

# Inhabiting the Kingdom: *On Apocalyptic Identity and Last-Generation Lifestyle* | BY ANTE JERONČIĆ



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## Introduction

Swimming is a big “No” on Sabbath. You can take a dip in the sea, but make sure that your feet do not leave the ground lest you begin exercising. Skiing is equally out. You can hike, although it demands more energy than skiing, but skiing seems more like doing what you please on God’s holy day (Isaiah 58:13). You can sail on the Sabbath, but don’t exert yourself by pulling the mainsheet; that would be “working.” Shave before sundown on Friday, and don’t shower on the Sabbath; avoid rock music (especially those tricky Beatles and their satanic backmasking); and be suspicious of laughter. After all, Ellen G. White exhorts, “God is dishonored by the frivolity and the empty, vain talking and laughing that characterize the life of many of our youth.”<sup>1</sup> Always place your Bible on top of other books; avoid Coke like the plague; wash your

dishes after sundown on Sabbath; do colporteur evangelism at least once a week; and by all means, don’t do any window shopping if you happen to walk through town after the Sabbath morning church service.

These lifestyle precepts were just some of the rules and practices that defined my Adventist teenage and young-adult years. As a new convert, I embraced them with a relish and seriousness that matched my zeal for my new-found faith. After all, becoming a Seventh-day Adventist, at least in the context of my home church, amounted to more than simply encountering God and finding forgiveness and grace; this was not a religion of mere sin management. Instead, nothing less than a complete transmutation of identity was called for. You didn’t just start praying, read devotional literature, and attend communal worship, you changed what you ate, watched, and listened to. In other words, you accepted and immersed yourself into a completely new lifestyle. You began to view the world as an arena of the great controversy and the urgency of “today”

(Hebrews 3:7)<sup>2</sup> and aimed to live accordingly. No choice was trivial, and no moment was to be wasted for anyone readying himself or herself to stand “without blemish” during the “time of trouble.” So, if that meant reading your pocket Bible while walking through town—bumping into people and lampposts in the process—or other efforts to become a complete overcomer, well, that was what one did.

Now it might appear that I am recalling such practices with a tinge of dismissal or sarcasm; I certainly am not. Granted, some of them were perhaps a bit too inflexible, too arbitrary—shaving on Sabbath as “work” (!)—but they were mostly done in good conscience and with a desire to honor God. With that in mind, I am leery of slapdash dismissals of “traditional Adventism”; those forms of reactionary zeal that mask a certain laziness of imagination and thought. Instead, my guiding desire is to probe the marrow of the Adventist way(s) of life in order to illuminate its architectonic beauty, to highlight its cohesive holism of doctrine and practice, and to celebrate its prodigious relevance to contemporary existence. One of the essential tasks of theology, after all, is to ferret out vital elements of the Christian faith from their overuse (and underuse) in order to imaginatively and critically re-sharpen them for both the life and the mission of the church. The same applies to the issue of “last-generation lifestyle”; that is, those copious attitudes and opinions of how Adventist believers ought to rearrange the totality of their lives—mentally, bodily, spiritually, socially, economically, and so on—in light of the imminent return of Christ. But how should one go about doing that? How can we meaningfully and coherently articulate what it means to truly worship God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind? What does it mean for our generation to live out the three angels’ messages? In sum, whither *apocalyptic identity*?

### Clearing: Naming Malfunctions

Dictionary treatments of *lifestyle* usually define the term almost redundantly as “a particular

way of living” or as the way an individual or a group decides to live, including convictions, attitudes, and emotional investments.<sup>3</sup> Thus, for example, when we say that Helen lives a “green lifestyle,” we have in mind a sense of identity expressed through specific practices over a period of time. But once we move away from such generic definitions and inquire into the specifics of an Adventist lifestyle, things become trickier. Be it questions of sexual ethics, diet, patriotism, choice of non-Adventist reading material, entertainment practices, Sabbath observance, jewelry, or spending money on status symbols in general—on these and other matters, one faces a deluge of opinions. That is particularly true in an age in which the immediacy of social media at times accentuates the basest aspects of human nature. Indeed, a simple Web search of matters Adventist will project one into a world of ministries or advocacy groups that elevate one or another lifestyle matter to *status confessionis* (confessional status)—an issue by which the church supposedly stands or falls. (Paul’s sarcastic jab in Galatians 5:15 about believers consuming one another is altogether apropos in this regard.) And how could it be otherwise in a religious movement in which disagreements habitually rise to the pitch of an apocalyptic “to be or not to be”? Such a burden of ultimacy is never an easy one to carry, neither for Hamlet nor for the Adventist believer.

As tempting as it might be to prance my way through these issues by advancing a personal “Here I stand” list, in this chapter I will instead take a step back and look at some of the foundational principles and beliefs that might aid us in approaching these matters in a faithful and coherent manner. For starters, we need to be transparent about various lifestyle malfunctions that routinely plague our community of faith, including the tendency to approach last-generation lifestyle matters in a reductionist sense. By that, I have in mind situations in which various communal rules and mores are wielded inconsistently at best, and disingenuously at worst. In fact, a habitual part of the Adventist folklore

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is to spoof the adroit ways in which we have mastered the craft of “straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel” (Matthew 23:24). One does not have to be a pastor or church leader to realize that jadedness among Adventist young adults often stems from exposures to such sanctimonious standards. We have all heard statements such as, “But Mom, Elder So-and-So just bought a \$975,000 home and drives an Audi A8, and you’re telling me that I cannot have these \$25 earrings?” Examples like that abound, and many a family’s Sabbath lunch has been visited by such riveting disputations.

