

The Church's Cutting Edge

Gerald Connell

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, like contemporary society, is in transition. Our movement began in the early 19th century, when the world was "large" and the pace of life, travel, and change was relatively slow. However, the world is fast becoming a "global village" with almost instantaneous communication. In many countries of the world, we have moved from an agrarian to an urban setting.¹

These changes have been accompanied by a dramatic change in the prevalent worldview; religion is no longer seen as an inherent part of the basic social structure.² As educated Christians, we find this transformation of particular interest. It points to a unique role we are called to play.

Combined with the dethronement of formal religion in contemporary culture, contemporary society is experiencing an explosion of knowledge, information, and specialization that seems to confirm the idea that humans can control life. Technology's ability to perform "miracles" has created many worshipers before the scientist's white lab coat. Humankind has turned its attention to technology for hope, meaning, and release from the menace of eventual decay. Faith in human knowledge seeks to reshape the world without divine help.

In contrast to earlier society, where life seemed fated and people had few choices, modern men and women have many choices. Instead of feeling predestined to follow tradition, people believe they can decide what destiny or future they want. Unfortunately, there is a high price to pay for this self-creation in

the currency of loneliness and alienation. Finite humans in their desperate search for hope, meaning, and answers to the basic issues of life have become technology's slaves and have been rendered helpless.

The Secular Mind

The whole process of secularization, its development and implications, are extremely relevant for Seventh-day Adventists who attend public colleges and universities,³ and also to young professionals.³ Anthony Campolo has used Langdon Gilkey's categories to describe the characteristics of the secular mind.⁴ In briefly reviewing these, we can see why public centers of higher education, to a large extent, seem to reject religion.

Contingency. Simply stated, contingency is the belief that everything is created by some natural phenomenon that preceded it. With this presupposition, the doctrine of creation is no longer acceptable. Natural evolution becomes the dominant interpretation of the mechanisms within the physical universe; humans, therefore, have evolved from cosmic dust. There is no real meaning to their existence or to anything else. Everything is explained by natural phenomena. This leads logically to the next characteristic of autonomy.

Autonomy. If God is no longer a factor in the physical universe and in human life, then God has nothing to say. If God does not exist, He is not a factor in humankind's social universe, either. There is no divine-directed destiny. Each individual becomes responsible for

being the focus of and creator of his or her own hope and meaning in life. Without a divine mandate—no accountability to God—humankind is forced to go onto the next step of relativity.

Relativity. If humans are left to chart their own destiny without divine guidance, then what is good for each individual is right. What is good and right for one group at one point in time is not necessarily right and good for others at another time and in another context. Therefore, there are no moral absolutes. By ruling out the possibility of God's existence, men and women are faced with an unanticipated dilemma. If they did not come from God, then human beings are only a cosmic accident, celestial orphans. This sense of temporality has devastating consequences.

Temporality. Secular women and men see life on Planet Earth as all that they have. They see no future world where there is a reward for ethical living. They believe in no judgment or place where there will not be more pain, sorrow, injustice, or fear. The secular person does not know how to relate to his or her temporality. Humanity's existence is limited to space and time as we know it. Death is the absolute end of everything.

Jean Paul Sartre was right when he summarized humanity's dilemma by saying, "Without an infinite reference point, finite man has no meaning."⁵ Francis Schaeffer said, "Man's biggest damnation is that he can find no meaning for man."⁶ With so much hope invested in science, technology and information, modern man has been left disillusioned and alienated from

God and his fellow man. Indeed, humans feel "condemned to freedom."⁷

Essential Knowledge

Much of what is being taught at public colleges and universities is an attempt to understand the universe, earth, and society, as well as how to succeed in life. The problem is that the philosophical presuppositions in the course content leave out a theistic worldview.⁸ Humans are left to make any meaning they can out of life, for themselves. Any change in society is seen as a result of politics or economics, and any change in an individual is explained mainly by applying principles of the social sciences.

