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REVELATION/INSPIRATION, CHURCH, AND CULTURE

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Our study in this essay is confined to the question how revelation/inspiration and culture interrelate within the Adventist community of faith. There is no attempt to define inspiration or culture precisely; we employ only a workable definition. The subject of Christianity and culture has been amply covered by scholars much more qualified than myself, as any cursory glance at a bibliography on the subject will show.¹ Nevertheless, there may be an aspect of inspiration and culture that, to my knowledge, has not been considered within the Adventist community—that is, the impact of culture on the understanding of our eschatological mission. We will first provide a brief definition of revelation/inspiration and culture, then set forth general features of the subject in the religious world, and finally will consider the effect culture may have on the Adventist church and task.

Definitions

Inspiration is "God's method of influencing and directing the minds of men in the process of making them channels of divine revelation."² More specifically, as a term, it is "used in the discussion of the nature of the canon of Scripture that concerns the influence of the Spirit of God upon the biblical writers to produce a divinely authoritative Scripture."³ It is "the action of the Spirit of God in so 'moving' its human authors in their work of producing Scripture, that in these Scriptures they speak, not out of themselves, but 'from God.' By virtue of the Spirit's action the Scriptures may be properly called 'God-breathed.'"⁴ As Peter said, "Men spoke

from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:21 NIV). Therefore, when speaking of revelation/inspiration we mean the biblical writings of the Old and New Testaments as we have them today, penned by persons inspired (moved) by the Holy Spirit to write what was divinely revealed to them. And we take these Scriptures at face value without doubting their reliability.

The word "culture" simply means the social environment in which we were reared and in which we live. It includes our social and intellectual heritage, the way we look at things, the way we perceive things. In a general sense, culture results from the lenses through which we look at the world, which make us interpret the same world differently. People who see the world through a set of atheistic or Buddhist glasses will continue to create certain cultural and social environments. People looking at the world through Christian lenses—from their biblical viewpoint—will create a different cultural and social environment. Culture in turn determines values, and values affect behavior.⁵

As any reliable dictionary will point out, the word "culture" is used also in a more narrow sense to refer to cultured people with refined ways of thinking and acting, particularly those who have an interest in the fine arts.

For the purpose of this essay, however, the word "culture" will be understood as the total pattern of a people's behavior, including "all behavior that is learned and transmitted by the symbols (rites, artifacts, language, etc.) of a particular group and that focuses on certain ideas or assumptions—lenses if you please—that we call a world view."⁶ And by world view we mean those conceptualizations of reality which lie at the very heart of culture, touching and strongly influencing all its other aspects. It may also be seen as the organizer of, or that which governs, what is taught to and employed by the members of that culture.⁷ Therefore, by culture we mean those conceptualizations of reality, those customs and practices that make up the habits and lifestyle of a people or a nation.

Christianity and Culture

While the Bible has no word for culture as such, nevertheless it is clear that God created men and women as creatures of culture—a culture in which relations with God, human beings, and the earth

play a part. It must not be assumed that after the entrance of sin, it was God's purpose for His people to create, find, or adopt a cultural system totally apart from that common to the peoples and nations around them. Rather, God intended to reveal His will through His people so that institutions and practices already existing could be reformed to become suitable vehicles of and for His glory.⁸ And what was true for His people in ancient times is still true for "believers" today. The oft repeated remark that the NT teaches us to be indifferent to culture is based on a very narrow view of culture. The believers' experience with Christ in New Testament times had great implications for culture.⁹

There are two basic errors regarding religion and culture. One is that culture can be expanded and developed without religion, and the other is that religion—especially a revealed religion such as Christianity—need not concern itself with the preservation of culture.¹⁰ An extreme expression of this latter point of view is found in Watchman Nee, who believed that salvation involved the total severance of a person from this world's culture. The Christian lives in the world as in an alien environment and therefore should maintain an attitude of detachment.¹¹ The tension between Christianity and culture cannot be resolved by an avoidance of culture. It is impossible to commit oneself to Christ and then isolate oneself from the surrounding culture.¹²

Richard Niebuhr in his study of Christianity and culture speaks of the three basic positions: (1) Christ against culture, Christ in culture, and Christ above culture.¹³ Charles Kraft expands these three positions and points to the fact that those who understand God as being opposed to culture have, by their commitment to God, made a choice to oppose it. He believes this to be a radical position often held by fundamentalist groups and by those not in harmony with Scripture. Others, such as the contemporary Hebrews, hold that God is contained within culture, but see Him as only related to their culture.

