am an Adventist.
- I am not an Adventist.

Do you answer honestly if your life, job, family ties, or reputation are on the line? The melodramatic scenario is rife with the either/or, us/them, all-or-nothing logic of remnant, a winnowing of wheat and tares. But what if your most honest answer is to check both boxes? What if you both are and are not an Adventist?

I'm not referring to a casual Laodicean luke-warmness of weak or divided loyalties, the indecision of having one foot in each camp, or of mere indifference to spiritual matters. I mean a more complex conundrum in which one identity generates its supposed opposite. By upbringing, habits of thought, and core values (such as a perhaps obsessive preoccupation with questions of truth and belief), I am an Adventist. Some of those very qualities, however, I am convinced, have led me away from religious belief. Paradoxically, I am perhaps never so much a true, earnest, even idealistic child of Adventism than when I challenge, doubt, or ultimately disbelieve Adventist dogma.

The paradox cuts both ways, a double "Catch-22."¹ When I think most like a traditional Adventist, then I conclude that I am not an Adventist. Surrounded by worshippers in church, I kneel during prayer or hear the preacher refer inclusively to what "we believe," and I

open my eyes wide during that prayer, and bow my head during that sermon, feeling the more an outsider, almost guilty for being there. Of course, I know that the assembly is not really so united in belief—admission is open, and I'm aware from private conversations with other skeptical thinkers who attend and participate, if only for family reasons or the soaring organ music. But I also know that Adventists like to think of themselves as a community of believers, a church defined by a list of fundamental doctrines. Just how many of those beliefs a believer must believe to qualify as an Adventist isn't clear to me (must it be 100 percent? 90? a passing C's worth?), or whether one ought to remove one's membership if those beliefs have shifted since they were affirmed through baptism, at the impressionable age of twelve or fourteen (or twenty).² Wherever one places the bar, however, on strictly doctrinal grounds—grounds of personal belief that Adventists themselves like to think determine religious identity—I know that I am not an Adventist.

When I think like a non-Adventist, however—perhaps like a sociologist observing myself and my lifestyle and worldview from outside the bubble—then I realize how deeply Adventist I still am. Some telltale traits are immediately recognizable. A close friend I met in grad school, himself nonreligious, laughs good-naturedly at "superstitious" behavior he says belies my pretensions to free thought. I don't drink, swear, or eat meat. I wouldn't even sample the celebratory wine a professor brought to my dissertation defense. (Tellingly, the dissertation itself explored disturbing connections between early modern theologians' obsession with documenting the reality of witches, and their desperate need to believe in God and immortal souls.)

The Adventist ethos is stronger in me, however, than loyalty to a lifestyle, by itself a sort of cardboard-cutout



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Adventism. Mere cultural observance does not an Adventist make. Rites and ceremonies might define membership in some religions, but Adventist identity—at least in theory—is a function of interiority, of core beliefs and values. Indeed, even assent to a list of doctrines is itself arguably only a superficial marker of membership. More essential principles, down in the engine room as it were, power the ship of faith and determine those outlying doctrinal positions. In Matthew 22 and John 13, Jesus boils down the Decalogue to two principles, and, ultimately, a single law of love. On such liberal terms perhaps even an unbeliever like me can own the label Christian.

Taking Truth Too Seriously?

Thanks to my Adventist and educational heritage, however, I don't think I can boil it down so far. Not even love trumps truth (although integrity to truth need not be understood to trump love either). The two principles coexist in a sometimes complicated equilibrium. In Joyce's *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus is mocked as something of a prig for refusing to pander to his dying mother's wishes and pray with her at her bedside; but I understand his reticence.³ Her request demands of him a self-abnegating obeisance before cultural norms and even a certain dishonesty. He would

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make a mockery or empty form of prayer if he were to go through with it, though unbelieving. Some skeptical Adventists, acknowledging the social function of public prayer, are willing to lead out in it, and perhaps their stance is more sensible than my own somewhat superstitious scruples. I am happy to close my eyes and bow my head out of respect to the believers present, just like I am happy to attend church respectfully, for that implies nothing about my own belief or unbelief. I generally appreciate the words of the prayers and sermons as meaningful expressions of human joys and longings, even though I don't believe they ascend to any divine ear or consciousness. If asked to say grace before a meal, I feel bound by conscience to frame the speech act as an open, unaddressed statement of gratitude that I fear must seem too bland and impersonal for most appetites (which is why it may be politest to defer).⁴