The fact that knowledge is doubling about every 22 months means that students at public colleges and universities are often on the cutting edge of information. Many Adventists who have grown up in the church with a strong "remnant" identity assume that the church has "all knowledge." As they begin attending classes that deal with current issues and up-to-date information, they discover that the church does not have "all knowledge." What is even more discouraging for some is that people in the local congregation may not even want to hear their perspectives or discuss with them the issues with which they are grappling. Sometimes the students begin to think that, possibly, the church is irrelevant. It does not "speak their language" nor is it on the "cutting edge" of knowledge. Even their Sabbath School lessons don't deal with the issues the students are facing.

When I meet with students who are struggling with these kinds of issues I point out that the church is not the repository of "all knowledge." It is the repository of "essential knowledge." Even the Bible does not contain all knowledge. It does contain essen-

tial knowledge—the knowledge of God's work on behalf of the human family.

Sometimes students think that the public college or university has nothing in common with the church, but this isn't true. Like universities, the church has a deep interest in the transmission of culture; we care about what is promoted in society in terms of culture.⁹ We are very interested in knowledge for the purpose of staying on the "cutting edge" and making the gospel relevant to our contemporaries. We are also deeply interested in the training of professors. Our own colleges and universities have many Adventist professors trained in public universities. The church is also certainly interested in scientific discovery and benefits greatly from it as it ministers to the world. The church has used and does use the technology developed in public universities to help it fulfill its mission.

Don't Walk Away

My appeal to students in public colleges and universities is, "Don't walk away from Jesus or His church. The church does not have all knowledge, so it needs your knowledge to keep it relevant. Walking away will not solve your basic problem of mortality. To walk away from Jesus you have to accept fully your plight as a cosmic orphan, coming face-to-face with the absurdity of life without God." Francis Schaeffer saw the logical result of life without God: "Once God is denied, life becomes worthless."¹⁰ If life has no worth, then human beings must create a meaning for themselves—which amounts to self-delusion. Paul Tillich said, "The threat of non-being is staggering. For though I now know that I exist, that I am alive, I also know that some day I will no longer be—that I will die. This thought is staggering and threatening to think that the person I call

'myself' will cease to exist. To think that my life is just a momentary transition out of oblivion and into oblivion is overwhelming."¹¹

Dostoevsky, realizing the incredible implications of God's non-existence said, "If God did not exist we are plunged into moral relativism; without God all things are permitted."¹² Kierkegaard, whose thinking laid the groundwork for much of modern existentialism, understood the implications of God's non-existence and the autonomy this would create for the human race. He contended that the anxieties created by autonomy would be overwhelming; it would be more of a curse than a blessing.

Take the Next Step

Since the idea of walking away from Jesus is intellectually and emotionally untenable, a person must take the next step and ask, "If following Jesus can add hope and meaning to life, can I do that within the context of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?" I believe this is very possible. I know many students in public colleges and universities who are deeply committed to following Christ, young adults who have razor-sharp intellects and are also active Adventists.

You may be asking, what about the church being current and relevant? This is exactly why the body of Christ, the church, needs you, a young adult who has wrestled with issues, thought through the problems, and is willing to push the church to deal openly and accountably with current knowledge. The church needs you to teach in our own universities and also in public universities, to work in industry and represent Christ and His church. The church needs you to provide vision and leadership in local congregations, in conference, union, and division committees, and in the General Conference. Because walking away from Jesus is

not really a viable option, stay and help keep the church on the cutting edge until it accomplishes its mission.

NOTES

1. See Gottfried Oosterwal, "Mission to Technopolis," *Dialogue* 1:1 (1989), pp. 4-7.

2. For more details on this changing worldview, see Gerald Connell, "A New Look at Secular Campus Ministry," *Dialogue* 3:1 (1991), pp. 24-26.

3. See Humberto M. Rasi, "Fighting on Two Fronts: An Adventist Response to Secularism and Neopaganism," *Dialogue* 3:1 (1991), pp. 4-7, 22-23.