Some Christian denominations believe God is exclusively relating to them. Such see that there are major differences, for instance, between Christians and non-Christians, but fail to distinguish between the whole of culture and the Christian use of culture to serve its own functions. Unfortunately, many hold that God is

both above and unconcerned with human culture. This is the position of Deism and much popular, western thinking. It is a reaction against the biblical view of the divine relationship of Christ to God and sees Christianity as a hindrance to progress.¹⁴

Essentially, Kraft aligns himself with the God-above-culture position, but modifies it by proposing what he calls, *The God-above-but-through-culture* view. This model, he says, assumes that, though God exists totally outside of culture and humans exist totally within it, God chooses the cultural milieu in which people are immersed as the arena of His interaction with them. This relationship is not a required relationship (in the sense that God is obligated to culture), yet He has freely chosen to limit Himself to the capacities of human culture in His interaction with people. On occasion He will demonstrate His transcendence by means of "miracles" to show that He is not bound by culture in the same way that humans are.¹⁵

The attempt to define the relationship between Christianity and culture is made still more complex by the fact that the term "culture" has different associations, depending on whether we have in mind an individual, a group, or a whole society. However, the culture of an individual is dependent upon the culture of a group, and the culture of a group is dependent upon the culture of a whole society.¹⁶

Commonality of Cultures

However, as we look at the various regions of the world, we see that at the deepest level, human beings are more biologically similar than culturally diverse. The attempt to classify human populations on the basis of race is now being widely abandoned by knowledgeable scholars and is regarded as a "scientific dead-end" in the explanation of culture. To be sure there are "racial" differences—such as facial features, color, stature, etc.—but these differences are less impressive than the fact that human anatomy and physiology are *generally* the same the world over.¹⁷

It is from this deeper level that we see the commonality of us all. As Ron Browning said in his recent presentation on *The Religion, Culture, and Family Project*, at the University of Chicago, the fact that cultures have different beliefs about the dimensions

of life does not negate the fact that all persons and communities share them. What are these dimensions of life? They all center on human needs. First, we are all bodily creatures. Secondly, human beings have needs rooted in the social aspects of life, and thus have need for law and order. Thirdly, all have needs rooted in the meaning of life—how to deal with human aspirations, suffering, failure, and the value of existence in general.

Does this enable us to make moral judgments about other cultures? It does, insofar as a culture's mores deny and destroy these basic human needs, because these needs are shared by all human beings. By respecting and enhancing the integrities of created life, we are responding in gratitude and reverence to God.¹⁸

If the deeper level of humanity is rooted in the biological commonality of persons and in their common societal needs of law and order and personal dignity, then we have a right to judge cultures in which these basic needs are being eroded or denied. Disregard for others' rights has always existed, but the current rash of violence in a supposed "enlightened" society such as we have in the United States has many people concerned. For instance, John Flynn, the pastor of St. Martin of Tours Roman Catholic Church in the Bronx, recently spoke of our advanced culture as a "culture of violence," because it has even become unsafe for his parishioners to attend midnight mass.¹⁹

From these brief observations it is obvious that the tension between Christianity—with its revelational base—and culture—with its great diversity and universal human need—cannot be resolved by a few strokes of the pen. However, the solution is as old as the first promise made to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden: Through the power of Divine grace men and women may taste a new culture, the culture of God's kingdom to come. Until then, when Christ again breaks personally into history, there will continue to be confrontations in life between Christianity and culture, tensions which believers must resolve in their various situations in their own way. Note how Christ expressed concern for His people to the Father, "I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth" (John 17:15-17, KJV).

Our focus now turns to the more specific concerns of this essay, namely, the impact of culture on Christian theology. The latter is supposed to provide the guidance needed by men and women to help them taste the "new wine" of a different and better culture.

Impact of Modern Culture on the Theological World

Thomas Oden, in the Preface to *Agenda for Theology*, contrasts what he calls the majority report within Christian theology which says: Keep on trying to accommodate to "modernity" with the minority report which says: It is just this accommodation to modernity that has brought us to the brink of disaster. By "modernity" Oden means the overarching idolatry of our times, which assumes that recent modes of knowing truth are vastly superior to all older ways. It is this view—characterized by individualism, secularization, naturalistic reductionism, and narcissistic hedonism—that has presided over the deterioration of social structures. There needs to be a renewed grasp of Christian orthodoxy to bring about some civility and stability to our society.²⁰

The last thing we need, says Oden, is another new program of theology. He tells of a curious dream in which he was in the New Haven Cemetery only to stumble across his own tombstone with the astonishing epitaph: He made no new contribution to theology. When he awoke, he was marvelously pleased and relieved for of late he had been trying to follow the conviction of the great ecumenical councils of the past which deplored the notion that theology's task was to create some new addition to the apostolic teaching of "the received doctrine."

As Oden points out, there seems to be no lack of a certain kind of brilliance among some who view themselves as innovative theologians. Theology has even managed to gain a modest status in the world—a chair here or there in an enormous tax-supported university. It has developed professional societies that are neat carbon copies of other professional societies, and it has even undergone a dramatic name change: from theology to religious studies. Its subject matter is no longer confined to God or revelation, but embraces the phenomena of religious experience.²¹

Much of the recent teaching of theology has gone into an effort to achieve a predictive expertise about what new cultural wave is

coming, and then having spotted an emergent movement cresting in the distance—to see if it might get a foothold for theology on that rolling tide so that some notoriety might be enjoyed as long as it lasts. Process theology and existential theology are just two examples of where vast theological programs have emerged to bend Scripture to accommodate to a Whitehead or a Heidegger.