What an awkward tightrope walk that must seem—especially to friends who have abandoned the Adventist scene altogether, or others who wholly acquiesce in its official teachings, and don't understand why I can't just go along with them. Yet, I think my predicament describes not merely a balancing act between Adventist and non-Adventist elements of identity, but a taut wire of tension inherent within Adventism itself, that both the abandoner and the easy acquiescer have in some sense let go. (Perhaps it is a double bind from which there is no easy escape unless one's private thoughts and beliefs happen to flow precisely in officially prescribed pathways.) The Protestant primacy of individual conscience on the one hand competes against the strong ties of a communal and family faith on the other. Personal integrity pulls against loyalty to the tribe. Love and truth vie as cardinal virtues. Love of truth is called down from its airy flights to accommodate sensitivity to the feelings of others (as well as to the emotional needs and existential longings of the self).

My behavior is quintessentially Protestant and Adventist, then, not only when I refuse to accept authoritarian prescriptions of doctrine, demand-

ing to think it all through for myself and to follow truth and the weight of evidence wherever they lead, but also when I nevertheless still cleave to my home community out of a strong sense of loyalty and identity. We all know the paradigmatic mission story of the girl or boy who converts to Adventism against the commands of overbearing Hindu or Catholic or Muslim parents, sacrificing family ties in devotion to the truth. This illustrates one of the core values of Adventism that would seem to support Stephen Dedalus's privileging of private conscience over his mother's prayer request—but of course the reality is more complicated. Adventism is not really so unreservedly individualistic or libertarian, for a double standard is at work. The Catholic girl or Hindu boy may be celebrated for abandoning the family faith because that faith is benighted. In such a case the idealistic pursuit of truth for truth's sake may be taken as admirable, even heroic. If that young person were a dissenting Adventist, however, suddenly communitarian values and family loyalty might seem more important; the heroic pursuit of truth becomes instead a betrayal.

The supposed difference, of course, is that as Adventists we know we have the truth, so there can be no question of leaving Adventism in pursuit of it. Some other motive must be assigned to wayward seekers. Perhaps they are rebellious by temperament. Perhaps their home church was not warm enough. Perhaps they were not raised right by their parents. Such theories shield the institution itself and any dubious truth claims (what doubters actually doubt when they lose faith), casting blame instead upon individual members and their supposed parenting failures or shortcomings as teachers. It grieves me to think of myself and others like me as a stigma upon people we love and admire. Sadly, it may be easier psychologically for loyal members to take that guilt upon themselves as scapegoats for their church, or to lay it upon wayward loved ones, than to admit the even more shattering possibility that their own faith and eternal hopes are mistaken.

Ontological Crisis

My sensitivity to the vital importance of that hope, as well as its fragility, makes me silent, often, when Adventists express fundamentalist opinions in ways that seem nonnegotiable.

"I'm certainly not willing to believe that humans evolved over millions of years," a relative of mine stated recently, and all I could do was nod my head slightly in recognition that I understood his position (while not intending to imply that I agreed with it).⁵ Actually, his statement did not impugn science so much as register his own unwillingness to believe it. His choice of phrasing nevertheless betrays a certain uneasiness, as if he perhaps ought to be willing to believe in human evolution upon the authority of science, if only it didn't contradict necessary theology (as he went on to argue that it does). Behind the surface denials is a respect for science—even a religious earnestness about it—that is characteristically Adventist and I think admirable. To be sure, the most strident and least informed creationist denials come across as dishonest or frantic, casting for evidence among discredited conspiracy theories and hoaxes, tracing human footprints in the Jurassic sands of time. Such deniers sustain the ideal of a supernatural theology that is neatly wedded to natural fact by inventing their own alternative science.