In addition to the problem of *inconsistency*, we, as Adventist believers, are frequently affected by the issue of *segmentation* (which, indeed, is another type of inconsistency). It is always tempting to approach issues of last-generation lifestyle in a thoroughly fragmented manner, in which one fixates on prayer but not on money; on missions but not on social justice (as defined in the Bible); on the dinner plate but not on speech; or perhaps on sexual purity but not on practices of nonviolence—and vice versa.<sup>4</sup> Of course, such selectivity seldom results from an intentional decision to become imbalanced; our interests, religious environment, and cultural trends do their skewing work in our lives without asking for our permission.<sup>5</sup> And yet, we need to guard against such bifurcations, whatever their spurious rationale. Simply saying, “This is not my thing,” or “It does not concern me” just won’t cut it, irrespective of the garnish we bestow on our complacent apathies. Thus, it is usually a good all-around policy to distrust our preferred inclinations. We would do well to ask ourselves, why do I find this unimportant? Who or what has influenced me in that regard? What emotions drive my resistance? What unpleasant experiences, bad examples, or personal slights lie at the bottom of my reservations? Even a modicum of self-honesty will usually help us discover a reactionary motive behind our misgivings.

In that regard, the Adventist pioneers, such as Joseph Bates, provide an enviable model. As



**Adventist Pioneer, Joseph Bates**

we read Bates’s life vignettes, we are struck by the extent to which they exhibit, for lack of a better word, a deeply organic or integrative *spirituality*. Quite honestly, I am grappling for words to express my utter astonishment in that regard, especially if we consider the common denominator of most apocalyptic movements, both Christian and non-Christian—the separation of the “children of light” from everything that is dark and impure.<sup>6</sup> You break off contact and build your little communes; you don’t soil your hands with pesky matters of this world. Not so with Bates. In 1842, while believing that Jesus Christ, the great Abolitionist, would come within a year or so, Bates continued to walk the trenches of social justice. To wit, this is a

IMAGE SOURCE: ALAMY LTD.

man who in 1846, in the context of the Mexican-American War, readily condemned the United States as a “land of blood and slavery,” a “heaven-daring, soul-destroying, slave-holding, neighbor-murdering country.”<sup>7</sup> How about chewing on that for a morning devotional while sipping a cup of tea?

My point here does not concern the exact wording that Bates chose but rather the question, What was it about his understanding of the coming of Christ that made such a prophetic indictment both possible and necessary? He himself answers this question in his diary, where he writes: “All who embraced this doctrine[of the Second Advent] would and must necessarily be advocates of temperance and the abolition of slavery; and those who opposed this doctrine of the second advent would be not very effective laborers in moral reform.”<sup>8</sup> So, whatever we mean by living in the light of the First Advent, it has to include such a broadened scope of discipleship; it has to include spiritual practices and ethical integrity, the indicative (proclamation) and the interrogative (critique), the personal and the social, our deeds and our hearts. All of these elements will be present in a Spirit-filled community; a community that lives out its apocalyptic calling in a holistic way. Therefore, let us not put asunder what the Spirit of God seeks to put together.

Then, on top of everything else, we have the malfunction of *misapplication*. We must caution against the tendency to view various lifestyle matters, including treasured spiritual practices such as prayer and Bible study, as barometers of spirituality. It is at this point that Jonathan Edwards, arguably the most significant American theologian, offers a treasure trove of spiritual insights—his stringent Calvinism notwithstanding.<sup>9</sup> In his *Religious Affections* (1746) and other works, he deals with the following conundrums: What are the true signs of Christian conversion? How can we know that an experience of revival is genuine? What principles should we use “to discern the spirits”? In an effort to respond to these tricky concerns, Edwards helpfully points

to the “signs of nothing,” that is, to all those practices and manifestations of spirituality that might or might not point to a genuinely converted life. Things such as long prayers, passionate worship, rigorous morality, avoidance of entertainment practices, frequent quoting of Scripture, and service to others could indeed be a testament that someone has a relationship with Jesus but not necessarily so. Are we not all familiar with instances when this or some other “sign” in ourselves or in others proved to be a mirage, a cover for a cavernous soul devoid of spiritual vitality? Even altar calls can easily turn into ritualized protocols whose long-lasting effect just about rivals the length of those minor key choruses we love to employ on such occasions.

But if we cannot trust these things per se, what else could possibly serve as a measuring stick for self-evaluation (Ezekiel 40:3)? Quite importantly, Edwards reminds us that we should always turn the index finger in our direction and not play the game of guessing the motives of others, including their altar call responses. In the end, his answer is not surprising: “positive signs” of genuine conversion concern living according to the law of the Spirit and exhibiting His fruits: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22, 23)—not the external observance of the “law,” including the Adventist “law” of lifestyle rules. Without a progressive growth in such character traits, I am but an annoying quack, irrespective of my denominational status, YouTube reputation, or sense of self-righteousness. Such laser-focused attention on the core of genuine conversion is desperately needed, particularly at a time when passion for truth among the saints increasingly functions as a license for meanness. We would do well to heed Ellen G. White’s counsel in this regard: “There can be no more conclusive evidence that we possess the spirit of Satan than the disposition to hurt and to destroy those who do not appreciate our work, or who act contrary to our ideas.”<sup>10</sup>

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issues,  
sometimes  
despairingly:  
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see!”**

That is why we need to be watchful lest our religion morph into a perfidious means of God evasion—our fourth malfunction, that of *delusion*. Remember David, for instance, on the heels of the Bathsheba affair (see 2 Samuel 12). Just observe him sliding into religious talk during his tête-à-tête with the prophet Nathan, now that morality concerns others and not his own ignoble actions. In 2 Samuel 11, we see him acting with a moral conscience befitting a Mafia don, sending people left and right as it pleases him, including to their death. When it comes to condemning someone else, the word *God* glides dexterously over his lips while amounting to little more than a type of religious accoutrement. Miraculously, moral obtuseness is now nowhere to be found, so that his ethical judgment dazzles us with its swiftness and severity. In that sense, religion, for David, fulfills a conscience-placating role. Its fervency only masks the absence of a genuine devotion, which is a tendency readily observed in the Gospels as well. A lot of religious hot air gets generated—tears are shed, healings take place, pamphlets are delivered, prayer hugs dished out—but in the end, the person does not really know the Lord and is not known by Him. The religious carnival “has left town,” so to speak, and all you have is someone building his house on sand, because he refuses to listen to the words of Jesus and put them into practice (Matthew 7:24).