And when Scripture does not bend to a Bultmannian interpretation, or to Tillich's concept of correlation with the *kairos* of our times, it is said to be irrelevant to the modern man, adrift from the intellectual momentum of our age. However, the actual audience out there is one that is preeminently characterized by hunger for continuity, stability, the freedom to sustain Scriptural values, and historical identifications with what they believe is right.²²

Oden speaks of his own theological pilgrimage as addictive accommodationism in pursuit of the latest social movement in order to learn from it, baptize it, and then treat it as if it were identical with the Christian center. He lists the various "movements" he espoused on his theological "roller-coaster" ride beginning in the early 1950's before realizing, as he did, thirty years later, the value of doctrinal stability. Why, he asks, did it take me so long to discover the marvelous depth of historical and moral awareness? Why had my liberal Christian tradition, which spoke so often about tolerance, proven so intolerant of those who held different positions?²³

While Oden expresses his concerns about liberal tradition, Scott Hafemann expresses a similar concern regarding Evangelicals. In his article, *Seminary, Subjectivity, and the Centrality of Scripture*, he asks why the church and its seminaries seem to lack the courage to confront the prevailing culture prophetically. Given the power and dominance of our culture's false reading of reality we are, he says, in a crisis situation in which the reading of reality entrusted to the community of faith is in profound contradiction to the reading of reality found in society. Without sound exegesis and the authority of Scripture we cannot but be overwhelmed by it.²⁴

He goes on to say that Evangelicals are participating more than ever in all aspects of the prevailing culture of modernity. Most seminaries have already been overwhelmed by it. While liberalism

is a self-conscious accommodation to modern values and cultural norms, and while Evangelicals have tried to resist such accommodations, they are nevertheless in the process of change. They are going the way of culture's de-objectivization with its flip side of subjectivization. And although neo-orthodoxy as a movement has played itself out, there are indications that as a mode of theological discourse, it is gaining credibility and popular support. While Evangelicals say that the neo-orthodoxy position is wrong, in practice their position on certain points of doctrine illustrates that they are in fact subjectivists. They believe that the meaning of a text necessarily varies for each believer since each person approaches the Bible from a different life situation. Therefore, we cannot speak of ultimate truth, but only of ultimate truth for each believer.

With this approach, Hafemann says, the emphasis shifts from a concern with the proclamation of an objective and universal truth to a concern with the subjective applicability of truth, that is, from what the Bible states to what God is telling us individually.²⁵ What one "feels" about the Bible and God is now culturally acceptable, and is easily wedded with one's subjective experience as the primary source of certitude. Thus, the Bible itself becomes marginalized,²⁶ and "I know that Christ lives in my heart" becomes equated with "I know about God and Christ by looking into my heart."²⁷

Others also are concerned about the subtle shift from the objective to the subjective among Evangelicals. Osborne says that the "casebook" approach to understanding Scripture ceases to hold to a revealed set of doctrines that must be believed. Instead the method provides Scriptural models from which the reader may construct his own Christianity. Thus the locus shifts from an authoritative Scripture to the needs of the person or community in the same way that modern biblical hermeneutics has shifted from the biblical text to the reader, for the construction of meaning.²⁸

McQuilkin also expresses concern and says that many left-wing Evangelicals have been so influenced by radical biblical criticism and behavioral scientific presuppositions, that biblical authority no longer controls ethical thinking. Some reject all ethical authority in Scripture, using it as a casebook of past religious experiences, if at all; whereas others are selective in recognizing some biblical standards as universally normative. Both elements

tend toward relativism, and in that sense are not far from being situation ethicists for whom the only thing that matters is love.²⁹

According to Hafemann, Evangelicals are also being influenced by the "movements" within theology such as Process theology's emphasis on the present rather than on God's self-disclosure in the past. If the character of God can only be known as it develops in interaction with history and humankind today, then the focus of attention is no longer on what God revealed about Himself in the Scriptures, but on how God is adapting to current events. In other words, God Himself is at the center of a great evolution. Nothing is yet fully fixed. Everything is changing—even God. And the inconsistencies that we experience are but natural effects of living in a universe with a God whose temperament is still evolving.

As Hafemann says, the paradigm of revelation is thus no longer the Bible as a fixed canon but the experiences of various movements within the theological world or within society. As a result, the Bible is no longer felt to be as relevant as our own theological focus, which will give us the paradigms we need to understand Scripture.³⁰

Thus, when the Scriptures are interpreted subjectively, either by our own experience or by our own chosen theological focus, they are divested of their authority to command obedience.³¹ With this statement, Hafemann has placed his finger on the nerve of the issue of revelation and culture, especially in the light of the gospel's eschatological emphasis, "Fear God and give glory to Him; for the hour of His judgment has come" (Rev 14:6).