Many Adventists, however, recognize the discrepancy and have to make a hard choice—or at least a complicated exegesis. As a student writer observes in *The Collegian's* February 2 (2012) special issue on origins, "At its roots, evolution is a theory that is irreconcilable to Christianity." I agree. So are advanced biblical scholarship, anthropology, archaeology, geology, and any number of other -ologies.⁶ As an argument against evolution, however, this merely begs the essential question—we don't actually have to examine the evidence once we discern inadmissible theological implications.⁷ Such statements, often heartfelt and earnestly intended to uphold Adventist doctrine, nevertheless reveal a fracture

within the Adventist world view. They drive a wedge between theology and the book of nature, threatening to make a mockery of Adventist higher education. They are politically inconvenient—and yet, I think, the underlying fears are perceptive.

Despite the efforts of liberal Adventists to apply a splint and limit the damage, making the best of an awkward situation, the fracture is serious and extends beyond Adventism as a crisis for Christian supernaturalism in general, which (to shift metaphors midstream) is unequally yoked to scientific naturalism in a marriage of convenience. An ontological schizophrenia results that accommodates miracles or intercessory prayer in the chapel on Sundays while restricting itself to naturalistic explanation in the lab on workdays, or on the evening news. A stubborn philosophical consistency on the part of Adventists, exemplified by a distinctive and often overlooked doctrine, makes it especially difficult for us to overlook such contradictions. The result is a pair of unlikely twins, Adventist fundamentalism and Adventist atheism, unsightly offspring of the Adventist monistic union who come by their warts honestly (although they take after different parents).

The Perils of Monistic Thinking

Like atheists, Adventists are monists. We don't believe in immortal "souls" or in body/soul or spirit/matter dualism. Such monism was actually quite influential during the early modern period and made a play to become mainstream: Hobbes and Milton were monists and mortalists, for example, as was Tyndale before them.⁸ During that age of rising science, theologians pointed to witches as empirical proof of the reality of spirits, their bodies the mediums where flesh and spirit conjoined during sexual congress with demons. Eventually, however, the hope for an empirically-validated faith on such sensational terms turned into an embarrassment, both for religion and for science. The mainstream solution has been an ontologi-

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cal split, a great chasm opened up in the order of things. Despite the fracture (due to irreconcilable differences), it is widely considered an amicable divorce with a mutually beneficial settlement. Religion inhabits the high Judean hills, ceding the fertile vales of Sodom to science. Thus it is comparatively easy for dualist Christians to have their faith and science too, each sovereign over its separate fiefdom, impervious to assault from the other.

Not so for Adventists! Science matters. The body matters. Matter matters religiously, not just spirit. Hence the Adventist emphasis upon the second coming and a bodily, whole-person resurrection. Hence the Advent health message. Hence ADRA. Hence Adventist involvement in science—the Madaba Plains Project and Geoscience Research Institute (despite the latter’s quick dive into apologetics).⁹ Even the Sabbath maps the sacred upon real-world space-time. All these Adventist beliefs and pursuits participate in a single, coherent, integrated world view that is an admirable—even heroic—alternative to the convenient evasiveness of mainstream Christian dualism, which can strike Adventists as a sort of ontological schizophrenia or split personality disorder. That heroic consistency,¹⁰ however, comes at a price. I believe it makes educated Adventists especially prone to slide not merely into apostasy or religious indifference, but outright atheism.

In the first fifty pages of his skeptical treatise *The Illusion of Immortality* (1935), humanist philosopher Corliss Lamont chips away at the dualistic foundation for belief in an afterlife, asserting what he calls “the essential unity of the body-personality.”¹¹ On the path to atheistic annihilationism, in other words, Adventists have a head start! On the following page Lamont awards that dubious recognition:

Today in the United States the religious sects known as Russellites [i.e. Jehovah’s Witnesses] and Seventh Day Adventists [sic] adhere to the same general notion of a sleeping or unconscious soul between the death and resurrection of the body. In spite of the fact that this solution has never gained any large or important

group of converts, it must be conceded that it has the advantage of a certain heroic consistency. And its defenders, of all those who have called themselves Christians subsequent to the earliest days of the faith, come nearest to admitting monism in its pure and simple form. . . . It would, however, be rather tragic for these stalwart dissenters if the long-promised and long-heralded resurrection never took place after all. For then, according to their own theory, neither they nor anyone else would ever taste the joys of immortality.¹²