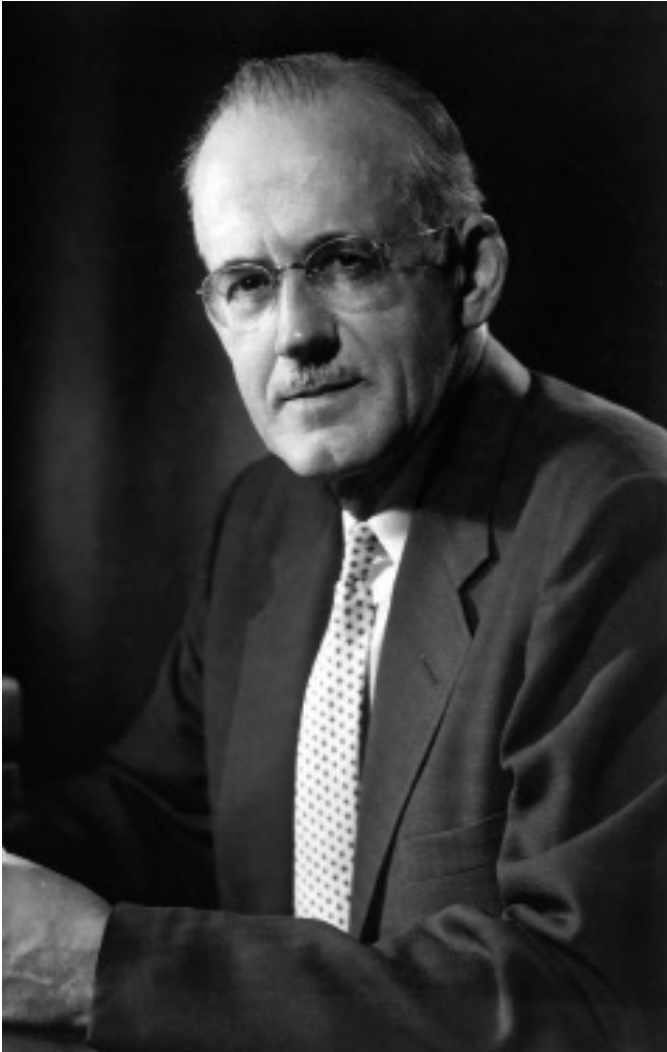
These, then, are some of the potential pitfalls that threaten to sabotage the faith of Christ’s followers: inconsistency (selective application of principles), segmentation (focusing on certain lifestyle issues at the expense of others), misalignment (forgetting the function and purpose of discipleship), and delusion (turning religion into a means of disobedience). Of course, all of that is clearly addressed in the Bible. Whether one takes a passage such as Isaiah 58 or perhaps delves into the Sermon on the Mount, the urgency to avoid such forms of inauthenticity are pressed upon us with particular vigor and insistence. How could they not, when so much is at stake; when the deceptiveness of the human

heart exerts such a blinding vigor? In truth, the plea of Bartimaeus often comes to my mind as I think of these issues, sometimes despairingly: “Rabbi, I want to see!” (Mark 10:51, NIV).

### **Deepening: On “Seeing,” “Standing,” and “Being”**

At one point in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, C. S. Lewis’s famed collection of children stories, the narrator offhandedly reminds his audience that “what you see and what you hear depends a great deal on where you are standing. It also depends on what sort of person you are.”<sup>11</sup> Lewis hints here at the obvious truism that our “way of seeing” depends on our “standing” and “being.”<sup>12</sup> To appropriate an image from a well-known cultural critic, it is one thing to see the city of Chicago from the top of the Willis Tower; it is quite another to do so while standing in an alley on Chicago’s South Side.<sup>13</sup> The position and orientation of your standing is significant in determining your perception—the extent, intensity, perspective, impact, angle, and proportion of it—as well as your potential actions and accompanying attitudes and emotions.

To develop this a bit more, let us say that “seeing,” or *perception* in the Lewis quote above, includes the following elements: attunement (predisposition to notice), understanding (interpretation), judgment (valuation), and imagination (envisioning possibilities). It leads to statements such as, “Notice this!” or “It means this,” or “This matters!” or perhaps, “We could do that!” The Bible is saturated with examples of perception, so defined, playing a determining role in the lives of believers. Take the case of Jesus describing the extravagant act of His anointing as “beautiful”—the amazing connection of self-sacrifice and aesthetics here warrants a deeper exploration—while others dismiss the spilling of the fragrance as wasteful or self-promoting (Mark 14:4–6). Or when Paul becomes “greatly distressed” (Acts 17:16, NIV) upon entering the city of Athens and seeing the city littered with pagan symbols, while others walking next to him are either at peace or greatly



**Theologian, A. W. Tozer**

impressed with the city's splendor. In both of these occasions, we have a clash of perceptions—with Jesus and Paul on one side, and the disciples and the crowd on the other. To repeat, Jesus and Paul did not just act in opposition to others; they perceived things differently. They were predisposed to notice certain things when the people around them were oblivious to them (attunement); they understood them correctly (interpretation); they attached a different level of significance to these things than did their followers or adversaries (valuation); and they were alert to a range of potentialities (imagination) that others were not aware of. In that sense, the foundational question for Christ's disciples is not simply, What would Jesus do? but rather, What and how would Jesus see? This often boils down to, What would Jesus care about?