Impact of Shifting Theological Culture on Adventism

In the mid-1950's, Horton Davies, in *Christian Deviations*, challenged his colleagues at Princeton and other such universities to bring into mainstream Christianity what he called the New Spiritual Movements or sidestream Christianity—such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Mormons, and Christian Scientists. He contended that there were social factors which hampered reunion as much as theological factors do. Snob-bish patronage on our part, he said to his colleagues, can do incalculable harm to the delicate relations between separated brethren. This will demand patience and involvement, but it will

shatter prejudices, and there will be interchange of grace and gifts.³² These gifts—such as witnessing, preaching the Second Advent, family values, health and healing—is what mainstream Christianity has neglected and needs to reintegrate into the larger community of faith.

What Davis says in his Epilogue regarding a more positive approach to dialogue is quite relevant to the purpose of this essay. His colleagues, he says, must look for signs of change in these developing denominations *from* the centrifugal movement *away* from mainstream Christianity *to* signs of a centripetal stepping *toward* the center of the historic churches. Furthermore, they must adopt a new attitude and do whatever they can to accelerate these centripetal movements.³³ What are the signs in these New Spiritual Movements, he asks, which mark the change from hostility to growing appreciation of the historic churches?

First, he suggests, the mainline churches need to realize there were social, as well as theological factors, that accounted for the original hostility between the older denominations and these new emerging ones. This means: As the social differences diminish so will the theological hostility. The growing appreciation of culture and education by these movements—as their men and women attend older seminaries and universities—will begin to change the way they view the historic churches. Soon, their vocabularies will change and become indistinguishable from mainstream Christianity; their store-front churches and tin tabernacles will give way to brick structures and neo-Gothic or neo-colonial churches. When they see these signs, the older churches should hang out their flags instead of muttering against these emerging denominations as is so often done. Endless opportunities also exist for dialogue in various associations and professional societies.³⁴

Secondly, there is the process of numerical growth and denominational maturation which will inevitably take place within these movements. The enthusiasm of the first generation of Bible-based movements is seen as notoriously difficult to preserve in the second and third generations. Success brings in numbers, and numbers require a complex organization. The close-knit fellowship of the pioneers, despite the organization of gigantic conventions, tends to move towards a remoteness from the local congregation.

The organization at regional and national levels further complicates the situation by training specialists and developing institutions where evangelistic, educational, and medical training may be offered. As a result, fellowship diminishes and tends to become less spontaneous and more formal.³⁵

Thirdly, as a result of the social and organizational changes mentioned above, there will be a demand for a more educated ministry. Bible institutes are not adequate and sophisticated enough for training ministers. Consequently, colleges and seminaries must be established. But if these institutions are to receive accreditation, their teachers must have doctoral degrees. Thus, the most able and ambitious of them will feel the need to attend various universities or university-related seminaries such as Harvard, Yale, or Berkeley. The result of this free encounter will contribute to the fracturing of stereotypes and prejudices the groups have held. Personal friendships will be formed. A Presbyterian will make a life-long friend of a Pentecostalist, or a Baptist will see a Seventh-day Adventist as a comrade instead of a competitor. Slowly but surely, a more sophisticated theology will begin to emerge.³⁶

Fourthly, there will be a subtle transformation of emphasis in belief and practice. Christianity will be recognized as world-affirming as well as world-denying. As a result, there will be less emphasis, for example, on the immediacy of the Second Coming of Christ, and less interest in the predictions of the Apocalypse. The hope will not be denied, but will be delayed.³⁷ In other words, the distinctive doctrines of Adventists will become less important to them, and their special mission—as seen in the light of the proclamation of the three angels in Revelation 14—will recede into the background.

Parenthetically, it should also be said that in spite of some of the adverse cultural and theological influences found in non-Adventist institutions of higher learning, and the fact that Adventists have their own colleges and universities, it is not the position of the church that learning at other institutions should be shunned. In fact, young men and women, rooted and grounded in the Adventist faith, who have a living connection with God, could, if so counseled by church leaders, attend other institutions of higher learning where they would have a wider field for study. They would associate with different minds, would become acquainted with the results of

the popular methods of education, and would gain a knowledge of the theology as taught in various leading institutions. What they learned would be of great value, for it would prepare them to labor for the educated classes and to meet the prevailing theological errors of our time, all the while living their faith and sowing seeds of truth in the minds of men and women as the ancient Waldenses did.³⁸

One example of such theological errors which Adventism must guard against is a modified form of the "moral-influence" theory of the atonement. Popularized by Horace Bushnell in the 19th century, the theory says that since God's nature is essentially love, man need not be concerned about God's justice. Man's problem is not that he has violated God's law; his problem is that his own attitudes keep him apart from God. Man does not realize that his disobedience is a source of pain to God and that God still loves him.