This is the boldness of the Adventist position, a fitting reason to feature that word “Adventist” in the church title. Like the earliest Christian believers,¹³ Adventists stake all their hopes for an afterlife upon resurrection at the promised second coming—a risky, historically-contingent gamble. Indeed, so great is the human longing to go on existing¹⁴ (preferably in a better existence), despite the evident fact of mortality, that mainstream Christianity developed a telling redundancy in the denial strategy. The dead do not have to wait until doomsday to live again, it was decided, for their souls are already immortal and at death are released from the prison of the mortal body like birds from a cage. Until the resurrection (or should the resurrection never take place), ongoing life—or one’s vital consciousness, at least—is thereby assured. Adventists lack that safety net, that redundancy, in the theology of immortality. The unresurrected must sleep forever in oblivion. The failure of the promised second coming would be a catastrophe to any hope of long-term personal survival.

What Lamont doesn’t mention is that just such a tragic disappointment as he projects in the quotation did in fact take place early in Adventist history. Many in the Millerite movement lost faith, but some remained steadfast, and they did so for the very reason that Lamont suggests the disappointment would be so tragic—that is, precisely because so very much depended on it. A high emotional investment can cause believers to hold onto faith even more tenaciously in the face of adversity and apparent disconfirmation, as the branch of



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social psychology known as cognitive dissonance theory explains. In their classic application of this theory, Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter describe how members of a UFO cult that predicted the end of the world would occur on December 21, 1954, nevertheless maintained their faith and reinterpreted the prophecies when the apocalypse failed and no spaceship descended to take them home to the skies.¹⁵ All of this hits home. Indeed, in the introductory chapter the authors devote eleven pages to the parallel

pattern of predictions, sacrifices, reschedulings, disappointments, and reinterpretations by the Millerites.¹⁶

Of course most tests of belief are not so dramatic or definitive. Prophecies that imprudently target specific dates and make falsifiable predictions are characteristic of young cults, not seasoned religions which grow up to be more reticent or sophisticated, and perhaps Adventism has been maturing in that direction.¹⁷ Adventist believers are nevertheless still subject to emotional pangs and existential longings similar to

those recalled by the disappointed Millerites,¹⁸ experiencing as it were their own private Great Disappointments or quiet Awakenings, each on his or her own personal schedule, when faith perhaps gradually ebbs away through a series of discoveries, or suddenly reappears.

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Belief as a Guilty Pleasure?

A few summers ago an Adventist friend and I exchanged a series of email messages exploring the reasons for belief and disbelief in God. In a climactic message my friend announced with relief and excitement that he had experienced a breakthrough. “I had an epiphany of sorts,” he wrote. “I chose to believe.” He said he felt greater peace of mind than he had in a decade. I was happy for him—he’s a wonderful person who gives Adventism a good name through his integrity, intellectual acuity, tolerance, and life of service. His testimony to the joys and psychological benefits of belief, however, was not by itself a convincing argument for me to believe. Indeed, in an odd sort of way the very convenience of his newfound faith seemed to make my friend himself suspicious of his own motives.

Being the “substance of things hoped for” has never seemed to me a very solid foundation for belief. Our legal system recognizes the distorting power of bias upon decision making and disqualifies judges and jurors who have a vested interest in a case. In questions of personal belief, we cannot so easily opt out of the hot seat, but we can still try to beware the biasing motives of our hopes and needs which, contrary to William James’s arguments, seem rather to cast doubt upon a convenient truth than to confirm it.¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, for one, is so wary of the skeptical charge that Christian faith is a projection of wish-fulfillment that he goes to rather absurd lengths to suggest the opposite. In his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy* he represents himself, unconvincingly, as a “most dejected and reluctant convert,”²⁰ dragged kicking and screaming, as it were, from atheism to belief in God. Perversely, he makes the Christian gospel sound as if it were the bad news of salvation and

eternal life! Thus Lewis comes off as agreeing with today’s neoatheists who, in an apparent effort to make atheism more salable, represent it as a gospel of liberation from the oppressive weight of religious belief. (“Good news! God doesn’t exist and humans have no hope for eternal life!”) For opposite reasons, then, both Lewis and the neoatheists distort the obvious psychological attractions of belief, which in Paul’s own formulation are faith’s defining motive.

