

An Adventist Wycliffe: *In Defense of God and Human Freedom* | BY ALDEN THOMPSON

Does Sigve Tonstad get any sleep at all? If he is not grappling with the difficult issues confronting humans in their search for a credible God, he is writing monumental books about those struggles. *God of Sense and Traditions of Non-sense* (GoS) joins three other substantial volumes that have appeared under his name in the last ten years, each with an impressive bibliography and helpful indexing.¹

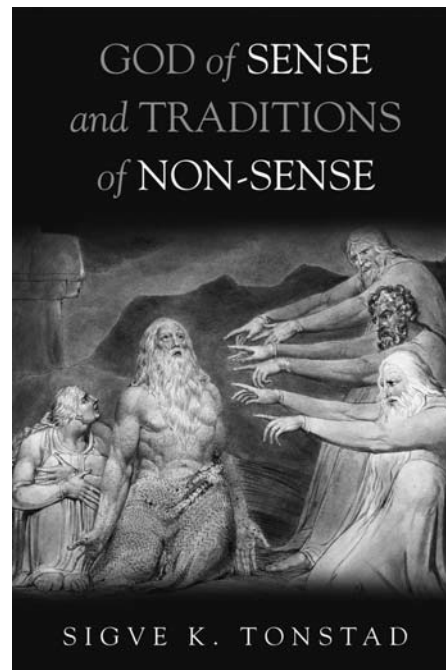
The precursor of GoS appeared in 2000 under the title *The Scandals of the Bible*.² In this modest little book of 154 pages, the Norwegian-born physician and biblical scholar describes the issues that haunt him: “I have chosen a category of scandals that concern God’s silence in the face of evil with all its atrocities. It is God’s apparent and disturbing inaction that has been most puzzling to me, as it has to many others.”³ In short, his focus is theodicy, the attempt to justify the existence of a good and powerful deity in the face of evil. Now, sixteen years later, that little book has mushroomed into a spectacular *magnum opus* of 453 pages, published by Wipf and Stock, a major U. S. press.

In GoS, the use of the term “non-sense” does not at all refer to mere “foolishness.” Rather, Tonstad is addressing a deeply-rooted tradition that, in the name of “human incapacity” and “divine inscrutability,”⁴ would deny human beings their right to pose their questions to God. Key spokespersons for that oppressive tradition include Job’s friends (especially Elihu), Augustine of Hippo (354–430), Martin Luther (1483–1546), John Calvin (1509–1564), and Karl Barth (1886–1968), a startling list of villains, to be sure. Elihu’s modest fan base makes him a safe target. But Augustine, Luther, Calvin and Karl Barth are all heavy-weights. Even in Adventism, Ellen White’s *The Great Controversy* dedicates some sixty pages to Luther, and another seventeen to Calvin.⁵

But before we turn specifically to the book’s arguments, let me explain a line in my title: “An Adventist Wycliffe.”

As I worked through the book I kept thinking of an Ellen White quotation that had an incendiary impact on me when I was a young Adventist reading *The Great Controversy*. Referring to John Wycliffe, the “morning star” of the Reformation, Ellen White wrote: “Wycliffe received a liberal education, and with him the fear of the Lord was the beginning of wisdom. He was noted at college for his fervent piety as well as for his remarkable talents and sound scholarship. In his thirst for knowledge he sought to become acquainted with every branch of learning.”⁶ The whole paragraph is a passionate affirmation of learning in the service of God. At a time when the church’s scholars are often viewed with suspicion, Tonstad has “sought to become acquainted with every branch of learning.” The enormous breadth of knowledge reflected in GoS is what triggered the connection with Wycliffe. And it’s all there: biblical studies, church history, Holocaust literature, modern novels. Astonishing is not too strong a word.

From one perspective, I suspect that Wycliffe, a strong advocate of predestination, would join Tonstad’s list of vil-



Sigve Tonstad, *God of Sense and Traditions of Non-sense*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016. Xxii + 453 pages.

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lains in this particular project. The only interest most predestinarians have in theodicy is to oppose it. And this book is serious theodicy. But depending on the agenda, we all choose up sides differently. Just as Ellen White admitted that Calvin as a public leader was not “faultless nor were his doctrines free from error,”⁷ so Tonstad states: “A comprehensive representation of the lives, work, and legacies of people like Augustine, Martin Luther, or Karl Barth would look different from the one given here and in many respects be admirable.”⁸

Though Tonstad’s title highlights the crucial tension between those who need the freedom to confront God (sense) and those who feel the need to curtail that freedom (non-sense), another two-part agenda could just as easily receive top billing: 1) the defense of the miraculous in Scripture; and 2) an apology for a personal demonic being who opposes God. The two are closely linked, for if one denies the supernatural, a personal devil vanishes as well. And when that happens, Tonstad suggests, one stands helpless before the horrors of the Holocaust.