If man would repent and turn to God in trust and faith, there would be reconciliation, for the difficulty certainly does not lie with God's ability to forgive. There is nothing in His nature requiring satisfaction for or rectification of our sins. The difficulty is with man. Sin is a type of sickness from which men and women must be healed. It is to correct this defect in us that Christ came. This is His real work. His death was not the purpose of His coming, it was the consequence of His coming.³⁹

Adventists believe the Scriptures teach that Christ's death is both substitutionary and expiatory, as well as reconciling and transforming.⁴⁰

As man's substitute and surety, the iniquity of men was laid on Christ. He was counted a transgressor that He might redeem them from the curse of the law. The guilt of every descendant of Adam of every age was pressing upon His heart, . . . [He] who raised the dead to life and opened the eyes of the blind, offers Himself upon the cross as the last sacrifice for man. He, the sin-bearer, endures judicial punishment for iniquity and becomes sin itself for man.⁴¹

It should be said that while the teachers of Scripture are extremely important to Adventists, these teachings should not so absorb the attention of the church that it ignores the needs of people. Those who have had great spiritual privileges, but who refuse to carry their share of responsibility in this world, are in

greater condemnation before God than those who may be in error upon some doctrinal points, but who live to do good to others.⁴² When Christ on the Mount of Olives spoke to His disciples concerning the great judgment day, He represented its decision as turning upon one point. When the nations are gathered before Him, there will be only two classes of people. Their eternal destiny will be determined by what they have done or have neglected to do for Him in the person of the poor and suffering.⁴³

John Stott, in *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*, underscores the necessity for genuine Christian compassion as he tells of a homeless woman who turned to her vicar for help, and who, because *he* was too busy, promised to pray for her. She later wrote about her experience in this poem:

I was hungry, and you formed a humanities group to discuss my hunger.

I was imprisoned, and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release.

I was naked, and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.

I was sick, and you knelt and thanked God for your health.

I was homeless, and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God.

I was lonely, and you left me alone to pray for me.

You seem so holy, so close to God but I am still very hungry—and lonely—and cold.⁴⁴

Whether serving Christ in the person of the poor and suffering is of greater importance than theological accuracy it is not an "either-or" question. Correct beliefs and heartfelt service are both essential for the Christian faith. Teaching biblical truths in a right spirit will lead men and women to Christ and contribute to unselfish living. It is for this reason, among others, that the importance of the authority of Scripture must not be overlooked.

It is still true that when young men and women are counseled to attend other institutions of higher learning, they need to understand the issues at stake. They need to realize the danger of allowing their minds to be diverted from their heritage of faith. No doubt can be safely entertained about the truths God has given for this time. For whatever weakens faith in God, and whoever gives

the impression (learned teachers are often admired by their students and thought to be right) that the Bible is no more than a good book of moral instructions and cannot possibly be correct, robs men and women of the only real safeguard against sin.⁴⁵

We must not forget:

The warnings of the word of God regarding the perils surrounding the Christian church belong to us to-day. As in the days of the apostles men tried by tradition and philosophy to destroy faith in the Scriptures, so to-day, by the pleasing sentiments of "higher-criticism," evolution, spiritualism, theosophy, and pantheism, the enemy of righteousness is seeking to lead souls into forbidden paths. To many, the Bible is as a lamp without oil, because they have turned their minds into channels of speculative belief that bring misunderstanding and confusion. The work of "higher-criticism," in dissecting, conjecturing, reconstructing, is destroying faith in the Bible as a divine revelation. It is robbing God's word of power to control, uplift, and inspire human lives.⁴⁶

It is one thing to treat the Bible as a book of good moral instruction, to be heeded so far as is consistent with the spirit of the times; it is another thing to regard it as it really is,—the word of the living God,—the word that is our life, the word that is to mold our thoughts, our words, and our actions. To hold God's word as anything less than this is to reject it. It is this rejection by those who profess to believe it, that is foremost among the causes of skepticism and infidelity in the youth.⁴⁷

As C. S. Lewis points out in *God in the Dock*, each generation is taught by an earlier generation, and the beliefs which boys from school now hold are largely the beliefs of the previous generation. The mental world also has its time-bombs. No generation, he says, can bequeath to its successor what it has not got. You may frame the syllabus as you please, but when you have planned and reported *ad nauseam*, if you are skeptical you will teach only skepticism to your pupils. Nothing which is not in the teachers can flow from them into the pupils.⁴⁸

A Lesson from History

Another facet of western culture in which the authority of Scripture is easily set aside, is the emphasis on the rights of

individuals and groups that have such ethnic or nationalistic concerns for identity that these interests and concerns overshadow basic Scriptural principles. One example from recent history occurred on a national level in Germany in the 1930's when Catholics and Protestants saw nothing wrong with cooperating with the Nazi party.

