

Thoughtful

MY PILGRIMAGE OF THEOLOGY AND FAITH: “What Remains”



A native of the Netherlands, **Reinder Bruinsma** retired in 2007 after a long career in pastoral, editorial, teaching, and church leadership assignments in Europe, the United States, and West Africa. After receiving a BA from Newbold College and an MA from Andrews University, he earned a BDiv with honors and a doctorate in church history from the University of London. Before retiring, he was president of the Netherlands Union.

In June 1996 a group of theologians gathered at the initiative of German Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann in the university city of Tübingen. The occasion was Moltmann's 70th birthday. The group discussed their theological pilgrimage during the past three decades, which resulted in a modest, but most interesting, publication: *How I Have Changed: Reflections on Thirty Years of Theology*.¹ Some of the participants said they had altered very little, but most—Moltmann among them—shared with the group how many of their ideas had developed during that time.

Toward the end of his life, Hans Küng, a great thinker and prolific writer, wanted to arrange a compilation from his extensive writings of what he felt had real significance. He gave his publication the telling title: *Was Bleibt (What Remains)*.² Other theologians have done something similar: making an inventory of where their theological explorations have taken them. At the end of the day, what convictions had lost their power, and what did they still believe?

I do not suggest that I rank with any of the great theologians of our time, outside or within our own faith community. But as I turn 80 this September, I believe it is meaningful to take the time to retrace my own theological steps. It is significant for myself, using the words of Küng, to review “what remains,” and I hope it may inspire some others to do the same. This process seems to be in line with the admonition of the apostle Peter: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15, *NIV*).

Leadership



LEFT: Four-year-old Bruinsma (left) with his siblings.



ABOVE: The author at age 5.

My Roots

Today, less than 50 percent of the people in the Netherlands identify themselves as religious, a dramatic change from my childhood. When I was growing up, about 30 percent of the population was Roman Catholic (predominantly in the southern provinces), while most of the others belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church or one of many other Protestant denominations. When I was five, our family moved from Amsterdam to a village some 20 miles north of the capital city. Part of our village was solidly Catholic, and the rest was split between two Protestant denominations—one rather strict and the other more lenient. But we were different: Seventh-day Adventists. People did not know what that meant, but most saw us as a special kind of Calvinist: rather strict, but for some strange reason, attending church on Saturday. My mother had converted to Adventism around age 16. She remained a committed church member until she died in her late seventies. My father joined the Church after he married my mother. He died young (age 50), and I have never quite figured out how much his faith meant to him.

At first, we were isolated church members, only

occasionally able to travel to Amsterdam and attend church. Then an evangelistic series in a nearby town resulted in a small congregation of which we became members. Our Adventist connection did not prevent my parents from sending my sister and me to the Dutch Reformed Sunday school. The fact that our grandfather (who lived with us) was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church might have had something to do with that. At the time of our move from Amsterdam to the village, I had not yet started elementary school. In a somewhat unexpected ecumenical spirit, my mother enrolled me in the Catholic kindergarten—the only one available. When we were ready to enter the elementary grades, our parents did not send my siblings and me to the public school, but to the “Christian” school, which was strictly Calvinistic.

The death of my brother at age eight (two years younger than I) and the passing of our father were, of course, devastating events, but I cannot say they increased or diminished my childlike faith.³ From my childhood on, I was interested in religion, more so than my siblings. Our weekly attendance in the small congregation (where we were the only youth) was more of a challenge for my sister than for me. I discovered



LEFT: Bruisma lived for a time in Windmill (1960).
ABOVE: He and his wife, Aafje, were married December 22, 1964.

that the most unpleasant aspect of being an Adventist was that it made me “different” when I went on to the secondary school in the nearby city of Alkmaar. I had to be absent from class on Saturday morning. But this apparently did not lead to any discrimination, as I was twice elected as the representative of my class and for some time served as the editor of the school journal.

On April 29, 1956, I was baptized by immersion in a swimming hall in the city of Alkmaar after the local pastor gave me a short series of Bible studies. At my mother’s suggestion, I had also enrolled in a Bible correspondence course. All in all, I think I knew at least as much of Adventist doctrines as an average baptismal candidate. How I experienced my baptism is hard to describe. It was not a deep, emotional experience. Although I was acquainted with the main Adventist doctrines and could defend them quite well with a number of proof texts, I did not yet have a faith in the sense of a deep, personal relationship with God. That came later in a gradual, almost imperceptible, but no less meaningful, process.

Adventist doctrine made sense to me: the Sabbath, the second coming, the state of the dead, baptism, tithing, clean and unclean food, the avoidance of smoking and alcohol. I understood that particular prophecies in the Bible would soon be fulfilled, as we were living at the end of time! But such topics as the

heavenly sanctuary and the rationale behind the plan of salvation still remained under my Adventist radar. One of the baptismal questions was whether I believed that the Adventist Church was God’s true church. I must admit that, even at that time, I wondered whether our denomination offered the only gateway to salvation. Just suppose there were things we got wrong ... what consequences would that have?

Beginning My Theology Study

A number of problematic circumstances at home led to my decision to leave the secondary school prematurely at age 16. But what to do? I had heard of Dutch Adventist young people who had gone to Sweden to earn good money by selling Adventist books. I contacted the Swedish Adventist publishing house and was accepted as a student colporteur although I had no clear idea where any future education might take place and what I would study. I spent six months selling Adventist books in Sweden with reasonable success, but I hated every minute of it. After coming home I took a temporary job at a poultry farm. It did not require a surgeon’s brain to conclude that I did not want that kind of future. I had made a wrong decision to quit school and needed somehow to continue my education. Returning to my old school would be problematic. University was out of the question. However, there was one opportunity that I wanted to explore. At that time the Adventist Church in the Netherlands operated a junior college

with emphasis on theological study. Through Newbold College it was accredited with Columbia Union College (CUC) in Washington, D.C. (now Washington Adventist University), and my unfinished secondary education happened to be equivalent to CUC's entrance requirement. This opened the possibility to enroll in the theology course of Oud Zandbergen, the Dutch Adventist junior college.