My introspective friend seems to share my (Adventist?) discomfort with this Pauline hoped-for-faith or Jamesian willed-belief. Later in the same eureka email message celebrating his newfound freedom to believe, he added:

Of course there are lots of negative things to say about such a decision . . . Is this a utilitarian decision? I don’t know if it’s possible to sort that out. I’m well aware of the utilitarian benefits, not least including ‘smoother’ group membership. I’d like to think that it’s not utilitarian, but that could easily be self-delusional.

His anxiety on this point, and my own unbelief, stem from the same commitment to truth over convenience, convention, and authority. Thus we find ourselves in our own Catch-22, a freethinking Adventist’s dilemma. Either path we take—belief or unbelief—can seem like a betrayal: his sense that he might have sold out by “choosing” belief out of convenience, or my own rejection of my parents’ faith due to an impractical—and to some eyes, callous—adherence to core principles (truth? integrity? idealism? a Protestant independence of mind?) that my parents themselves, and other Adventists, tried to teach me.

Desire does not imply gratification, nor wishes fulfillment. Of course, I’d like to believe in eternal life and an end to injustice and suffering; I’d like even more not just to believe it, but for it really to be true. Christianity at its best is a powerful expression of these human longings. Sadly, however, our wishes and ideals do not determine reality. Perhaps this is what can give even statements of hope and comfort a tinge of heroic sadness. At a recent funeral I attended for a man I

myself never knew, I nevertheless felt the loss deeply, and noticed the tremor in the voice of the pastor as he read the Bible promises. Those promises express life as it should be, and we mourn in part at the incommensurable gap between that should and what is. That gap is not diminished by our wishes or denials. The sufferings and questions of Job are not resolved by the tacked-on epilogue (although the desire to tack it on is itself revealing of human nature). The Bible, like other great literature, explores the full range of human experience—not just the comic or melodramatic, genres with a crowd-pleasing finish. Indeed, the greatest of Shakespeare’s plays, in which he probes most profoundly the depths of human experience, are tragedies.

A Life-Affirming, though Tragic, Vision

I had the privilege of acting alongside that same friend in Atlantic Union College’s final English department theatrical production, *King Lear*. After bearing the lifeless body of Cordelia onstage in the final scene of Shakespeare’s great tragedy, Lear utters some of the most heart-breaking lines in all of literature, words that press toward a stark unchristian conclusion:

*Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!*²¹

What a powerful expression of loss and the value of a human life, accompanied by the absolute negation—reiterated five times in the same bleak line—of any hope of an afterlife. Death is final.²² Our sense of the old king’s sorrow and affection for his daughter, however, is not diminished by this stoic denial—to the contrary. The play is tragic precisely because it examines unflinchingly the disparity between human values (values the play affirms feelingly) and events in a mute, uncaring, amoral universe. At the conclusion corpses litter the stage. Nevertheless, neither my believing friend nor I would trade Shakespeare’s searching treatment

for Nahum Tate’s cheerier 1681 revision in which divine justice prevails, Cordelia lives, and Lear never speaks those searing, truthful, and remarkably doubt-laden lines.²³ ■

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References

1. Ok, so that doubleness is already present in the title conundrum of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, but let’s call it “*Catch-44*” anyway, with the echoes of 1844 and 144,000 ringing in our ears.

2. Or what about adherence to a fundamental doctrine that has been added to or revised since one’s baptism? Would there be a grandfather clause to allow ongoing membership under the old rules?

3. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1914; New York, 1961), 5, 8. Despite his apparently stoic refusal, Stephen is evidently moved enough by guilt, or love, or sorrow for his mother that he is haunted by this memory (9ff). Perhaps truth-finicky Adventist atheists, as well as Adventist fundamentalists, share something of what Stephen’s friend Buck Mulligan refers to as “the cursed jesuit strain in you,” which for the Adventist atheist, as for Stephen, however, is “injected the wrong way” (8).