Given that our actions are always a response to how we see things, it is easy to see why the question of perception is so important for ethics and Christian discipline-

ship in general. As the ethicist Stanley Hauerwas rightly notes, ethics "is not first of all concerned with 'thou shalt' or 'thou shalt not.' Its first task is to help us rightly envision the world."<sup>14</sup> Such an observation, of course, applies to a multiplicity of life spheres. A doctor reading MRI and CT scans for diagnostic purposes, an art connoisseur noticing compositional elements of a Vermeer painting, a musicologist marveling at the mathematical brilliance of Bach's Chaconne for solo violin, an activist sensitized to subtle patterns of institutional injustice—these and countless other examples illustrate how competencies, life experiences, character, interests, psychological and physiological states, and beliefs influence our seeing or failure to see and how that in turn determines the range of our potential actions, emotional responses, and cares.<sup>15</sup> (There is actually a whole discipline that studies the nature and causes of ignorance called *agnology*, but that, too, must be left for another context.<sup>16</sup>)

And it is on this last point that the significance of Lewis's insight comes fully to the fore—the idea that perception is connected with our "standing" and "being." The former, I suggest, refers to our *orienting beliefs*, which include everything from basic worldview commitments—what James Sire refers to as ideas about the "basic constitution of reality"—to more ordinary, everyday beliefs.<sup>17</sup> All beliefs matter! In fact, by using the term *orienting beliefs* I mean to avoid the natural impulse to accord foundational worldview commitments a greater life-orienting weight than other, seemingly mundane, beliefs. After all, most people in the United States today deem Black Fridays more existentially pressing than black holes—used here as a metonym for questions of cosmology—and virtual reality fantasies more enticing than concerns over the nature of ultimate reality. And I don't mean this in any snide or demeaning sense. On the contrary, I simply credit the way in which minuscule tenets sometimes disproportionately affect the way we *live* our lives. For instance, Don might firmly believe in the glory of God—certainly a claim about the "basic constitution of reality"—but when it comes to mentally processing, let's say, a failed work promotion, it is his peeve about the dysfunctionality of bureaucratic institutions that assumes the ultimate orienting force. (Or he might be just an incorrigible quibbler!) Accordingly, describing a person in terms of his worldview, such as theist, deist, or monist, represents only a portion of who that person is and the choices he makes

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while working, commuting, socializing, relaxing, and so on. The question, therefore, is not which of his beliefs are important in some ultimate sense but rather which of them orients or directs his decision making.

Adding to this problematic situation is the vexed role of the cognitive unconscious that frequently overrides orienting beliefs without our conscious awareness.<sup>18</sup> A person who ardently sings and preaches about the love of God might nurture, at a more fundamental level, the image of an unpredictable and arbitrary deity whose providential interventions border on the schizophrenic. Yes, a theology of the love of God is intact and loquaciously defended—as we impassionedly seek to do in this book—but hidden uncertainties shape the person’s decision making, self-perception, and basic life orientation. To compound the problem, the presence and substance of the cognitive unconscious eludes superficial introspection. Along those lines, A. W. Tozer suggests that,

our real idea of God may lie buried under the rubbish of conventional religious notions and may require an intelligent and vigorous search before it is finally unearthed and exposed for what it is. Only after an ordeal of painful self-probing are we likely to discover what we actually believe about God.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, much ardent prayer needs to be offered to God asking Him to reveal to us the true state of our hearts and minds.

That being said, as important as are orienting beliefs (“where we stand”) for perception—and here we are moving to the other element of the Narnia quote above—what we see also depends on “who we are.” Obviously, we *are* in some ways our beliefs; how could it be otherwise? At the same time, we are so much more. That is, there is a more encompassing, *existential* dimension to us as human beings in general (and specifically as last-generation believers) that at the bare minimum includes the following aspects:

*Affective investments* comprise *desires* for objects, experiences, states of mind, God, or people; *passions* for causes, that is, things we feel strongly about; *loyalties* toward God, individuals, life roles, communities, institutions, traditions, the nation-state, and so on; and *priorities* in time and allocation of resources. Such affective investments might be either acute or protracted; they inextricably shape who we are as human persons. In fact, given their obstreperous character, these allegiances frequently exert a determinate influence on where and how we land on various moral issues. They not only supercharge our responses but also fundamentally direct them; they incline us to certain actions and affections.

*Embodied sensibilities* include automatic responses expressed through a “sense” or “feeling” about an issue, leading us either to recoil from it or to cling to it—often automatically. By functioning as the basis of our emotions, these embodied sensibilities manifest themselves through deep-seated feelings of like or dislike, attraction or repulsion, and delight or aversion and are often at work long before cogent, intellectual reasoning arrives on the scene. We are attracted by that which we find beautiful, pleasing, hip, and aspiring on the one hand and repulsed by that which we perceive as hypocritical, odious, passé, and limiting on the other. In other words, much of our being in the world is determined by these aesthetic sensibilities; sensibilities that, in conjunction with the cognitive unconscious, provide a covert mechanism of decision making. This has enormous implication for pastoral practice and missions because most people do not reject Christianity because they see it as wrong; they reject it because they find it unseemly—they are in some way repulsed by it. To a large extent, their rationales are aesthetic, not epistemological. In other words, their response involves judgments of taste and not statements of truth. For the most part, this blinding does not result from unearthing some faith-shattering axiom; instead, it sprouts from a slow, almost imperceptible shift of aesthetic sensibilities where fragments of God alienation

coalesce into alloys of religious indifference imperceptibly over time. In the end, the spark and luster are gone, and God just does not do it for the person anymore. (Of course, as the story of the Fall illustrates, such changes can happen more suddenly. Adam and Eve's about-face had nothing gradual about it; the shift in their aesthetic sensibilities seemingly happened with remarkable speed.)

*Character*, as the very term implies, refers to dispositions or tendencies to act, feel, and think in a certain way over an extended period of time. According to the Bible, it is impossible to talk about human identity, including the pursuit of truth, without focusing on character, which is that internal network of good habits and bad habits, virtues and vices. Namely, we may arrive at wrong judgments about something or someone—we “see” or “read” wrongly—not only because we possess inadequate information or misguided beliefs but also because we are plagued by character faults. A selfish person will see the world differently than a person who is generous, and the “fool,” as depicted in Proverbs, will remain impervious to words of wisdom despite their rational appeal (cf. Proverbs 23:9). Put differently, both the pursuit and articulation of truth inevitably rides the jagged topography of virtues and vices, emotions and experiences, influences and presuppositions. There is always more to knowing than simply knowing; inevitably, all kinds of motives, character traits, tastes, and emotions also get thrown into the mix in a way that often eludes our clear comprehension. That is why training in truthfulness requires “training in godliness.” Peter says as much when he exhorts us to supplement our

faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.

He then concludes by stressing that these vir-

tues have an epistemic, or truth, weight in that they keep us “from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:5–8).