4. Anthony Campolo, *A Reasonable Faith: A Christian Response to Secularism* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983); Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

5. Quoted in Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1976), p. 13.

6. Schaeffer, p. 15.

7. Langdon Gilkey, *Society and the Sacred* (New York: Cross Word Books, 1981), p. 80.

8. See Gerald Connell, "A Reason to Believe," *Dialogue*, 2:1 (1990), pp. 15-17, 31.

9. See Martin Marty, quoted in *Invitation to Dialogue: The Theology of College Chaplaincy and Campus Ministry* (New York: National Council of Churches, 1986), p. 13.

10. Schaeffer, p. 15.

11. Quoted by Schaeffer, p. 21.

12. Quoted in Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 29.

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Letters

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B. Faith and regeneration: (1) Are causally prior to justification (i.e., that justification is predicated upon a prior response and alteration within persons). (2) Follow after God's work of justification.

You are correct in your observation regarding E. J. Waggoner. He comes close to affirming both A-2 and B-2 above. The major problem with B-2 is its determinism. If God saves people without their willingness to be saved, then grace amounts to a doctrine of fate. What becomes of the "whosoever will" (Rev. 22:17)? In the final analysis, Waggoner stops short of this position and adopts an Arminian stance: "Why are not all made righteous by the obedience of One?" The reason is they do not wish to be" (Signs of the Times, March 12, 1896, p. 5). Arminians, as you correctly infer, endorse the first position in both cases, but add to A-1 a powerful doctrine of sanctification.

Wallenkampf does not endorse either a Lutheran or an Arminian view; but with its emphasis on human voluntarism, Christian perfection, etc., his study is more Arminian than Lutheran.

The stance of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has not been formally defined as Arminian, but almost everything about Adventist doctrine is Arminian: our Christology, our understandings of law and judgment, our emphasis on human responsibility, etc. It would be impossible for a Lutheran to have written Steps to Christ. Note the implication: my steps. Luther would turn in his grave at the thought! For him, salvation is all God's work.

Russell L. Staples, Andrews University
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Dialogue in German?

I was just recently introduced to *Dialogue* by one of my lecturers and I really enjoyed its stimulating and informative content. I went to our college library for some back issues to read and in one of them I came across an article about ethical decision-making, by James W. Walters ("The Choice Is Yours," Vol. 3, No. 3). I really appreciated this article because in this time of moral confusion we must understand the Christian principles that govern our decisions. Also very useful is the discussion of moral issues from a Christian and Adventist perspective that Dr. Michael Pearson presents in his book *Millennial Dreams and Moral Dilemmas*, which you reviewed (Vol. 2, No. 3). I highly recommend this book (Cambridge University Press, 1990) to all those interested in these issues.

As a German student, I would be interested to see *Dialogue* also published in German.

Gunther Pratz, Newbold College
Bracknell, Berks., ENGLAND

The Editors Reply:

Thanks, Gunther, for your compliments! From the start, we decided to publish *Dialogue* in English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish, because these are the languages spoken in two or more of the world divisions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This approach ensures a wide readership for the journal.

Several readers have suggested that we start producing a German edition of *Dialogue*. The AMiCUS Committee would be happy to consider a request from German-speaking church leaders to publish the journal in that language and would provide support for its launching. However, questions of production, circulation and funding will need to be addressed realistically before the decision is made. You may be interested to know that the Euro-Africa Division plans to begin publishing a Russian edition of *Dialogue* in the very near future.

Excited About the Journal

I recently found a copy of *Dialogue* and, after reading it, must tell you that I am excited about this journal. As a Seventh-day Adventist pursuing a post-graduate degree at the Catholic University of America, I found the articles thought provoking and educational. I would like to be placed in your mailing list for the English edition.

LCDR Arthur M. Slagle, CHC, USN
Vienna, Virginia, U.S.A.

Letters

Dialogue welcomes letters from its readers. Please limit your comments to 200 words and address them to: *Dialogue Letters*, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600, U.S.A. If selected for this section, your letter may be edited for purposes of clarity or space.