Was this a calling or rather a matter of choosing from very limited options? In some sense it was both. I was looking for a possibility for further study, and this option presented itself. But I also felt a growing sense of wanting to choose something that would be meaningful and would satisfy my religious interest. Increasingly, I was looking for answers to a number of questions about my own faith and about the Adventist Church. The three years that I spent as a theology student at the Dutch junior college were formative in many ways.

The arrival of the small cohort of students to which I belonged coincided with the start of Pastor Nico Heijkoop as the new rector of the junior college. He was one of the prominent Dutch pastors with a successful history of pastoral ministry and evangelism. Heijkoop was around 40 and radiated a great deal of energy and self-confidence. Without any formal teaching experience, he began his new career with gusto. He taught virtually all Bible subjects as well as psychology. His considerable knowledge of the Bible and the flair with which he delivered his classes intrigued us. Especially impressive, at least to me, was the fact—which he reported with some regularity—that he had worked through *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* from cover to cover. He knew how to inspire his students and how to present pastoral ministry as a fascinating career that, while it had its challenges, also offered much fulfillment. In doing so, he certainly reinforced in me a slowly growing sense of vocation.

During the three years I spent at Oud Zandbergen, I had classes in dogmatics, Daniel and Revelation, and the Pauline epistles, among other things. That last subject was perhaps a bit over-ambitious, and when I now pull out the books we read and see what I underlined, I wonder how much I really understood at the time. I found the class in Daniel and Revelation fascinating. What stuck with me most of all was that Heijkoop left room for alternative approaches and did not pin us down to a particular explanation. In that respect he probably had a decisive influence on me as

I was taking my first tentative steps on the path of theology.

Being systematically engaged with the Bible made me realize that, while I knew the basics of the teachings of the Church and was reasonably familiar with the stories in the Old and New Testament, I hardly knew large sections of the Bible. That made me decide to read systematically through the entire Bible. That I had an intense spiritual life in those days would be overstating it. But, unmistakably, the awareness grew that I was in the right place, and the sense of "vocation" became gradually stronger. The fact that some pastors whom I knew well regularly encouraged me certainly contributed to that.

Newbold College

Theology students were expected to move on from Oud Zandbergen to Newbold College in Great Britain. When I attended Newbold College (1963-1965), it was not yet the quality institution it would later become. When I arrived, the most prominent theology professor was Dr. Leslie Hardinge, an American who had been "loaned" to Newbold for several years by CUC. His lectures showed an impressive knowledge of the Bible, and with his boundless imagination he often managed to make them extremely exciting. He was also so well versed in the books of Ellen White that he always knew of a quotation to reinforce his explanation of a biblical passage. However, he approached the Bible in a literalistic way that gave me a sense of unease and from which I later firmly distanced myself.

The subject of the sanctuary service was an important part of the Newbold curriculum, and Hardinge was a sanctuary specialist. In the United States he was a much sought-after speaker at Bible conferences and other events. He gave a deep meaning to every part of the sanctuary, every piece of clothing worn by the priests, and every detail of the sacrifices and other sacred rituals. At times his explanations sounded (at least to me) quite bizarre or at least artificial. With other themes, too, he sometimes came up with startling statements. I especially questioned his approach to the Old Testament prophets. Hardinge was convinced that those books should not be studied primarily in their historical context, but for their direct (and often allegorical) application to concrete situations in our present time.

Another key lecturer was Ernest Marter. He was a completely different type of teacher—much more predictable but also much more boring. He taught,

among other things, the Harmony of the Gospels course. Ignoring all the theories that exist about the relationships between the Gospels—and especially between the three Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke)—he instructed us to cut up two old Bibles and paste all separate paragraphs of the Gospels in such a way that one continuous story would emerge. I still had so little theological background that it seemed a reasonable and useful activity. It would not take long, however, for me to understand that such a simplistic approach to the so-called Synoptic problem was not worthy of a true theological educational institution.

My two years at Newbold were especially important in confronting me with the role of Ellen White in Adventism. In the Dutch Adventist Church of those days, she played a limited role. Only a few of her books had been translated into Dutch, and most members had read little of her material. Moreover, most of the older pastors had been educated in Germany, where the Church had paid relatively little attention to her. Many considered the vegetarian lifestyle she promoted as rather odd. Newbold, however, emphasized Ellen White much more, and I was forced to read extensively in her writings. My reaction to them was somewhat ambivalent.

MA at Andrews

Arriving at Andrews in 1965, I felt that at long last I was really beginning my theological studies. One of the teachers who immediately made a deep impression on me was Dr. Siegfried Horn, from whom I took the class, Introduction to the Old Testament. He regularly participated in excavations in the Middle East led by the almost legendary Professor William Albright. As a result, he would be away for a good part of the first semester of the 1965-1966 academic year, so he had to squeeze three months' worth of lectures into six weeks. For Horn, it was no problem at all to start his lectures at 7:00 in the morning and then talk non-stop until about 10:00. Although always very diplomatic about the origins of the Old Testament, he did say enough about major issues to arouse my curiosity, giving me the idea that there were serious problems that one could not just dismiss. Still, he left the area of so-called "higher criticism" largely unexplored. At one time

during a private discussion, he mentioned that he knew there were many problems, in particular with regard to chronology. He remained silent about these issues in public, he said, because he owed much to his Church and therefore did not want to create any trouble.

Introduction to the New Testament did, however, bring out the "critical" theories much more clearly. The class was taught by a team of three professors—Earl Hilgert, Sakae Kubo, and Herold Weiss. I was lucky enough to enjoy their expertise. Within a few years after I graduated, the Seminary discontinued them as teachers.

Among my other favorite professors were Dr. Raoul Dederen, a systematic theologian, with whom I took the Christology course, and especially Dr. Edward Vick. Dederen, who grew up in the French speaking part of Belgium, had recently come to Andrews, and his heavy French accent would always betray his origins. Vick came from England and was a maverick within the faculty. Many viewed him with suspicion because he not only avoided Adventist jargon, but also refused to give ready-made answers to his students' questions. That was especially evident in his lectures on Contemporary Theology, which provided an overview of what was then available on the theological market. I still have my class notes!