On "July 20, 1933, the Catholic Center Party in Germany was formally dissolved and a concordat between Pope Pius XI and the German Nazis announced. In October of that year German bishops celebrated the 450th anniversary of Luther's birth by pledging fealty to 'our Leader Adolf Hitler as a gift from God's hand.'"⁴⁹ In 1934 the Barmen Declaration was drawn up by Evangelical leaders such as Karl Barth to define the mission of the church in the face of the liberal Nazi Christians. "The foundation of the Church was held [by these Evangelicals] to be in the Revelation of God in Jesus Christ and not in any subordinate revelation in nature or history, and her primary mission was defined as to preach the Gospel of the free Grace of God."⁵⁰

Barth—who had a decided influence on drafting this declaration and who afterward was expelled from Germany and went to live in Switzerland—points out that the logic of the German Christians was that side by side with its attestation in Jesus Christ in Scripture, the church should also proclaim God's revelation in reason, in conscience, in the emotions, in history, in nature, and in culture and its achievements and developments. However, as Barth warns, even if we only lend our little finger to natural theology, there naturally follows the denial of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. What happened with humanism in the 18th century, scholarship and nationalism in the 19th century, and a little later with socialism, was happening again. They all tried to have a say in the Church. For them it was admissible and right, and perhaps even orthodox, to combine the knowability of God in Jesus Christ with His knowability in nature, reason, and history, and with all other kinds of proclamations.⁵¹

If there is no genuine, no unique, revelation from God, men can gather everything they need to know on their own, and then natural, humanistic, and political forms of organization are all that we need. But if a "church" is to be formed, it must be founded on

divine revelation. Unless it can be established that God has actually made some disclosure, churches are unnecessary organizations.⁵² But if it is established that God has spoken, and that revelation from Him is believed, then it must be adhered to above all other revelations, natural and political alike.

While in the 1930's the German church saw nothing contradictory with Christianity by placing nationalism and racial interests above the authority of Scripture, it led to the greatest atrocity that the 20th Century had seen: the Jewish holocaust. Yet, somehow our hindsight deceives us when we fail to recognize that one of the causes of these terrible deeds was placing loyalty to the Nazi government above loyalty to the revelation of Jesus Christ in Scripture. Their actions simply echoed the words of Caiaphas, "It is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not" (cf. John 11:50).

In more subtle ways, rights movements of any kind, no matter how right they are—when allowed to subordinate Scripture to their own interests on either an individual, group, or national level—are taking the same path. Believers often quote the text, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28, NIV) as a basis for legitimate rights, but then this text becomes a pretext for actions that do despite to the primacy of Scripture in areas of essentials truths.

Christians are citizens of two worlds and live in the "now" of the kingdom of grace as well in the "not yet" of the kingdom of glory. In that sense we are strangers and pilgrims looking for a city whose builder and maker is God (Heb 11:8-16). We are not first of all Americans, Germans, French, Japanese, Africans or Argentinians—and then Christians. We are first and foremost Seventh-day Adventist Christians, and then, whatever else our heritage has passed on to us. Unfortunately, too often this priority has been reversed, and we have so strongly supported a given "rights" movement (of whatever kind) we may have inadvertently undermined the principles of the kingdom to which we have promised to give our first allegiance.

We are first of all members of the body of Christ and each individual part is in need of the other parts. As persons, we function as part of the whole of which we have chosen to be a part. It is in

this relationship—our relationship with Christ—that we find our true identity, and not by searching for and then finding it somehow within ourselves. When the support of social, racial, or nationalistic concerns, as legitimate as they may be, becomes more important to us than the authority of Scripture regarding the Sabbath or any other of the 27 Fundamental Beliefs, we are then Seventh-day Adventist Christians only in name.

By God's grace we are all brought into one body. Some have said,

'You do not understand the French people; you do not understand the Germans. They have to be met in just such a way.' But I inquire: Does not God understand them? Is it not He who gives His servants a message for the people? He knows just what they need; and if the message comes directly from Him through His servants to the people, it will accomplish the work whereunto it is sent; it will make all one in Christ. Though some are decidedly French, others decidedly German, and others decidedly American, they will be just as decidedly Christlike.⁵³

The power to make us all one in Christ can only come when divine revelation is given its rightful place, balanced by belief and practice as given to us in Scripture.

The Coming Cultural Shift

Seventh-day Adventists hold Scripture as supreme and believe that separation of church and state is what made our nation great and our culture unique.⁵⁴ However, they also believe that in spite of the historic and present separation of church and state, religion will eventually be brought into government by popular demand in order to save society. Furthermore it will be brought into government so strongly, the principles of the first amendment to the Constitution—which guarantees freedom of religion to all—will disappear.⁵⁵ Political corruption continues to destroy love of justice and regard for truth; and in free America, in order for legislators to maintain favor with the public, they will yield to the popular demand to save the country by enforcing religion.⁵⁶

Stephen Carter, a Harvard law professor, in his recent book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, comes to the defense of religion in government. He believes that American law, with its undue emphasis on

separation of church and state, has trivialized religion. He urges lawmakers to make a careful distinction between what is acceptable societal behavior and religious convictions—instead of immediately holding suspect anything highly motivated by religion.⁵⁷ He says that the state rightly recognizes that some things must be superior to others in order to maintain law and order, but when this concept was wedded to the idea that the African race was inferior, it was rightly challenged by the abolitionist movement in the 19th century, and the civil rights movement in the 20th century—both of which had their origins in religion.⁵⁸

He also mentions Sakharov's admiration for the strength of Seventh-day Adventists in Russia as an example when they refused to allow state policy to step on their religious conscience. This example, he says, involves much more than the rights of individual conscience. The Adventist willingness to serve in the military, but not fight, is a by-product of their search for ultimate meaning. This is what government must not trivialize.⁵⁹ In essence this means that government must allow religious convictions to speak to whatever is depriving men and women of their rights and is destroying the fabric of society.