4. “We are thankful for . . .” is one formula for beginning such an NDR (Non-Deity-Referencing) expression of gratitude before meals. I think it is not disrespectful while remaining honest.

5. Likewise, after a funeral, an Adventist expressed to me how difficult she thought it must be for nonbelievers to face the fact of death without our hope. I did not interpret that as an invitation for real discussion, and so of course just nodded my head, as much as to say that I understood that she did indeed find the hopelessness of unbelief inadmissible. But of course we can feel sympathy for all humans faced with the fact of our mortality! Indeed, her own statement suggests that belief functions for her as a necessary shield against the very fear of mortality that she projects onto the unbeliever. (Behold the “bare, forked animal” beneath our cultural clothing! All of us, it seems, are afraid of the dark.)

6. Assuming we are talking about a fundamentalist, biblical, supernaturalistic Christianity. Of course we can also speak of a selective ethical or philosophical Christianity, the Christianity of the Golden Rule or the Sermon on the Mount (or the Jefferson

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Bible), to which secular humanitarian activists might be said to adhere as well as anyone. A toned down, wholly naturalistic Christianity can avoid contradiction with biology and the other -ologies (the narrator of Martin Gardner's novel *The Flight of Peter Fromm*, for example, is both a Unitarian minister and an atheist), but at the cost of some of its most popular features in the form of miracles, special providence, and transcendence of natural mortality (liberal sects such as Unitarianism don't exactly offer patrons the same metaphysical punch).

7. During a Sabbath dinner years ago when a disparaging remark was made about the theory of evolution by another guest, and my friend the host went into his study and returned with a tall stack of scholarly books on the subject, he was probably wasting his effort because the first step to discovery seems to have little to do with science itself. (The willingness even to consider evidence that goes against one's own wishes and beliefs seems to be the necessary preliminary leap of unfaith.) Compare what the prosecutor does to demolish the arguments of intelligent design theorist Michael Behe in the Dover, PA evolution trial, as reenacted according to the court records in NOVA's documentary "Intelligent Design on Trial" (viewable online at www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/evolution/intelligent-design-trial.html). In response to Behe's assertion that the bacterial motor flagellum is an example of irreducible complexity, the sudden eureka appearance of which scientists could not account for and whose component parts in residual form could have had no prior function, the prosecutor produced a tall stack of research demonstrating the contrary. The scene is emblematic of the mass of evidence that makes evolution both "fact and theory," as Stephen Jay Gould explains in his classic and still helpful essay, "Evolution as Fact and Theory," *Discover Magazine* (May 1981), reprinted in Gould, *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes* (New York, 1983), 253–262. Gould's suggestion in *Rocks of Ages* (New York, 1999), that science and religion comprise two "non-overlapping magisteria" (or NOMA), on the other hand, seems merely to recapitulate the dualist compromise, a God-of-the-gaps philosophy that would render supernaturalist or revealed religion obsolete, leaving room for the "spiritual" only in the interstices left vacant by scientific explanation—apparently, for Gould, roughly the territory covered by philosophy, ethics, and of course theology.

8. Primary early modern texts include Tyndale's *An Answer unto Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* (1531), Milton's manuscript "De Doctrina Christiana," Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) and *An Answer to a Book Published by Dr. Bramhall* (1682), and Richard Overton's *Man's Mortality* (1644), in addition to many other lesser-known controversialist treatises and pamphlets; modern historical studies of the history of mortalism (or soul sleep) include Norman T. Burns, *Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton* (Cambridge, MA, 1972); Ann Thomson, *Bodies of Thought* (Oxford, 2008); Bryan W. Ball, *The Soul Sleepers* (Cambridge, 2008) with an Adventist slant; and earlier, also Adventist, and at great length in two volumes, L. E. Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington, D.C., 1965–66).

9. On the history of the Geoscience Research Institute see Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists* (Berkeley, 1992), 290–8. The book is required reading for all would-be controversialists on the subject of creation/evolution.