Because I had chosen a major in church history, I had intensive contact with Dr. Kenneth Strand, from whom I took classes in the history of the early church and of the Reformation period, and with Dr. Daniel Walther, who among other things guided me in writing my master's thesis about the role of the Calvinist theological and political views that inspired William of Orange to assume leadership in the 16th-century Dutch revolt against Spain.

Because my wife Aafje and I were struggling for financial survival, I did not have time to read much else besides the required material for my classes. But every now and then I managed to delve into something extra. It would be true to say that I had come to Andrews as a fundamentalist, but the class of Hilgert, Kubo,

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and Weiss, in particular, opened my eyes. Dr. Kubo encouraged me to read some specific books about the dangers of fundamentalism, which further helped me to turn away from my fundamentalist outlook.

I graduated *magna cum laude*, but in retrospect my wife and I wonder how we managed to complete the academic year at Andrews so successfully. We had \$1,000 in our pockets when we arrived. By the end, our total assets had shrunk to less than \$100. Dr. Kubo, who strongly urged me to continue my studies, made contacts for me at the prestigious Divinity School of the University of Chicago. When I went there for an interview, I was told that I could be admitted to the doctoral program. But our money had run out. Our only option was to return to the Netherlands and seek Church employment

Back to the Netherlands

The leaders of the Dutch Church were surprised to see us come back. When I had continued my education in the United States, they considered us “lost” for the work in the Netherlands. We had not received any monetary support from the Church while at Newbold or at Andrews. Aafje worked full time in the Andrews book bindery, and I put in some 20 hours a week in the university maintenance department. In order to finance our return trip to the Netherlands and have some money for basic furniture, we remained in the United States for another three months while I was employed as a painter in the nearby city of Benton Harbor. The Dutch “brethren” graciously decided to subsidize our return journey to the Netherlands with the equivalent of what the travel from England would have cost!

The Church leaders were rather suspicious that I had academic ambitions, and my placement as an assistant pastor in the northern part of the country may well have partly been inspired by the comforting idea that no theological educational institutions existed in the area! During the nearly two years I worked there, I read widely but had no chance to engage in any serious academic work. However, things changed when I received an invitation to join the staff of the Church’s small junior college as the dean of boys. My job description also included some teaching: New Testament Greek, doctrines, and Old Testament backgrounds. At first I combined my half-time teaching load with my duties as dean of boys. After about three years, the school board appointed me as the head of the institution, and my teaching continued.

Since my move to the college, I was in a

much better situation as far as further study was concerned. After all, it was difficult to discourage an employee of an educational institution from further professional development. The board did not object when I suggested that I would enroll in the theology department of the University of Utrecht. I believed that on the basis of my master’s degree I would receive a good amount of academic credit. It was a major disappointment to hear that I would first have to take an advanced course in Latin and classical Greek. Following their successful completion, I would have to take classes in Hebrew and philosophy. At that stage I might receive some credit for work done at Andrews.

I decided to take the Latin and Greek classes. After a year I passed the exams and enrolled in theological studies. I started with the Hebrew classes, but I began to doubt more and more whether Utrecht University was my best option. Dr. Roy Graham, whom I knew from my Andrews period (and who had received his master’s degree simultaneously with me), had returned to Britain and assumed a leadership post in the British Union. He suggested the possibility of enrolling as an external student at the University of London. He also told me about Wolsley Hall, an institute in Oxford that offered various facilities to assist the so-called “external students” of the University of London by means of syllabi, reading schedules, examination examples, etc.

University of London

I was able to enroll in the “external” Bachelor of Divinity program of the University of London. The first period of three years would conclude with the so-called preliminary exam, and the entire study was then, if all went well, completed after the fifth year with the final exam. Based on what I had already done, the only course remaining for me prior to the preliminary exam was an exegesis of the Gospel of Mark from the Greek text. Soon enough the way was now open for an intensive study program that required two years for “normal” students. I was determined to do it in that same time period, even though I had a full-time job. This time my employing organization was prepared to foot the bill!

The study focused on nine subjects divided among Old Testament and New Testament backgrounds and exegesis, dogmatics, philosophy, and church history. The coursework especially focused on church history, particularly that of the early church. In addition to the “ordinary” church history of the first five centuries, I

had to do a course that explored the history of dogma of that period, as well as one that analyzed Latin and Greek liturgical texts of the same period.

I sat for the final exams in London, hoping that I would be successful. The university has a series of classifications in its grading system. Students can fail or they can pass in several ways. One can pass with "first class honors," "second class honors (upper)," "second class honors (lower)," or "third class honors." Those who pass with "first class" or "second class (upper)" can proceed directly to work on a doctorate, while those who pass with a lower classification must take additional studies before being admitted to PhD studies.

Weeks of tense waiting followed, but at last I received word that I had passed with the classification "second class (upper)"—sufficient to start working on a PhD dissertation. Not wasting any time, I began exploring how I could best go about this. I was advised to contact Dr. S. J. Murray, who was associated with Heythrop College. Also part of the University of London, it functions as the Catholic Theological Faculty. Murray, a Jesuit and expert in the history of early Christianity, received me in his simple living, sleeping, *cum* study room. He was immediately willing to be my supervisor. After some further correspondence, we agreed that I would study the theme of "rest" as it had developed in Syriac Christianity during the early centuries. Murray recommended that theme to me, believing that a Sabbath-keeper like myself would be especially fascinated by what I was likely to discover in such a study. I would do well, he said in passing, to learn the ancient Syriac language in order to be able to work from the original sources! However, an unexpected career switch meant that I would have little time to proceed with a dissertation.

Management and Writing

Although I had not continued in pastoral ministry, I had been ordained. While one or two of the senior Church leaders had questions about my orthodoxy, apparently those objections were not shared by others and did not impede or delay my ordination. My promotion at the junior college to be the head of the institution, with a place on the union committee, indicated that I was considered "in good and regular standing."