*Personal particularities*, finally, pertain to matters such as *context* (cultural, economic, sociohistorical, etc.), *narrative* (forces of socialization, formative experiences, conversions, traumatic markers, etc.), *memories* (including suppressed ones), and *self-markers* (personality, gender, ethnicity, mental and physiological health, intelligence, etc.).

As a summary, we could now rephrase Lewis's words from the beginning of this section—about how our seeing depends on where we stand and who we are—as follows: what you *perceive* (as attunement, understanding, judgment, and imagination) depends on your *orienting beliefs* (worldview, doctrines, cognitive unconscious, etc.) and *existential situation* (investments, sensibilities, character, and particularities). And that leads us to the core claim in this chapter: personal *identity* is an emergent property, a gestalt (composite whole) that arises from the interaction happening among perception (“seeing”), beliefs (“standing”), and situation (“being”). Let us unpack this a bit more.

What has been clear so far is that our account does not find much sympathy for an intellectualized reduction of human beings to “thinking things,” that is, to disembodied cognitive machines churning out worldview blueprints or fundamental beliefs that are then more or less acted upon.<sup>20</sup> But neither do I think that our core identity is just a sublimation of existential situations; that human persons are nothing but a patchwork of reactive emotions or mindless passions. Rather, human identity understood in an existential sense is a type of gestalt—a protean, continually malleable pattern of interaction between beliefs and situations affecting, as we have argued all along, both our perceptual horizons (attunement) and acts (understanding, judgment, and imagination).<sup>21</sup> The Bible abounds with examples that speak to how identity, so defined, shapes the actions

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it.**



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of individuals. Some see the resurrection of Lazarus as a miracle of God; others see it as a reason to condemn Jesus to death. One thief on the cross perceives Jesus to be the Messiah, while the other mocks Him. Some discern John the Baptist to be a great prophet, while others dismiss him as a religious fanatic and a usurper of established power arrangements. In all these instances, we have a clash of perceptions, because people possess different identities and different perceptual horizons and cares.

As expected, the precise anatomy of identity differs not only from person to person but also within an individual in different moments of that individual's life; the exact shape of our identity changes and fluctuates—sometimes less and sometimes more—as we go through life. We acquire new friendships, suffer tragedies, grow older, become victims of conflicts, see miracles, battle addictions, experience conversions, and grow in wisdom. In other words, we experience life in its ungraspable and baffling complexity. All these events, internal states, aspirations, and concerns, combined with our deepest-held beliefs, shape each configuration of identity, and with it, our relation to truth. We could even say that at any given point in our lives our identity tends to coalesce around one or more *centrations* or concerns.<sup>22</sup> In everyday language, we sometimes refer to such centrations as “consciousness.” Thus, when we say that “Hannah has a strong social consciousness” or “Andy’s patriotic consciousness is quite pronounced,” we have precisely such centrations in mind. In both instances, identity centration stands for everything about these individuals that explains Hannah’s and Andy’s attitudes toward social issues and the nation-state respectively at that moment in their lives.

What the notion of centration points to, therefore, is that various events, states of mind, personality, and insights can function as catalysts to either stress or neglect certain faith commitments in the way environmental factors, analogically speaking, might lead to gene silencing or activation in human cells. For in-

stance, a church member coming from a war-torn region where religious symbols fueled nationalistic jingoism might feel differently about national flags in houses of worship than would a proud mother of a newly minted Marine in the pew behind. To wit, the former might even see such flags as “the mark of the beast on the Christian body.”<sup>23</sup> As it happens, both individuals believe in the sovereignty of God, the creation of humanity in the image of God, the Sermon on the Mount as the charter for Christian discipleship, respect for authorities, the three angels’ messages, and a host of other beliefs. But the disparity in their affective investments and their life centrations alters the way they interpret, emphasize, or apply those faith commitments.<sup>24</sup> These two individuals might have identical orienting beliefs on paper—there is no denial of the objectivity of truth here—but their configurations of identity result in certain beliefs becoming accentuated while others are muted; they simply care about different things in different ways. In other words, their identity gestalt determines their *inhabitation* of truth, which can be either authentic or inauthentic or biblically faithful or not.

While granting that the word *authentic* is a slippery one that means different things to different people, in this context it does indeed pull a hefty polemical punch. Namely, if you recall our discussion from the previous section (*Clearing*), you will remember that we examined some of the common faith malfunctions that plague our community of believers: inconsistency, segmentation, misalignment, and delusion. All these represent different forms of incongruity or inauthenticity that last-generation Christians need to confront. In this section, we have covered the same territory from a different angle by taking a more specific look at the notion of human identity and the various elements that compose it. It will not be lost on the attentive reader that the notion of congruency, and thus authenticity, has been the driving force here as well. After all, isn’t that our most urgent need? To bring *all* our orienting beliefs into harmo-

ny with the Word of God (authenticity 1)? To make sure that *all* our loyalties and priorities reflect those Christ-centered beliefs (authenticity 2)? To prayerfully examine *all* our sensibilities to see whether they mirror the timbre of Christ's mind and spirit (authenticity 3)? And to petition the Spirit to instill in us His "fruits" or "kingdom virtues" that they might sustain us in our loyalty to Christ and provide the soil in which right sensibilities might flourish (authenticity 4)? The fusion of these four facets of authenticity is what I have in mind in the preceding paragraph as I refer to the authentic "inhabitation of truth." For the last-generation remnant, such an authentic Christian identity is by definition an apocalyptic one.