10. To coin a phrase from Lamont; see the block quotation embedded in the following paragraph of this essay.

11. Corliss Lamont, *The Illusion of Immortality* (New York, 1935), 49.

12. Lamont, 50.

13. Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes toward Death* (Baltimore, 1974),

29–33. Oscar Cullmann's landmark study *Immortality of the Soul; or, Resurrection of the Dead! The Witness of the New Testament* (New York, 1958) demonstrates that body/soul dualism featuring belief in an unconditionally immortal soul was an import from Greek thought not native to the eschatology of the earliest Christians, who looked to a resurrection of the whole person.

14. As philosopher Thomas Nagel explains in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, 1979), "It is being alive, doing certain things, having certain experiences, that we consider good. But if death is an evil, it is the loss of life, rather than the state of being dead, or nonexistent, or unconscious, that is objectionable" (3). This is accurate to my own intuitions, and fits well with Adventist mortalism. Many Christian apologists during the early modern period argued that the atheist's motive was to deny the reality of the afterlife out of fear of eternal hellfire, which would be worse than not existing at all. Likewise Lucretius argues in *De rerum natura (On the Nature of Things)* that religion created an artificial fear of the gods and torment in an afterlife, whereas there was really nothing to fear because both the gods and life after death were illusions. In his Pulitzer Prize winner *The Denial of Death* (New York, 1973), Ernest Becker demonstrates to the contrary that fear of death is natural for all humans as a basic existential anxiety that fuels our various neuroses and other denials (including belief in immortality). See also *Love's Executioner* (New York, 1989), Stanford University psychology professor Irvin Yalom's powerful application of this theory during therapy sessions with ten patients for whom fear of death is the underlying cause of dysfunctional behavior.

15. Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (*When Prophecy Fails* [New York, 1964]) write with an objectivity and an implicit compassion generally absent from the caustic intolerance of the so-called neoatheists. "Religion poisons everything" is the refrain of Christopher Hitchens's bestseller *God Is Not Great: The Case Against Religion* (London, 2007), and of course we know that pious zealotry has indeed cost countless lives and caused untold suffering. But surely, even in the absence of religion, sorrow and tragedy would continue—"everything," compared to human perceptions of how things ought to be, would still be "poisoned." No, religion is not so much the primal cause of human ills as a reaction or response to them, an attempted solution, or escape, or willful denial. It is the dream of a better world, the waking up from which is cause for genuine sorrow. Witness the desolation expressed by one disappointed Millerite:

Our fondest hopes and expectations were blasted, and such a spirit of weeping came over us as I never experienced before. It seemed that the loss of all earthly friends could have been no comparison. We wept, and wept, till the day dawn. I mused in my own heart, saying, My advent experience has been the richest and brightest of all my Christian experience. If this had proved a failure, what was the rest of my Christian experience worth? Has the Bible proved a failure? Is there no God, no heaven, no golden home city, no paradise? Is all this but a cunningly devised fable? Is there no reality to our fondest hope and expectation of these things? And thus we had something to grieve and weep over, if all our fond hopes were lost. And as I said, we wept till the day dawn. (quoted in Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter, 22)

Even unbelievers must read this as a human tragedy. How much has been lost that is good and noble and idealistic! Such dreams are not easily abandoned.

16. Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter, 12–23. Biblical scholarship presents another fascinating parallel to the Millerite experience—appropriately enough, in the book of Daniel, so important to the Millerites themselves, which seems to have been written and/or compiled by an apocalyptic community also anticipating the imminent end of time, apparently even involving some recalculations and reinterpretations of the predicted dates. Norman K. Gottwald concludes his treatment of Daniel in his book *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia, 1985) with the observation: “A realistic estimate of the apocalyptic devotees as activists, probably combatants, within the limits of their situation accords with the interesting fact that they did not discard or repudiate their apocalypse when it turned out that Daniel’s visions were wrong about the time of the end. Apparently, like other apocalyptists who have been studied in terms of social psychological cognitive dissonance theory, they reinterpreted events and carried on the struggle” (594). For such a community, under duress, the overarching theme that God is in control must have been very meaningful, and I think our understanding of this can add to our appreciation of the book.