While I was still working at the college, the Dutch Adventist publishing house began looking for a new

director. The union leadership asked me to combine my work at the school with serving part time at the publishing house as its director and editor-in-chief. They had noted that I had some writing skills. I soon saw my first small book published, which was about our denominational history.⁴

The years which followed were hectic, to say the least. After about two years, Church leadership released me from my job at the college so that I could devote all my time to managing the publishing house and editing its publications. I still did some occasional teaching and preached weekly. For the time being, my writing was mostly limited to articles for denominational journals. Throughout the 10 years that I was connected with the publishing branch of the Church, my byline appeared embarrassingly frequently. I tried to act responsibly and steer our publications away from topics I considered dubious. The content of what I wrote was perhaps more noteworthy for what I did *not* write than for what I did!

My period as an editor of the Dutch Adventist publications coincided with the activities of Robert Brinsmead and the tumultuous events around Desmond Ford. The ideas of Brinsmead circulated mostly at the right-wing fringes of the Dutch Church, and I felt an almost immediate aversion toward them. I was determined to give the Brinsmead teachings no visibility in our publications. The issues around Dr. Ford—even when they reached their climax at Glacier View—did not arouse a major interest among Dutch Adventists. At the time, I did not follow all the arguments. Unaware of most of the political intrigues at higher Church levels, I wondered why the Church was giving Ford such a hard time. I had read his book on Daniel⁵ and had learned about the "apotelesmatic principle," concluding that it was very similar to what I had been thinking myself for quite some time.

In 1978, Church leadership in the Netherlands asked me to write a "missionary book" presenting the main points of the Adventist faith. I gave it a title which translates as: *It Does Make a Difference What You Believe!* Some 20,000 copies were distributed, and in 1995 it was reprinted. Translations appeared in German, Swedish, and Danish. I tried to be balanced in my approach to our doctrines. It was definitely not fundamentalist, and I stayed away from topics that were increasingly subject to doubt in my own mind. While I underlined that God is the Creator, I remained silent about a creation of everything in six 24-hour days. I stressed both the divine and human elements in

the inspiration of the Bible, but chose to say very little about a heavenly sanctuary. I only touched (in a short footnote) upon the idea that “days” in biblical time prophecies might refer to actual years since I could not see any clear biblical proof for this. It was gratifying to see that the book was generally well received.

During this period the only articles from my pen that caused a significant stir involved a four-part series in the Dutch Union journal about the inspiration of Ellen White.⁶ It must be remembered that in the 1970s a number of scholars published their findings about the inspiration of White’s writings that were in tension (to say it kindly) with the official viewpoint of the denomination. In 1978, Ronald Numbers released his bombshell book, which made a tremendous impact on my thinking concerning White.⁷ I had never put her on a pedestal, but I saw how many church members did, and this was a good reason to give the Church some balanced information. The reactions to the articles were quite diverse. For some, reading them was a liberating experience. For others, it confirmed their suspicions that I was no longer a bona fide Adventist. Letters went to Dr. Jan Paulsen, the division president at that time. He asked for more information from the union president, who assured Paulsen that he had no reason to be concerned.

Throughout these years *Spectrum* was a source of inspiration for me and an eye-opener with regard to many important issues. I first heard about the journal during my brief pastoral assignment in the north of the Netherlands. A few times I had the good fortune

to meet Dr. Molleurus Couperus, one of the initiators of the journal, when he visited his elderly mother. She lived in a care home in my territory and enjoyed my visits, especially when I took the time to play a game of chess with her. In the years yet to come, I greatly appreciated my encounters with the longtime editor of *Spectrum*, Dr. Roy Branson. As time went on, I saw him as an inspiring role model, and eventually we became good friends.

Africa

After 10 tough years at the Dutch publishing house, I was looking for a change. Within days after I made it known that I was eager to accept an invitation to serve elsewhere, I received a call from the General Conference for a post in the West African country of Cameroon. For a little more than six years, I remained connected to the publishing branch of the Church, first as the manager of the publishing/printing house in Yaoundé in Cameroon and then as a consultant for publishing activities on the entire African continent, with my office in the division headquarters in Abidjan (Ivory Coast). I had the opportunity to travel widely in both West and East Africa. If it did anything for my perspective on the Adventist faith, it strengthened my growing conviction that unity in the Church must manifest itself in a colorful cultural diversity. I saw firsthand how a colonial attitude had shaped the Adventist Church in Africa and became convinced that Adventism in Africa should strive for a kind of church that culturally—but also theologically—would make African Adventism “present truth.”

During my African years, my workload was not as heavy as it had been in the previous decade, and I had more time for study. I found time for more writing and published three books in the Dutch language. A book about the Sabbath published by the Netherlands Union⁸ appeared subsequently in English, German, and Latvian. One of the major Christian publishers in the Netherlands accepted two other books.⁹ One dealt with financial stewardship,



Bruisma with the staff at the Adventist Publishing House in Yaounde, Cameroon, in 1985.

with a special focus on the responsibility of affluent Christians for people in the underdeveloped parts of the world. The other was about the realm of the miraculous. I constantly heard stories about miraculous events and often wondered what I was to make of these. In this volume I tried to approach miracles from a biblical perspective. In my reading and writing in Africa, I was severely limited by the absence of theological bookshops and easily accessible theological libraries.

During a visit to Nairobi in Kenya, I was delighted to find a good theological bookstore, where I came upon the book *African Religions and Philosophy* by the African theologian John S. Mbiti. It proved to be nothing less than a revelation for me. His explanation of the African understanding of time especially got me thinking. On the basis of his analysis of a number of local (Nilotic) languages in East Africa, Mbiti developed his thesis that Africans deal with time very differently from Europeans. He explained that these languages have different tenses to refer to stages of the past, as well as to the present, and to the immediate future. But they do not have a real future tense as in Western languages. They, therefore, lack the ability to pinpoint anything beyond a year or two in the future. The concept stimulated the more academically inclined cells of my brain. When I had been in Cameroon for more than a year, and felt that I was functioning reasonably well, the thought of resuming my studies gradually re-emerged. Would it be possible to work on a PhD through the theological faculty of the University of Yaoundé? And how about testing Mbiti's thesis in the Adventist Church in West Africa. Did local languages of Cameroon resemble those of East Africa with regard to the future tense? A superficial inquiry among my staff members led me to conclude that this was indeed the case. That raised the question: How does this affect the way African fellow believers experience their faith? Adventists have a religion that is strongly future-oriented, with a focus on end-time events and the subsequent return of Jesus. How do people who are much less future-oriented in their thinking view these things? I decided to start by reading more about African religious experience and African ways of

thinking as well as exploring the type of interview that I would use to collect my data.