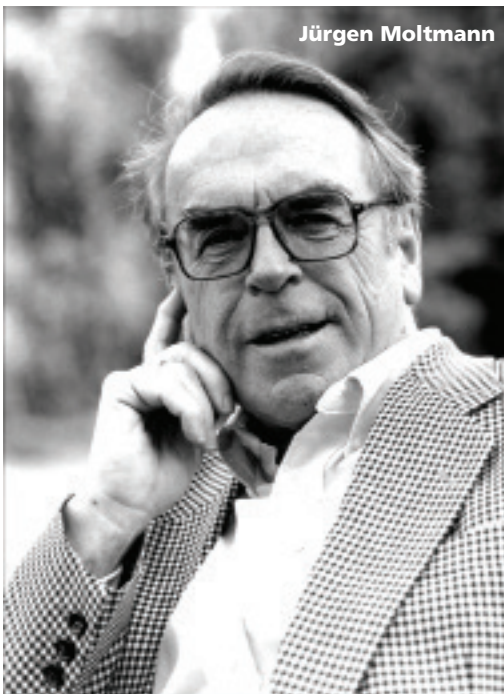
### Broadening: Inhabiting the Apocalyptic "Space"

For the Adventist pioneers, the confession "Jesus is coming soon" was so much more than a vacuous gesture. Their apocalyptic focus on the imminent return of Christ, the conviction that eternity was right at the door, led them to craft a lifestyle that would reflect the gravity of the times in which they were living. As they saw it, you could not profess such a cosmic announcement and continue to stroll around as

if nothing had happened. "The King is coming; be ready!" A radical change of identity and practice was the only proper response to God's ensuing interruption of history. Priorities had to be rearranged and resources reallocated; "life as usual" was no longer possible. To their credit, their response was one of verve, and then some. They were ready to assiduously up-end their existence and reject all forms of cultural and religious normality to an extent that we today find both inspiring and slightly unnerving. Any brief visit to the Adventist Village in Battle Creek, Michigan, or a perusal of early Adventist literature will make such an air of self-sacrifice and commitment virtually palpable. One feels dwarfed in the presence of such a spiritual dedication. And I don't mean this in a hagiographic, melodramatic sense; their blind spots and character defects can hardly be hidden from any semi-critical historiography. But whatever their shortcomings, and there were many, no one can question our pioneers' pursuit of congruence between faith and practice, between the proclamation of the final judgment and an unreserved commitment to God. They not only believed in the Second Coming, they lived it.

So, what happens when that focus diminishes? What happens to an apocalyptic movement when it becomes progressively *unapocalyptic*—note the shift here in identity centrations as discussed above—a fact only partially masked by the requisite "Jesus is coming soon" affirmations populating our collective gatherings? George Knight addresses these questions with some intensity in his widely received book *Apocalyptic Vision and the Neutering of Adventism*.<sup>25</sup> I remember how much I was taken by this book's title the first time I saw it. It was the word *neutering* that did it for me and still does. I like the way it conveys the image of Adventism being drained of its vitality; the process of making it more placid, more insipid, and ultimately barren. There are many ways, of course, in which such an *unadventizing* of Adventism might and does happen: institutionalism, authoritarianism, lack of missionary focus, and doctrinal infighting are

**One feels dwarfed in the presence of such a spiritual dedication. They not only believed in the Second Coming, they lived it.**



Jürgen Moltmann

IMAGE SOURCE: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/f1/30/4ff1304f66d512a771dcbe15854911e85e5.jpg>

**As a corollary,  
many view  
apocalypticism  
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just some of the potential forces that might contribute to it. But for Knight, and I would concur with him on this point, many of these problems are simply symptomatic of a deeper issue, namely, the loss of the apocalyptic identity central to Adventist pioneers.

Admittedly, that is a somewhat contentious claim because it is not at all self-evident that “apocalyptic” should be the central organizing idea of our Christian identity. Even our own community of faith faces significant disenchantments with apocalyptic discourse, particularly on a grassroots level. While the reasons for such disaffection vary, they usually fall back on some of the following: unease concerning Christ’s delay, antagonism toward Adventist “particulars”; rejection of a sectarian, contemptus mundi (contempt of the world) mentality; disillusionment with “beasts and charts” evangelism; alternative conceptions of Christ’s Parousia, or visible arrival; stress on the humanitarian and world-affirming dimensions of Adventism; and aversion toward a religiosity that fuels fear or promotes violence. As a corollary, many view apocalypticism as synonymous with loopy hysteria or uncouth exclusivism.

In response, I would say that the true character of Adventist apocalyptic identity is of an entirely different sort. It is *not* unduly obsessed with cataclysmic events in the near future, although its view of history is rather bleak. It is *not* conspiratorial, although it is often mistrustful of that which passes for “normality” or “common sense.” It is *not* world denying, although it is not naïve about the ways in which structured unbelief permeates most facets of our life or world. And most important, it is *not* just one aspect of biblical revelation; the Bible is apocalyptic through and through. In fact, we cannot make any sense of the ministry of Jesus, including such basic items as the Lord’s Prayer, without an apocalyptic framework. As Jürgen Moltmann famously and rightly puts it,

From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is escha-

tology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day. For Christian faith lives from the raising of the crucified Christ, and strains after the promises of the universal future of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

In this quote, the word *medium* is key because it pushes Adventist apocalyptic identity beyond a narrow preoccupation with final events and issues of character perfection, important as these topics are, to include fundamental questions of human existence such as philosophy of history, divine action, tragedy, truth, power, and the common good. In that sense, Adventist apocalyptic identity mirrors the scope of the great-controversy narrative, both in terms of its historical span and its thematic inclusivity. It functions as a lens by which last-generation Christians ought to conduct their lives in obedience to Christ.

As it is quite impossible to fully unpack these issues here given our space limitations, let me highlight but a few selected and rather compressed theses on apocalyptic identity and its key centrations (or consciousness, as I will use the term synonymously here).

### **1. The benevolence of the self-giving God is the foundation of all reality.**

“Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8). Everything stands and falls with that. No theology, practice, doctrine, policy, tradition, or anything else is ever—simply *must not be!*—allowed to impinge on this fundamental truth, this animating force of the universe. We are not waiting for just any God; some generic deity whose intentions are spurious or unclear. The

coming of God—in Creation, Redemption, and final glorification—speaks of a God of covenant faithfulness, of unmitigated and fierce love, of boundless grace, and of overwhelming compassion. The self-emptying (*kenosis*) of Jesus that Paul so movingly portrays in Philippians 2 is a dramatic enactment of divine humility, a revelation of who God always was, and is, and always will be throughout all eternity. Such a *God consciousness* frames the apocalyptic lifestyle.