17. The bold prediction that the Second Coming would take place on October 22, 1844, for example, was reinterpreted after the fact by the unfalsifiable claim that an event had then taken place in the heavenly sanctuary. Dualism in particular removes the objects of religious truth claims to an abstract/ethereal realm where they are less vulnerable to disqualification through the evidence of the senses. During our postmodern era in particular, it seems, seekers are invited into a sort of consumer-friendly, duty-free, reason-free, science-free, unempirical zone in which the will becomes the unfettered arbiter of reality. Thus the religious marketplace pitches faith as an arbitrary choice or free form of personal expression governed by consumer rights after a fashion parodied by Woody Allen as he literally shops around for a religion in *Hannah and Her Sisters*.

18. See for example the block quotation in note 15 above.

19. As William James asserts in his essay “The Will to Believe,” in matters of religion, which necessarily carry some doubt, he has “the right” to believe in line with his own wishes (*Essays on Faith and Morals*, Ed. Ralph Barton Perry [Meridian, 1962], 60; cf. 32.). Of course he has the right—it’s a free country. But many truth seekers are not satisfied with a belief founded upon such unsupported and avowedly subjective grounds. Note Thomas Nagel’s critique in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, 1979): “As a last resort, those who are uncomfortable without convictions but who also cannot manage to figure out what is true may escape by deciding that there is not right or wrong in the area of dispute, so that we need not decide what to believe, but can simply decide to say what we like so long as it is consistent, or else float above the battle of deluded theoretical opponents, observant but detached” (xi).

20. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Collins, 1959), 182. The phrase is used by David C. Downing in the title to his biogra-

phy of Lewis, *The Most Reluctant Convert: C. S. Lewis’s Journey to Faith* (InterVarsity Press, 2002).

21. William Shakespeare, *King Lear: A Conflated Text*, in *The Norton Shakespeare: Tragedies*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2008), V. iii., 305–7.

22. By contrast to the New Testament and Christian beliefs, death is represented as final in the Hebrew Bible, where the dead go down to “sheol” or the pit and one lives on only figuratively in one’s descendants. Likewise, a central theme of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, previewed in even earlier Gilgamesh poems, our earliest surviving world literature dating back to the third millennium BCE, is the hard lesson that no one can return from the grave (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. Benjamin R Foster, [New York, 2001]). The hero cannot even pass a sleep test and stay awake for seven days, never mind overcome inherent mortality (fittingly, the clock that marks the time of the test is the rate of decay of each day’s freshly baked bread). In the Sumerian poem “The Death of Gilgamesh” the god Enlil, speaking in a dream, tries to reconcile Gilgamesh to death as the unavoidable and irremediable fate of mankind, and this is the keynote both for this poem and the later epic:

Gilgamesh, your fate was destined for kingship, it was not
destined for eternal life,
May your heart not sorrow that human life must end,
May your spirit not be crushed, may your heart not be
aggrieved.
The misfortune of mankind has come for you, so I have
decreed.
What was set at the cutting of your umbilical cord has
come for you, so I have decreed. (lines 78–82)

Referring to “Mankind, whose descendants are snapped off like reeds in a canebrake,” Utanapishtim (the “Noah” figure in the epic) leaves us with this image of transience:

Dragonflies drift downstream on a river,
Their faces staring at the sun,
Then, suddenly, there is nothing. (Tablet X, lines 312–314)

For evidence of radical unchristian doubts during the early modern period as an interesting context for Shakespeare’s dark vision in *King Lear*, see especially Robert N. Watson, *The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1994) and secondarily, William R. Elton, *King Lear and the Gods* (San Marino, CA, 1968) and Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy* (2nd ed., Durham, 1993).

23. In ameliorating and Christianizing Shakespeare’s dark vision (the play is set, after all, in pagan pre-Christian Britain), Nahum Tate has Edgar conclude his revision of the play with the following Panglossian moral: “Divine Cordelia, . . . / Thy bright Example shall convince the World/ (Whatever Storms of Fortune are decreed)/ That Truth and Vertue shall at last succeed,” *The History of King Lear . . . Reviv’d with alterations* (London, 1681), 67.

**Prophecies
that imprudently
target specific
dates and
make falsifiable
predictions
are characteristic of
young cults,
not seasoned
religions...**