As admirable as Stephen Carter's defense of religion is—including his cautions—the time will come when government will not only cease to place emphasis on the separation of church and state that we see today, but will also institute a false worship and compel all to comply (Rev 13). As we have mentioned, it will be believed that the fast-spreading corruption of society must be corrected and that united worship, even if enforced, would greatly improve the morals of the nation. But though the electorate will advocate moral reforms based on biblical principles, one requirement will be contrary to God's Word: worshiping on Sunday.⁶⁰

As Louis Veillot says in his *Liberal Illusion*, published by the National Catholic Welfare Conference, "When the time comes and men realize that the social edifice must be rebuilt according to eternal standards, be it to-morrow, or be it centuries from now, the Catholics will arrange things to suit said standards. . . . They will make obligatory the religious observance of Sunday on behalf of the whole of society and for its own good."⁶¹

Already the media portrays the current United States of

America as the most crime-ridden nation in the world, and men and women are demanding that something be done about the violence that is ruining our nation. This mutual concern of religion and society sees the need for cooperation to preserve the nation. It argues that the "wall of separation" of the first amendment was erected to keep government out of religion; it was not meant to keep religion out of government.⁶²

Educators, for instance, are beginning to recognize that something must be done to preserve the values which have made us great. Allan Bloom, a professor at the University of Chicago, in *The Closing of the American Mind*, decries what higher education has done to impoverish the souls of today's students. There was a time, he says, when most students beginning their higher education could be counted on to know the Bible, that ubiquitous source of the older traditions filtered through early Protestantism in which every man was his own interpreter. Most students also had a unified and explicit political tradition based on the Declaration of Independence. Today, students arrive at the university ignorant of the most basic biblical principles, devoid of traditional family values and cynical about America's political heritage.

A knowledge of the Bible which permeated most of our households and constituted a large part of the family bond, giving it content, has largely disappeared. Moses and the Tables of the Law, Jesus and His preaching of brotherly love, gave our lives meaning and provided us with a modeled existence. Passages from the Psalms and the Gospels echoed in children's heads. Attending church, praying at the table, were a way of life, inseparable from the moral education that was part of the family's special responsibility in a democracy. The things one was supposed to do, the sense that the world supported them and punished disobedience, were all incarnated in the biblical stories. But today the dreariness of the family's spiritual landscape passes belief. The delicate fabric of the civilization into which successive generations are woven has unraveled, and children are raised, not educated.⁶³

Others have expressed the same concern, pointing out that the education given to the young molds the whole social fabric. Many educators suppose that better educational facilities, greater skill, and more recent methods will transform society and set things

right, yet they refuse to make the Word of God the foundation of education, as indeed it should be.⁶⁴

As Bloom rightly points out, every educational system has a moral goal that informs its curriculum. It wants to produce a certain kind of human being. Today, the purpose of education is not to make young people thinkers who can defend their convictions, but to provide them with a single, supposedly moral virtue—openness to everything.⁶⁵ The moral goal seems to be that whatever we do, let us not teach our students to have convictions and make moral judgments, because that would make someone else be wrong. Cultural relativism is what is destroying our culture, making it one of many in a republic of world cultures. But the study of history and cultures does not prove that cultures are relative. To the contrary, that is a philosophical premise we bring to our study of them. History and culture are interpreted in the light of relativism, and then it is said that history and culture prove the premise. This is the same as saying that the diversity of points of view in a college bull session proves there is no truth.⁶⁶ We pride ourselves on our tolerance and openness and in the process rob our culture of the very "stuff" it needs to survive.

One of the tasks of philosophy is to identify the nature of religious language, since religious utterances are the language of the individual believer. That is, it is spoken out of a specific paradigm. But individual choices among paradigms are not matters of truth, because the believer's choice to speak of God cannot be called objective truth in a universal sense. This relativistic view of religion caught fire in the more popularized work of Thomas Kuhn's, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which is now the dominating theory in most of the academic disciplines. So a religion is simply one perspective among others of viewing one's world.⁶⁷

Norskov Olsen, former president of Loma Linda University, expresses his concern over what has happened to this country's past values. In his recent book, *The New Relatedness*, he says that Darwinism, Marxism, and Freudianism have made man the measure of all things, and the belief in evolution and the survival of the fittest led many to consider moral standards to be relative. Consequently, there is the breakdown of the family which is the basic building block of society.⁶⁸