I soon found it was not easy to pick up the thread of my studies at the University of Yaoundé. The French system used in Cameroon differed too much from the Anglo-American system to allow for an easy transition. But the main reason I had to abandon this plan was my rather sudden transfer to the Ivory Coast.

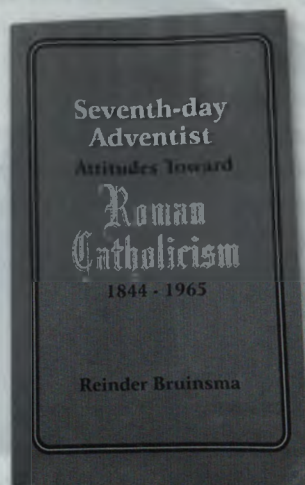
Dissertation

At long last the opportunity to obtain a PhD degree did come. When in early 1991 my six-year term as a "missionary" ended, I was inclined to offer my continued services in Africa. However, Jan Paulsen, the president of my home division, strongly urged me to ask for "permanent return" and finally work on my doctorate. The division was willing to allow for a creative application of the policies that govern the financial aspects of a missionary's homecoming. It meant that I could get a one-year leave to work on my dissertation.

The University of London accepted me as a doctoral candidate, and Dr. Judith Champs, a professor in church history in the Catholic section of the theological department, was prepared to act as my advisor. This time around I wanted to make sure that I had a topic that did not require any further language study and would be relevant for my Church and my role in it. And so I embarked on a study of "Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes towards Roman Catholicism, 1844-1965."

The question of why Adventists were (and often still are) so fervently anti-Catholic had long fascinated me. Of course, certain interpretations of the prophecies in Daniel and Revelation led to this, but to what extent were other important factors at play? Since the Adventist Church emerged in the United States, what impact did the American context have? What was the influence of the various key figures in the early years of Adventism, especially of Ellen White? What later developments had taken place?

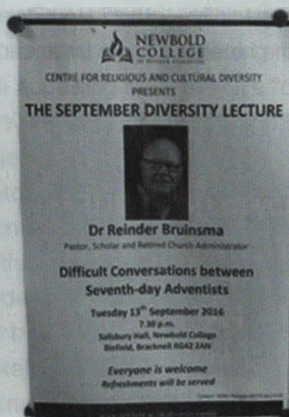
We moved to Andrews University and were able to rent a student apartment on campus. The James White Library at Andrews University was an excellent basis for my research. The nearby library at Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana,



was especially useful for finding resources on aspects of anti-Catholicism in America. I also spent several weeks in the archives of the General Conference in Silver Spring, Maryland. At one point, Bert Haloviak, then head of the statistics and archives department, placed a box in front of me. "This is the 666 box," he said. It contained a collection of documents that needed further sorting and cataloguing. The material made it abundantly clear that, for a long time, considerable doubt had existed among Church leadership as to whether the traditional Adventist interpretation of the "number of the beast" was in fact defensible. Among other things, I found the minutes of two committees charged with investigating this issue in the 1920s and 1930s. Both commissions concluded that the traditional Adventist position—that the number 666 referred to a Latin title of the pope—was not tenable!

My research showed that the Adventist view of the Roman Catholic Church did not differ much from that of many other American Protestants in the 19th century. Anti-Catholicism rose and fell in response to important political developments and events. In *The Great Controversy*, Ellen White's language regarding Roman Catholics was actually quite mild compared to that of many other Protestant voices of the period. However, because most Adventists considered White inspired, her views on Catholicism attained the status of an official teaching. And because she had written that the Roman Catholic Church would never change, the undeniable changes for the better (as a result of the Second Vatican Council, for example) would subsequently be dismissed as tactical maneuvers to gain more favor with other Christians.

Work on the dissertation went well, and my supervisor was very pleased with the progress. I completed most of the work during the year of my study leave. Dr. Champs arranged for the examination in London well before the normal timeframe had elapsed. The certificate signed on August 1993 by the vice chancellor of the University of London stated: "Reinder Bruinsma, having passed the approved examinations as an External Student in the Faculty of Theology, has this day been admitted by the Senate to the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy." To my surprise and delight, Andrews University Press was interested in



publishing the dissertation as a book. I expected the book to stir up some controversy, but heavy criticism did not erupt until a few years later when I summarized my findings in a *Spectrum* article.¹⁰ The negative reaction came from various right-wing "independent ministries" as well as from the Biblical Research Institute, which officially rebuked me. Nowadays, the thesis is still occasionally cited, both by those who appreciate it as a well-documented study and by those who see it as clear evidence of my highly questionable ideas. But so far, no one in the latter category has offered a well-reasoned critique that refutes my findings and arguments.

Mission Institute and Church Administration

We remained longer in Michigan than we had anticipated and even bought a house some eight miles from the Andrews University campus because the Mission Institute asked me to join their staff. Then located at the university,¹¹ but also directly linked to the secretariat of the General Conference, this small organization is responsible for the cross-cultural training of new missionary families. My Africa experience supplemented the qualifications of other staff members, who received an academic ranking in the theology department of the university. To my surprise, Andrews appointed me as an associate professor, even though I had no teaching experience at the university level. I owed it to my new employer and to those I was to instruct (and to myself) to systematically devote a lot of my time to mission studies, which gave a new dimension to my academic development.

After just three years, my time at the Mission Institute came to an end. The Trans-European Division wanted me to join their staff, and going back to Europe appealed to us. I became a departmental director—communications and public affairs and religious liberty (PARL)—and a field secretary, but during the 1995 General Conference in Utrecht, I was elected as the general secretary of the division. Even though my work was mainly of an administrative nature, I not only preached very regularly but also frequently lectured on various topics and taught intensive courses at Newbold College and elsewhere.