In that connection, he cites a famous quote from the German New Testament scholar, Rudolph Bultmann (1884–1976): “It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles. We may think we can manage it in our own lives, but to expect others to do so is to make the Christian faith unintelligible and unacceptable to the modern world. The mythical eschatology is untenable for the simple reason that the parousia of Christ never took place as the New Testament expected. History did not come to an end, and, as every schoolboy knows, it will continue to run its course.”⁹

What was so unnerving for me was the connection Tonstad drew between Bultmann’s condescending statement—“as every schoolboy knows”—and the Holocaust. Tonstad ticks off the rising crescendo of horrors that stalked the Jews in Germany, “undeterred by the racial

Nuremberg Laws of 1935; by the dismissal of all Jewish university professors the same year; by the *Kristallnacht* of November 9, 1938, when Jewish property was vandalized and synagogues burned to the ground all across Germany; by the decree on September 1, 1941, that all Jews had to wear a yellow star in public; and by the mass deportation of Jews that began on October 15, 1941.”¹⁰

Tonstad quotes Bultmann’s biographer, Konrad Hammann, as saying that “Bultmann wanted his students ‘to continue doing theology’ in the direction shown by Karl Barth in 1933, ‘as if nothing had happened.’”¹¹ His search for “benign ways to tame the beast” included his (failed) efforts to convince Barth to join him in signing an oath of loyalty to Hitler.¹² Tonstad notes that Bultmann’s quote about the modern use of electricity and the wireless is horribly ironic when “the electric lights are turned off in the gas chambers at Auschwitz, and when the radio fails to report live from the scene.” The failure of Christianity is also reflected in the fact that in 1938, when the disasters began to mount, “the persecuted Jews were not at all or hardly prayed for.”¹³

But now let’s look at the genealogy of *GoS* as reflected in *Scandals*, its out-of-print precursor.¹⁴ While there are brief glimpses of the Holocaust in that little book, its primary focus is on “scandalous” biblical stories, almost all of which show up in one form or another in *GoS*. After opening with “The Concubine’s Long Night” (Judges 19–21), *Scandals* touches on all the right stories and all the right people, including the great biblical skeptics who were unafraid to confront God over evil: Abraham, Moses, Job, Elijah.

The most notable contrast, however, between *Scandals* and *GoS* lies in the overall structure. In *GoS*, the opening lines focus on the Holocaust; the story of the concubine does not appear until the eleventh chapter of twenty-one. But I was also struck by a notable omission and a significant addition in *GoS*, at least when compared with *Scandals*. The omission is the chapter on “Child Sacrifice,” intriguing because *GoS* provides a rich analysis of both Genesis 18 (Sodom)

and 22 (sacrifice of Isaac), noting, in particular, Abraham's tenacious worry that the "Judge of the all the earth" might destroy the innocent and the wicked together. But Tonstad does not attempt to explain why Abraham, after his brave confrontation over Sodom, heads to Mt. Moriah without a whimper. Might a solution lie close at hand in the missing chapter, "Child Sacrifice"? In Abraham's day, as throughout the Old Testament, child sacrifice had come to be seen as the highest gift to rapacious gods. If everyone else was sacrificing their firstborn son to their gods, why would not Abraham be asked to do the same for his God?

An intriguing *GoS* addition to the narratives found in *Scandals* appears in the analysis of Job, namely, the suggestion that the vivid description of the untamed Leviathan in the second divine speech in Job is a reference to a demonic being.¹⁵ That addition is not mentioned in *Scandals*.

But what is most striking about *GoS* is the full-fledged application of the principles adumbrated in *Scandals* to our modern world in light of the Holocaust. Tonstad opens with a horrific narrative from his native Norway. At 5:00 a.m. on November 26, 1942, 100 taxis fanned out across the Norwegian capital Oslo, each one accompanied by three armed men and led by a policeman. They rounded up 302 Jewish men, 188 women, and 42 children. Shortly before 3:00 that same day, the German ship *Donau* left Oslo with its human cargo. Less than a week later, in the evening of December 1, all the women and children were murdered.¹⁶ The vivid images documented in that opening narrative reverberate throughout *GoS*.

In many ways, *GoS* reads like a modern novel, with chapters on biblical narratives interleaved with segments on ancient and modern literature; the narratives are often left open, then picked up again later in the book as the "plot" thickens. The Christian apologist Origen (185–254) and his dialogue with the deceased second-century Celsus is one of those recurring themes, as is the extensive treat-

ment of *The Brothers Karamazov*, the capstone work of the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881). In particular, Ivan Karamazov's "poem," "The Grand Inquisitor," assumes a central role in Tonstad's depiction of the vivid contrast between the suffering God revealed in Jesus and the domineering God of power as seen by imperial theologians.¹⁷

On balance, the book is a *tour de force*, all the more so because Tonstad's beautiful prose is unmatched. And he isn't even writing in his native tongue.