Jacques Ellul sees our technical culture fast becoming the all-embracing norm. The promoters of technical culture, he says, have three fundamental goals. One is the acquisition of knowledge; two, adapting the young to the technical environment; and finally, the creation of a psychological mood that is favorable to technique, and an openness to everything pertaining to it. For such, culture is simply the transmitting and organizing of information, and since everything else is changing, there must also be a change of culture. The visionaries of this new culture, he points out, have only scorn for what has thus far been regarded as culture: a dusty university collection of outdated knowledge. Everything that has thus far been produced in the form of culture must be scrapped. The technocrats want not only technical efficiency but also the glory that centuries of spiritual life have fashioned around Christian culture.⁶⁹

Karl Menninger, well-known psychiatrist and founder of the Menninger Foundation, says that sin is the transgression of the law of God. It is disobedience of the divine will. It is moral failure. The disappearance of the word "sin," he says, involves a shift in the allocation of responsibility for evil. Some people are convinced of the validity of the Skinnerian thesis that neither they nor anyone else is answerable for any evil. We project the blame on to others, and ascribe the responsibility to a group. Adultery may technically be a crime, yet we hesitate to call it a sin. But I believe that sin is still very much with us, by us, and in us.⁷⁰

Carl Henry expresses his concern for the loss of recognition of objective universal truth when he says that many theologians shy away from the biblical identification of the will of God with its specific commandments and precepts. There is a tendency to limit the revealed content of the divine will to the basic love for God and neighbor. Based on such passages as "love fulfills the law," they set aside all positive and applied commandments as legalistic, and accept as ethical norms only what love dictates. There is much talk about love and faith as tests of obedience, but there is a lack of detail in defining the *content* of obedience.

The assumption that undefined love is the law of the Christian finds no basis in the teaching of Jesus, nor in the teaching of the apostles. The historic Christian view is that revelation provides a content of moral principles and precepts that give specific, practical

direction. The Christian revelation of the good as obedience-in-love to the revealed will of God provides form and content to the word "love". Christ gave this definition: "If you love Me, keep My commandments." And on the verge of eternity, the Apocalypse closes the gates of the heavenly Jerusalem to liars. This means that the eternal destiny of men is based upon what their disposition toward the divine commandments has been. It says, "Here is the patience of the saints, here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus."⁷¹

The liberty of the Christian man is not a freedom from the obedience of the Law, but from the disobedience of it. To be free from obedience is to be servants of sin. The Law is needed as a rule because of the reality of the believer's freedom, that is, freedom to do what is right, which right he can only know from what is written in the Law.⁷²

Conclusion

It is important to realize what a difference a people's world view makes in their strength as they are exposed to the pressure of life. It was the early Christians with their commitment to what was written who were able to resist religious mixtures, syncretism, and the effects of Roman culture. This strength rested on God's being an infinite-personal God and His speaking in Scripture. This is what gave the early Christians universal values by which to live and by which to judge the society and the political state in which they lived.⁷³

The society in which we live is rapidly changing. It is no longer business as usual. All who value their eternal interests should be on guard against the inroads of skepticism for the very pillars of truth will be attacked. It is impossible to keep beyond the reach of the sarcasms and the insidious teachings of modern culture and infidelity. Even youth with little experience presume to insinuate doubts concerning the Word of God. Many jest at the faith of their fathers and insult the Spirit of grace. All who trust to human reason and arrive at supposed truth unaided by the wisdom of God, are entangled in the snare of Satan. Soon the testing time will come and those who have made God's Word their rule of life will be revealed. The false-hearted professor may not now be distinguished

from the real Christian, but the time is just upon us when the difference between those who worship at the shrine of a morally bankrupt culture and those who are committed to the timeless moral principles of Scripture will forever be seen.⁷⁴

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INSPIRATION, THE NATURAL SCIENCES, AND A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

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The most important change in the understanding of religious truth in the last centuries . . . has been caused more by the work of science than by any other factor religious or cultural. Langdon Gilkey¹

True science and Inspiration are in perfect harmony. Ellen White²

Introduction

What does inspiration guarantee?³ As hidden in Langdon Gilkey's thesis mentioned above, have advances in historical critical study of the Bible, evolutionary theories in biology, geology, and paleontology compelled Christian scholars and theologians to interpret the six days of creation week as nonliteral,⁴ the talking snake of Genesis 3 as figurative, the fall of Adam and Eve as nonhistorical, the flood as limited, the phenomenon of rain as something experienced continually before the flood,⁵ Joshua's long day as legendary,⁶ and so on⁷—thereby radically redefining traditional views of the reliability and intent of inspiration? Is inspiration, therefore, trustworthy only in matters of faith and practice as claimed by many Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant theologians so that the narratives of Genesis 1 and 2, for example, are "merely phenomenological descriptions which have no scientific intent?"⁸

On the other hand, as stated by Ellen White, are true science and inspiration in perfect harmony? Does the reliability of biblical