

# Malcolm Bull:

## “WHEN ONE THIS GOOD COMES ALONG”

BY JONATHAN BUTLER

We are fortunate to have lived in the generation of Seventh-day Adventists who could read *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* by Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart (first edition, Harper & Row, 1989; second edition, expanded and revised, Indiana University Press, 2007). The book may represent, to some degree, both a cause and an effect of the Church’s coming of age. At the very least, reading it is now an invaluable way of learning about ourselves, and with every rereading of it we learn something more.

Of course, most Adventists have never heard of the book, much less read it. When two unknown writers approached a publisher with a book idea on Seventh-day Adventism, whose millions of adherents would be, presumably, interested in reading about themselves, it sounded like the makings of a bestseller. But when no more than a fraction of Adventists got around to reading the book, it was bound to disappoint in the way of book



sales. Harper & Row, in fact, was disappointed twice, with the dismal sales of both Ronald Numbers’s *Prophetess and Health* in 1976 and *Seeking a Sanctuary* in 1989. The underwhelming sales of their book caused Bull and Lockhart to believe they were talking only to each other, in an echo chamber, and no one else was listening. It is the bane of most writers who work alone, in the immaculate isolation and silence of their home offices, never to hear the “aha” or “wow” from a grateful reader. Even a negative response would be welcome rather than being ignored. A cranky John Adams, for example, wrote “Fool!” in the margin of one writer. It may be worth saying here, however, that the value of a book cannot necessarily be measured by reactions to it or sales of it. It is hardly an exact science to calibrate the importance of a book. But there is something to say for weighing this book—not in pounds but in gravitas. How it expanded or enriched or changed minds in college classes, Sabbath schools, or reading groups. Not just how many read it but who read it. And more importantly, who reread it. But writing an analytical study of Adventists, unlikely to receive the imprimatur of the General Conference or a showcasing at the local ABC, is no way to flood the

Seventh-day Adventist market with a book.

If book reviews count for anything—and they do—*Seeking a Sanctuary* met with sensational reviews both outside and inside the Adventist church. Martin E. Marty, one of the great American church historians of his generation, commented, “We do not often pause to point out a denominational history, but when one this good comes along, we pause.” Harold Bloom, the renowned American literary critic, referred to the book as “the most informed study of Adventism” he had seen. Ronald Numbers, who knows something about Adventism from inside and out, called it “A masterpiece,” and added, “It is by far the best book on Adventism that has ever appeared.”

Adventists, with the most to gain or lose by its contents, gave the book its most careful scrutiny. They lauded it with the highest praise, and they registered the more trenchant criticisms. But any thoughtful critique is a kind of compliment; it means the book has been taken seriously. For there was no mistaking the fact that many Adventists had found it of monumental importance. Reading it would be a watershed, dividing their lives between “before” they had pored over its profound and insightful take on the church and “after.” Gregory Schneider, in the *Church History* journal, said it was “the most comprehensive review and insightful analysis in print of the sociology, history, and culture of the Seventh-day Adventist church.” He also saw “a distortion at the center” of the book’s vision, too sharply contrasting American individualism and Adventist collectivism. Doug Morgan, in *Spectrum*, praised the book as “nothing short of a spectacular achievement,” but fundamentally faulted it for characterizing Adventism as socially and politically passive, and understating the church’s transformative

involvement in the wider culture. I also reviewed it in *Spectrum* and declared of Bull and Lockhart: “In alternating between Adventism’s past and its present as both historians and sociologists of religion, the authors have combined an astonishing command of their sources with a penetrating, interpretive vision.” But I quarreled with their “casting Adventism as a hierarchy over against American democracy.” And I wondered aloud whether Adventism was less “an alternative to the American way of life” than “an intensification of Americanism.”

What surprised me the most, however, was not that liberal academics praised the book, along with taking issue with it in places; I did not expect conservatives (at least those who read the book with any care) to find in Bull and Lockhart, to no small degree, kindred spirits. Herbert Douglass, far to the right theologically on the Adventist spectrum, gave the book the most unequivocally positive endorsement. Nothing says more on the merits of *Seeking a Sanctuary* than that both left and right spoke highly of it.

All that said, over thirty years after I had read *Seeking a Sanctuary* for the first time, I was reading an excellent historical theology by Rolf Pöhler entitled *Dynamic Truth*. The footnotes saturate nearly half of every page, and Malcolm Bull’s article on “eschatology and manners” in a French journal peeked out from the fine print. I knew I had to read it, even if it meant relearning French. (It turned out only the abstract was in French.) Though a short article, it kept me occupied all afternoon, as I mulled over its contents, scribbled copious notes in its margins, forwarded it to friends, in a high fever about what I had just read. I felt as if I had been struck by lightning. I was dazed, disoriented. So much of its primary documents—Ellen White’s first vision, her *Adventist Home*—were deeply

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familiar to me. Yet I felt as if I were reading them for the first time. Bull saw things I had never seen.

As I pondered the article, I came to realize how White's first vision was, in embryonic form, so much of the life and thought she went on to embody throughout her life. I saw, too, that Bull's article foreshadowed so much of what would come later in *Seeking a Sanctuary*. It went without saying that the frail little New England girl, who had been lifted toward heaven in trance, nevertheless had her feet firmly planted in a particular geography, ethnicity, nationality, and culture. The other world that she saw in vision looked a whole lot like her Victorian world. What is so imaginative and innovative about Bull's article is the way in which it links earth to heaven in Ellen Harmon's and the later Ellen White's mind. There seems to have been an almost seamless connection between her world and the next. In her first vision, "the path the Advent people were traveling to the city" of her eschatology found its living counterpart in the social mobility toward the Victorian manners on this earth. To become worthy of Victorian society was to be prepared for the society of angels in heaven.

The fact that this life and the afterlife were for White in such close proximity prompts a fresh and interesting way of thinking about Seventh-day Adventism, as to its belief and practice. The hallmark of Adventist eschatology—premillennialism—takes on a very different meaning, if it is not completely recast. And the manners, the ethics, the practice of Adventism assumes, perhaps, far greater importance than its theology. For White, it seems, Adventism was less an ideology than an ethos, less a "system" than a "key," in the language of Russian Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky. White was an artist whose vision for Adventism transformed our way of understanding and seeing the church. She was not a

theologian introducing a school of thought or a set of doctrines but an artist at the origins of an art movement. She created the interior décor of Adventism (as, say, impressionism once did for the world), and it was far more pervasive and penetrating than any "statement of beliefs" could possibly have been. At least this was my take on Bull's article, and it took my breath away.



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