My work during these years involved a lot of traveling. A side benefit was that I had a fair amount of

time to read and write in airport lounges and especially early in the mornings and during evenings in the hotels where I stayed. In terms of my production of books, therefore, my division period was quite fruitful. I wrote two small books about our Adventist denomination for a publisher in the Netherlands and a small book about the second coming and related topics for the church members in the Netherlands. A more ambitious writing project was a book on religion in America. For many years I had a great fascination with the history of Christianity in North America and with its current state in America. I approached a Dutch publisher and found that they were interested in a book manuscript. In 1998 they published *Believing in America: Churches, History and Faith of Christians in the United States*.¹² I consider it one of my best books, and it is nice to see it quoted from time to time.

During the time I worked for the Trans-European Division, Pacific Press Publishing Association published three of my books. In *It's Time to Stop Rehearsing What We Believe and Start Looking at What Difference it Makes* (1998), I tried to approach the fundamental beliefs of the Adventist Church in a somewhat different way than is usually done. Instead of going into the theological details for each point of belief, I asked several questions. What difference does it actually make that I believe

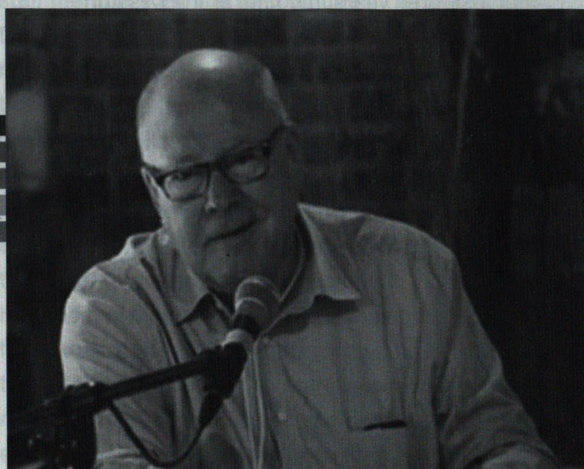
this? How does what I believe make me a better, more balanced, happier, and more pleasant person?

The book received many positive comments. A reprint came off the press in 2017. In *Our Awesome God* (2000), my focus was on the question of who and what our God is, and in *Matters of Life and Death* (2000), I dealt with a range of ethical issues, such as euthanasia, abortion, suicide, capital punishment, and so on.

One manuscript that I wrote during this period has so far remained unpublished. When I submitted *The Challenge of Change*, in which I pleaded for change in the Church in a number of areas, Pacific Press at first reacted very positively. However, when they checked with a few Church leaders, they decided that perhaps the book would bring trouble. The manuscript therefore remained in one of the drawers in my study. Its topic, however, surfaced at the 2000 General Conference Session in Toronto when some questioned the wisdom of my re-election as division secretary. I was re-elected in spite of the argument that the content of some of my

publications made me unsuitable for the office. Besides the *Spectrum* article about Adventism and Catholicism, critics mentioned the manuscript about change as an example of my lack of loyalty to my Church. Recently, when I looked at the manuscript again, I wondered if I might update it and still find a publisher for it somewhere. The changes I identified at the time are, in my opinion, still necessary—only even more so.

During this period, I developed a particular interest in the topic of postmodernism. I lectured on it at numerous pastoral conventions throughout Europe and on many other occasions. For a number of years, I presented an annual “intensive” at Newbold College on postmodernism and its impact on the Church,¹³ which inspired me to write something that I hoped would appeal to postmodern people. This resulted in a book published simultaneously in English and Dutch by Stanborough Press in Britain. In Dutch it was titled: *A Life-time Adventure: In Search of God and Yourself*



and in English: *Faith: Step by Step. Finding God and Yourself*. The book has since appeared in six other languages. To what extent it succeeded in appealing to a truly postmodern audience I am not sure.

I summarized my lectures on postmodernism in a book titled *Present Truth Revisited: An Adventist Perspective on Postmodernism*. I first submitted it to the two official Adventist publishers in the United States, and their responses were almost identical: "We would love to publish it, but we must be careful. The top leaders of the Church will most likely object to your book, and that would be very inconvenient for us." Other Adventist publishers in the English-speaking world also found it impossible to accept the manuscript. Eventually, I submitted it to Amazon as an e-book, but due to a lack of promotional channels, sales remained disappointing.

In the years that I worked as the secretary of the division and (later) as the president of the Netherlands Union, my teaching activities were limited, but once I officially retired, I could accept invitations from many places in Europe and beyond, including Bugema University in Uganda. The Adventist college (now university) in Florence, Italy, also invited me several times to teach there for a week. And it was a pleasant surprise in 2014 when Loma Linda University invited me to be a guest lecturer for a quarter. Invitations to give lectures at pastors' meetings came from France, the Baltic countries, Hungary, the United Kingdom, and especially Germany, and I was invited to present seminars for groups of church members in the United States, Germany, Sweden, Lithuania, and numerous other countries.

Shortly before my retirement, I first came into contact with Kinship, the Adventist organization for the LGBTQIA+ community. They invited me to present the workshops during an international Kinship conference

in the Netherlands. In retrospect, I can say that listening to the stories of people who discovered that they are "different," and who often had very dramatic experiences with the Adventist Church, was nothing less than a shock to me. Since then I have studied this topic. I have attended conferences on the subject, at which I have also made presentations, and I have written about the issues. I have concluded that the Bible actually says very little about homosexuality and other gender issues as we know them today. Some texts are definitely misinterpreted, and I have become convinced that the Bible is silent about permanent, exclusive love relationships between people of the same sex.

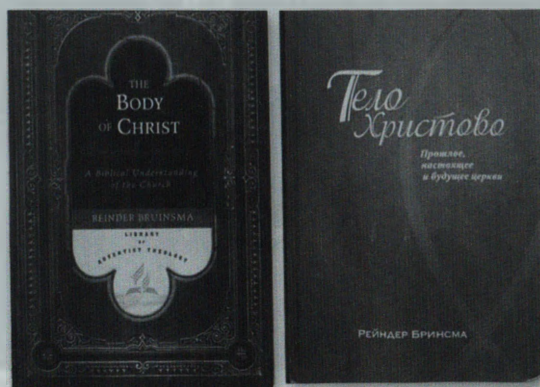
Writing Projects¹⁴

Since my retirement in 2007, writing and translating books has occupied a large part of my time. I wrote the adult Sabbath school quarterly—*Religion in Relationships*—for the third quarter of 2004. Five years later I was once again asked to produce a quarterly, this time dealing with 13 key words of the Christian faith. The so-called "companion book" appeared in English, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, and Japanese. A substantial amount of time went into organizing and editing a *Festschrift* for Dr. Jan Paulsen (2008) and one for Dr. Bertil Wiklander (2014), who was president of the Trans-European Division from 1995 to 2014.