### **2. To have apocalyptic hope is to live under the sense of the “now.”**

“I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2, NIV). *Therefore*, we conduct our lives under the sign of the *terminus*, the end. The very idea of imminence puts pressure on time; it compresses it, and with it shortens the horizon of our expectations. Apocalyptic Christians do not envision a historical horizon of perpetual postponement—a sense of slow, evolutionary development of humanity. They experience the urgency of time, and with it, the restlessness of hope. They are awake and alert, prayerfully attending to the “signs of the times.” Such a *time consciousness* frames the apocalyptic lifestyle.

### **3. God’s transcendence, or otherness, bursts through human expectations.**

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8, NIV). *Therefore*, we affirm God as the God of “breaking in” and rupture. He unsettles as much as He pacifies; He interrupts as much as He heals. We cannot control Him, nor can we confine Him within our arbitrary standards. He shatters all our religious efforts to turn Him into a manageable deity, into a god of our projections, wishes, and needs. Thus, to live in response to the coming of God means to live in repentance of all our idols, fetishes, and disguised forms of ego worship; it means to live in the light of truth that strips us of all falsehood and protective shields, es-

pecially religious ones. That God would confront us so is an act of grace, an act of “apocalyptic rupture” par excellence.<sup>27</sup> Such a *truth consciousness* frames the apocalyptic lifestyle.

### **4. The cross of Christ is the essence of our faith and identity.**

“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). *Therefore*, we side with Martin Luther’s words: “*Crux probat omnia*” (the cross tests everything). In so doing, we confess that apocalyptic identity is a cruciform identity. It imitates the crucified God in at least two key aspects: *kenosis* (self-emptying) and solidarity with others in their needs and sufferings. In other words, it recognizes that “the law of self-renouncing love is the law of life for earth and heaven.”<sup>28</sup> Who then is the coming God for us today? He is the one who continually invites us to the *via crucis* (the way of the cross), to a life of self-emptying benevolence and true freedom. Such a *cross consciousness* frames the apocalyptic lifestyle.

### **5. An apocalyptic philosophy and theology of history is a form of remembrance.**

“They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’” (Revelation 6:10, NIV). *Therefore*, we spurn bids to view historical developments and current societal arrangements through the eyes of the victors and their ideologies of “exception” by which they justify the necessity of exploitation, oppression, and destruction of human life. Instead, apocalyptic identity presents a form of counter-memory; an orientation attentive to the underside of history and the muted voices of victims, the multitude of slain souls under the altar (verse 9).<sup>29</sup> It refuses to sentimentalize their deaths, to abandon them to the logic of historical necessity and ideologies of collateral damage, and thus protests an “unalterable bias toward inhumanity and destruction in the drift of the world.”<sup>30</sup> Such a *solidarity consciousness* frames the apocalyptic lifestyle.

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needs.**

## 6. God's high regard for human and angelic freedom accounts for the provisional tragic dimension of human existence.

"For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now" (Romans 8:22). *Therefore*, we reject easy identifications of Divine Providence and history. We see God's purposes repeatedly thwarted by the mendaciousness and folly of both human and angelic freedom—the hubris of Lucifer, the rebellion of Adam who was "sufficient to have stood, though free to fall,"<sup>31</sup> the apotheosis of Babylon, and the surreptitiousness of the lamblike beast of Revelation 13. There is a certain sense in which it is fitting, therefore, to speak of "the weakness of God," as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, not in order to make God impotent or complicit *vis-à-vis* human suffering, but rather to account for God's sovereign, self-limitation in the face of human freedom. Such a *tragic consciousness* frames the apocalyptic lifestyle.

## 7. In imitating the way of Jesus Christ, we pursue a life of peaceable witness.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). *Therefore*, we consider peacemaking as essential to the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18) that God has given to us in this world. Following the lead of the Adventist pioneers who considered "all participation in acts of war and bloodshed as being inconsistent with the duties enjoined upon us by our divine Master toward our enemies and toward all mankind,"<sup>32</sup> we, too, seek to engage in peacemaking efforts in all spheres of life. Such a *peace consciousness* frames the apocalyptic lifestyle.

## 8. The whole cosmos is alienated from God and under the provisional rule of principalities and powers.

"When we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world" (Galatians 4:3, NIV). *Therefore*, we profess that such fallenness extends beyond individual sinfulness; it infects all human institutions and endeavors, including corporations and governments, ideologies and philosophies. Principalities and powers, in whatever form they manifest themselves, always seek to make God weird and the "world" normal. With that in mind, apocalyptic Christians will be skeptical of powers of normalization. They will continually ask, How did such-and-such become a problem? Who de-



Dietrich Bonhoeffer

IMAGE SOURCE: [HTTPS://UPLOAD.WIKIMEDIA.ORG/WIKIPEDIA/EN/46/DIETRICH-B.JPG](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/46/Dietrich-B.jpg)

fines the parameters of the "acceptable" and the "normal"? What reigning mythologies or ideologies seek to capture our imagination and actions? What liturgies or repeated practices have been established to achieve such outcomes? What symbols and rituals do they contain? How do they employ threats and promises as mechanisms of control? Such a *critical consciousness* frames the apocalyptic lifestyle.

## 9. In a world opposed to the gospel of Christ, our remnant identity will be one of cosmopolitan exiles.

"Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles . . . according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood (1 Peter 1:1, 2)."

*Therefore*, apocalyptic speaks of a nomadic existence, a

sense that in this world, even in the best of circumstances, we are never fully “at home.” The Adventist movement as a religion of hope unsettles societal norms, continually breaking camp and extinguishing existing campfires. The very notion of a tribal allegiance to an ideology or the state flies in the face of the cosmopolitan character of the people of God who refuse any form of “adjectival subversion” in which “black,” “white,” “American,” “libertarian,” “progressive,” or any other label would serve as a modifier of the noun “Adventist” instead of the other way around. Our kingdom is not of this world. Such an *exilic consciousness* frames the apocalyptic lifestyle.