But I must close with a reference to an unfinished task thrown into bold relief by *GoS*, namely, the question of how to do justice to the role of a sovereign God in human experience. How does one account for the beauty and power of monastic lives, for example, in the Roman Catholic tradition, lives such as Thomas Merton (1915–1968) and Henri Nouwen (1932–1996)?

Perhaps the need to worship an all-powerful God is reflected in the "Trial of God," described in several forms by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, whose God died at Auschwitz and who makes several appearances in *GoS*. In the introduction to Wiesel's dramatic presentation of the trial, Robert McAfee Brown tells how a teacher of Talmud befriended the fifteen-year-old Wiesel in Auschwitz. This is the story as Brown recounts it: "One night the teacher took Wiesel back to his own barracks, and there, with the young boy as the only witness, three great Jewish scholars—masters of Talmud, Halakhah, and Jewish jurisprudence—put God on trial, creating, in that eerie place, 'a rabbinic court of law to indict the Almighty.'¹⁸ The trial lasted several nights. Witnesses were heard, evidence was gathered, conclusions were drawn, all of which issued finally in a unanimous verdict: the Lord God Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, was found *guilty* of crimes against creation and humankind. And then, after what Wiesel describes as an 'infinity of silence,' the Talmudic scholar looked at the sky and said 'It's time for evening prayers,' and the members of the tribunal recited Maariv, the evening service."¹⁹

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Another paradox: Why is it that predestinarian, Augustinian/Calvinist parents tend to give birth to free-will Arminian/Wesleyan children, while free-will parents tend to give birth to those who cherish a sovereign God? Some years ago at a seminar in a solidly free-will United Methodist Church in Pensacola, Florida, I asked the some forty-five Methodists in attendance how many of them had family or friends who had once stood in the free-will tradition, but who had shifted their loyalties to the evangelical/Reformed tradition. Virtually every hand went up.

My commitment to the body of Christ, which for me means a big-tent Adventism—or a big-encampment Adventism (to borrow a phrase from John Webster of La Sierra University)—forces me to address that issue. What is important to both Sigve and me is that we both must ask our questions. We may not find the answers, but we must be free to ask our questions. I look forward to long hours of conversation with Sigve and others as we pursue the questions raised in and by his magnificent book. ■

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Answers and Escape from the Flames: How Ellen White Grew from Fear to Joy and Helped Me to Do it Too have played an important role in the community discussion about Ellen White.

References

1. His other major books, all currently in print, are: *Saving God's Reputation: The Theological Function of Pistis Iesou in the Cosmic Narratives of Revelation* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2006), a slightly revised version of his doctoral dissertation, submitted to the University of St. Andrews in Scotland in 2004; reissued in softcover by Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2013; *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), and *The Letter to the Romans: Paul among the Ecologists*, *The Earth Bible Commentary 7*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2016).
2. Sigve Tonstad, *The Scandals of the Bible* (Alma Park, Grantham Lincs: Autumn House, 2000).
3. *Ibid.*, 10–11.
4. *GoS*, 4.

5. Ellen White, *The Great Controversy* (1911): on Luther: 120–170, 185–196; on Calvin, 219–236.
6. *Great Controversy*, 80.
7. *Ibid.*, 236.
8. *GoS*, xxi.
9. Rudolph Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology" (1941), cited from *Kerygma and Myth*, Hans Werner Bartsch, ed. (Harper Torchbook, 1961), 5.
10. *GoS*, 15.
11. *Ibid.* The italics are Tonstad's.
12. *Ibid.* The Barth-Bultmann negotiations are taken from the *Barth-Bultmann Letters*, 78–79.
13. *Ibid.*, 18, citing Nicha Brumlik, "Post-Holocaust Theology," from *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 176.
14. Unfortunately, *Scandals* is out of print, though copies can be had for a price. At the point of writing, one could purchase a used copy through Bookfinder.com for as low as \$53.72 and a new one for as high as \$1,485.93 (from Amazon.co.uk).
15. Job 41:1–34, *GoS*, 260–263.
16. *GoS*, xviii.
17. The most thorough analysis of *The Brothers Karamazov* in *GoS* is found in chapter 2 (22–35) and chapter 18 (427–343).
18. A citation from Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel* (New York: Holocaust Publications, 1985), 112–13.
19. Robert McAfee Brown, from the "Introduction" to *Elie Wiesel, The Trial of God* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), vii.
20. Webster's suggestion surfaced in the discussion of a paper I presented at the West Coast Religion Teachers Conference at La Sierra University (April 8–10, 2016): "The Theocentric Former Adventists: Could They Return to a Big-Tent Adventism?" Several of my peace-loving WCRTC colleagues noted how exhausting it was to try to bring everyone inside a "big tent." That's when Webster suggested a "big encampment" like ancient Israel had in the wilderness. The sanctuary would be in the middle and individuals could pitch their tents around the sanctuary at whatever distance they wished.