In 2009, the Review and Herald Publishing Association published my book, *The Body of Christ: A Biblical Understanding of the Church*. It was the first substantial volume in our Church on ecclesiology, i.e., the doctrine of the church. Besides working on some smaller publications, a lot of time and energy went into two devotional books with daily messages. Unfortunately, they never made it to the Adventist public in the United States, as American denominational publishers are extremely protective of this lucrative segment of the Adventist book market. In addition, I also translated a dozen or so books from English into Dutch and vice versa. The Dutch Adventist Church published some, and a few scholarly books by Dutch theologians were published by Eerdmans Publishers in the United States. I especially enjoyed translating the 700-page *Introduction to Christian Doctrine* by Kees van der Kooij and Gijsbert van den Brink, two professors at the Free University in Amsterdam.¹⁵

Leaving or Staying?

In August 2016 my book, *Facing Doubt: A Book for Adventist Believers "on the Margins"* came off the



The Body of Christ, English and Russian editions.

press in English, simultaneously with a Dutch version. Subsequent translations appeared in French, Danish, Russian, German, and Portuguese. What prompted me to write this book?

I met more and more people who told me that they had left the Adventist Church or had serious doubts about whether they wanted to remain in it. I was also aware of many people in my circle of friends and acquaintances who were slowly but surely abandoning the Church, sometimes after having been active church members for many years. In conversations they told me that they had begun to doubt several Adventist views and had sometimes even lost their certainty that God exists. In many cases people expressed great concern about recent trends in the Church. I decided that I would try to engage with those Adventists “on the margins.” At the same time, I also tried to deal with my own doubts and questions. Why did I want to remain an Adventist Christian? A book that was of enormous help to me in my own quest was Alvin Plantinga’s *Warranted Christian Belief*.¹⁶ This Reformed theologian argues that although we have no absolute proof for all tenets of the Christian faith, we have enough evidence that “warrants” belief.

Earlier, I realized no Adventist publisher would want to publish my book about doubt, but a friend in Britain with a start-up publishing company was keen to assist. A generous donor in the Netherlands took care of the initial costs for the English and Dutch editions and later also for editions in other languages. In the book I first dealt briefly with the major issues in the crisis of present-day Western Christianity before focusing on Adventism. Many fellow Adventists, like other Christians, have questions about the existence of God and especially wonder why the world has so much suffering. Many also doubt some of the official beliefs of our Church. Was the world really created in six literal days, some 6,000—or at most—10,000 years ago? Do we have to take everything in the Bible literally? Many, lots of pastors included, are not so sure about the traditional view of the heavenly sanctuary, the arithmetic that leads to 1844, and the historicist interpretation of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. In addition, many are wondering where the Church is heading. For many leaders, unity seems to require strict uniformity, in particular when it comes to the Church’s theology. Anyone who wants to be a true Adventist must conform to the small print of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. Two additional points also cause much controversy: the ordination of female pastors and

the status of gays and lesbians in the Church.

Most of the issues that I mentioned in the previous paragraph were (and are) also of great concern to me. In this book I tried to claim the space that I need for myself and that I want for others. I asked the readers not to abandon the Church because of these and other doubts and objections. I sought to convince them that we need the Church, even if it is far from ideal. Also, I defended the proposition that not all points of faith are equally important¹⁷ and that we do not have to think alike about everything to qualify as “real” Adventists. And, finally, I wrote about how, in my opinion, we can deal with our basic doubts in a positive and healing way.

Immediately after its publication, the *Spectrum* website reviewed the book. Clifford Goldstein, the editor of the Sabbath school quarterlies, tore it to pieces. He later admitted he had only read part of the book, but he failed to apologize publicly for his unwarranted accusations. However, most reactions were very positive. Over time, I received hundreds of letters, emails, and other communications from readers all around the world, who told me that the book had helped them to remain in the Church and to look at Adventism from a more positive perspective. Among those who thanked me for the book were some leaders in the General Conference and a few theology professors at Andrews!

In Recent Years

After *Facing Doubt*, some other topics surfaced that I wanted to pay attention to. I was still doing a substantial amount of traveling in connection with seminars for pastors and local churches, Adventist Forum meetings, study conferences, etc. I continued



Different editions of *Facing Doubt: A Book for Adventist Believers "on the Margins."*

My main survival strategy has been to be selective in what I say in my preaching and writing and to focus on things that I could say without having to go against my inner beliefs.

to write a weekly blog—a practice I started when I was president of the Netherlands Union.¹⁸ As I visited places in Europe and elsewhere, I noticed the increasing influence of the heresy of the so-called Last Generation Theology. Oak & Acorn, the new publishing venture of the Pacific Union Conference, published my book about this topic in both English and Spanish.¹⁹ The COVID-19 pandemic put a temporary stop to many of my activities, even though the Zoom technology created new possibilities. In addition to preaching and some distance teaching, I was able to make presentations for virtual Sabbath schools in the United States.

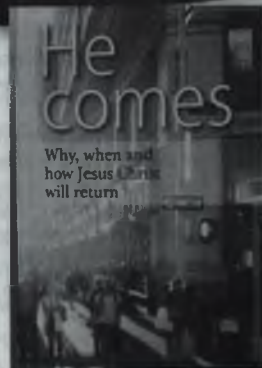
As age was beginning to creep up on me, the topics of death, resurrection, and eternal life attained a definite urgency. More and more they were no longer primarily of intellectual interest but of existential concern. Reading and thinking about such things helped me find answers to several questions that had long occupied me. All this led to the book that Stanborough Press published in 2019: *I Have a Future: Christ's Resurrection and Mine*. It has since also appeared in Dutch and Norwegian.