### 10. The Spirit awakens us to the presence of the kingdom in all of its manifold manifestations.

“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7). *Therefore*, we readily affirm the sprouts of God’s kingdom as we encounter them in different dimensions of life—art, nature, science, the political sphere, and so on. Because apocalyptic Christians recognize the sovereignty of God in all things, they are free to recognize and support the common good wherever they encounter it. Such a *kingdom consciousness* frames the apocalyptic lifestyle.

These theses, while being borderline cryptic, at least partially limn, I hope, the contours of an apocalyptic lifestyle. Or rather, they outline foundational truths that ought to function as orienting beliefs for last-generation Christians so that Christ may reign supreme over our existence. Because in the end, isn’t that at the heart of it all? Isn’t it of utmost importance that Jesus Christ be the Alpha and Omega, the key identity centration encompassing all of our lives? As Dietrich Bonhoeffer movingly puts it,

[Christ] is in the middle. He has deprived those whom he has called of every immediate connection to those given realities. He wants to be the medium; everything should happen only through him. He stands not only between me and God, he also stands between me and the world, between me and other people and things. *He is the mediator*, not only between God and human persons, but also between person and person, and between person and reality. Because the whole world was created

by him and for him (John 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Heb. 1:2), he is the sole mediator in the world. Since Christ there has been no more unmediated relationship for the human person, neither to God nor to the world. Christ intends to be the mediator.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, everything needs to go through Christ; all our words, deeds, and beliefs have to pass through Him as the Center, as do all facets of our existential situation. He is the norm, the measure, the example, and it is in obedience to Him, the soon-coming King, that we are called to live out our apocalyptic identity. ■

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## Footnotes:

1. Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 367.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the ESV.
3. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “lifestyle,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lifestyle>.
4. A theme that cannot be explored here concerns how preoccupations with personal or communal purity regulated through idioms of disgust and fear of defilement might lead to ill effects such as social disengagement and negative self-image. For a provocative treatment of these issues, see Richard Allan Beck, *Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality, and Morality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011). On a related note, see George R. Knight, *I Used to Be Perfect: A Study of Sin and Salvation*, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2001).
5. We will take a closer look at this issue in the following section.
6. While the term *apocalyptic* is rather difficult to define, in this context I am employing it as a general designation for groupings that subscribe to some expectation of a cataclysmic future on the one hand and the idea of an end-time “remnant” on the other. For a helpful discussion of different meanings of apocalypticism, see Stephen L. Cook, *Prophecy and Apocalypticism: The Postexilic Social Setting* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1–84.
7. George R. Knight, *Joseph Bates: The Real Founder of Seventh-day Adventism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2004), 54.
8. *Ibid.*, 59.
9. Most readers will be familiar with Edwards’s notorious sermon, “Sinners

- in the Hands of an Angry God.” What is less known is that Edwards was not a typical “fire and brimstone” preacher but, instead, focused primarily, perhaps like no other thinker in the history of Christian thought, on the beauty of God. See, e.g., Roland André Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).
10. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1964), 487.
11. C. S. Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew* (New York: Scholastic, 1995), 136.
12. The relationship of truth and virtue has been a major concern in the relatively recent field of virtue epistemology. One aspect of this discussion focuses on the definition of intellectual virtues, i.e., whether they refer to reliable cognitive faculties (memory, introspection, etc.) or to character traits (open-mindedness, thoroughness, etc.). For elements of virtue epistemology at work in the Narnia Chronicles, see Kevin Kinghorn, “Virtue Epistemology: Why Uncle Andrew Couldn’t Hear the Animals Speak,” in *The Chronicles of Narnia and Philosophy: The Lion, the Witch, and the Worldview*, Gregory Bassham and Jerry L. Walls, eds. (Chicago: Open Court, 2005). For a more technical discussion of these issues, see Ernest Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective: Selected Essays in Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Jason S. Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Michael R. DePaul and Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
13. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 91–110.
14. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 29.
15. For an interesting, personal take on this problem, see Alexandra Horowitz, *On Looking: Eleven Walks with Expert Eyes* (New York: Scribner, 2013). Writing from an autobiographical perspective, she notes, “I would find myself at once alarmed, delighted, and humbled at the limitations of my ordinary looking. My consolation is that this deficiency of mine is quite human. We see, but we do not see: we use our eyes, but our gaze is glancing, frivolously considering its object. We see the signs, but not their meanings. We are not blinded, but we have blinders.” *Ibid.*, 8.
16. Robert Proctor and Londa L. Schiebinger, *Agnology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).
17. James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 5th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 20.
18. For a classic treatment of the cognitive unconscious, see John F. Kihlstrom, “The Cognitive Unconscious,” *Science* 237 (September 1987): 1445–1452. Kihlstrom notes, “Consciousness is not to be identified with any particular perceptual-cognitive functions such as discriminative response to stimulation, perception, memory, or the higher mental processes involved in judgment and problem-solving. All these functions can take place outside of phenomenal awareness.” *Ibid.*, 1450.
19. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy: The Attributes of God, Their Meaning in the Christian Life* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1961), 2.
20. In that regard, I am in agreement with James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).
21. For Christians, identity also has an ontological dimension entailed in the concept of the *imago Dei* that in turn includes both *capacities* for personhood (capacity for self-determination, sociality, etc.) and a *status* conferred upon us in creation (rights, sacredness of human life, etc.) and redemption (election, justification, “children of God,” etc.). Unfortunately, due to space limitations, these themes cannot be adequately addressed here.
22. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 261.
23. Douglas K. Harink, *Paul Among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology Beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003).
24. Charles Taylor’s concept of “social imaginaries” would be quite helpful for describing some of those differences in perception. He writes, “By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. . . . I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.” *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.
25. George R. Knight, *The Apocalyptic Vision and the Neutering of Adventism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2008).
26. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM, 1967), 25.
27. Nathan Kerr, *Christ, History, and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 66.
28. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 20.
29. For a helpful discussion of Christian apocalyptic as a form of counter-memory and counter-history, see David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), Chapter 7.
30. George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 291.
31. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 3.95–9.
32. “Report of the Third Annual Session of the General Conference of S. D. Adventists,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, (May 23, 1865): 197.
33. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 93, 94; emphasis in original.