It surprised me greatly to discover that Adventist authors have written so little lately about the state of the dead and the resurrection. And then I also realized how little Adventist authors have written in recent decades about the second coming of Christ. Prompted to deal with this topic in what I hoped would be a fresh way,

I completed my latest book: *He Comes: Why, When and How Jesus Will Return*.²⁰

I Have Survived While I Have Changed

From time to time, colleagues and other church member have asked me how I could possibly survive as a church worker—even in leadership roles—saying and writing many things that were often considered unorthodox. More recently I hear such comments as: “Yes, now that you are retired, you feel free to criticize Church leadership and to urge doctrinal change.” I recognize that there are many colleagues who are reticent to be outspoken as long as they are employed by the denomination for fear of losing their church employment. I empathize with them, but I have always tried to remain authentic and to be open about what I think and believe. It may well be (in fact,



Bruinsma stands with his wife, Aafje, after receiving the title Knight of the Order of Orange Naussau from G. J. Gorter, the mayor of Zeewolde (right), the town where the Bruinsmas currently live.

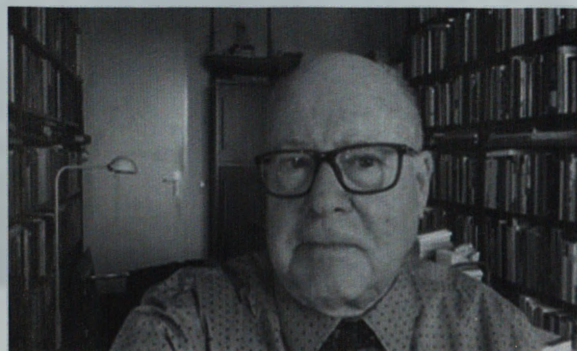
I know this has been the case) that I missed certain denominational career opportunities because of my perceived liberalism. On the other hand, I believe my experiences in Church employment show that there may, in fact, be more freedom to express oneself in the Church than is often thought.

My main survival strategy has been to be selective in what I say in my preaching and writing and to focus on things that I could say without having to go against my inner beliefs. Yet, when asked, I always tried to respond truthfully and not defend standpoints I seriously doubted. I always kept in mind that one does not, on every occasion and before any audience, have to outline all objections one might have regarding particular doctrines and practices. Honesty and courage must be combined with tact and pastoral care, and it also helps if they are accompanied by a sense of humor. I know that many in my own country and elsewhere see me as rather liberal, while some others regard me as totally apostate. Some, on the other hand, would classify me as "progressive," and that is an epithet I prefer. Such terms are, however, subjective and relative. I am grateful that I have been able to function in the Church, even in leadership positions, and that many of my articles have appeared in Adventist journals and that Adventist publishing houses have accepted many of my books.

At the end of this autobiographical article, I need to return to the question I posed at the beginning: have I changed during my theological and ecclesial pilgrimage? The answer is definitively in the affirmative. I have changed with regard to many of my theological ideas and in my attitude toward various traditions and views of the Adventist Church. I do not feel I have to offer any apologies. On the contrary, I am grateful for my journey of faith and for clearer insights into what is vital for a life of faith and service to others. Some of my earlier convictions have faded away, but what I consider the essentials of my faith constitute *was bleibt* (to use the words of Hans Küng).

I have remained a Christian. More and more my *being a Christian*, rather than *being an Adventist*, has come first. However, being a Christian always implies a certain packaging. One is always a Christian within a particular tradition. Although there are things in the Adventist tradition that I do not appreciate, there is enough of substance left in my Adventist tradition to keep me connected with the Seventh-day Adventist Church as my spiritual home.

As I am about to turn 80, I do not know how much



time the good Lord will yet extend to me. I hope He will be generous to me. In fact, I can think of a few more books I would like to write! If there are a few more years, I hope I can continue to contribute to the life and mission of my Church!

Endnotes

1. Jürgen Moltmann, ed., *How I Have Changed: Reflections on Thirty Years of Theology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press Int., 1997).
2. Hans Küng, *Was Bleibt* (Munich: Piper Verlag GmbH, 2013).
3. At that time our family consisted of grandfather, father, mother, my 10-year-old sister from my father's first marriage, my sister who is about one and a half year older than I am, and two sisters, respectively seven and eight years younger.
4. *Ontstaan en Groei van de Adventbeweging* (The Hague, the Netherlands: Boekenhuis Veritas, 1973).
5. Desmond Ford, *Daniel* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1978).
6. *ADVENT*, November 1982, December 1982, January 1983, and February 1983.
7. Ronald Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978).
8. *De Dag die God Schiep* (Bosch en Duin, Netherlands: Uitgeverij Veritas, 1988 and 1990).
9. *De Christen en zijn Geld: Rentmeesterschap Vandaag* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1990); and *Wonderen: Wat kunnen christenen daar nog mee?* (Kampen, the Netherlands: J.H. Kok, 1991).
10. "Adventists and Catholics: Prophetic Preview or Prejudice" (*Spectrum*, vol. 27, no. 3, Summer 1999), 45-52.
11. It has since been moved to the headquarters building of the Church in Silver Spring, Maryland.
12. Published by Uitgeverij Boekencentrum in the Dutch town of Zoetermeer, 1998.
13. These lectures form the basis for the e-book that was published in 2014 and is since then available through Amazon: *Present Truth Revisited: An Adventist Perspective on Postmodernism*.
14. For a list of my publications, see my website: www.reinderbruinsma.com and choose: *main publications*.
15. *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2017).
16. New York/Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000.
17. See also my contribution "Are All Truths Truth?", in Rudi Maier, ed.: *Encountering God in Life and Mission: A Festschrift Honoring Jon Dybdahl* (Department of World Mission, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 2010), 174-189.
18. www.reinderbruinsma.com
19. *In All Humility: Saying No to Last Generation Theology* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak & Acorn, 2018).
20. Published by Stanborough Press (Grantham, UK, 2021). I also prepared a Dutch edition (2022), and a German translation is under way.