

Retelling the Old Old Story

A SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST SHARES THE CHALLENGES OF WRITING FAITHFUL HISTORY

An Interview with Jonathan M. Butler

IN RECENT MONTHS MORMONS HAVE FOUND THEMSELVES IN THE MIDST OF A SPIRITED—SOMETIMES acrimonious—debate about how our religious past should be chronicled. Savoring as we do our status as a peculiar people, we have tended to see this disquiet in our community as unique. Unfortunately, such a perspective unnecessarily isolates us from others—with whom we share more than we often comfortably admit.

Mormons and Seventh-day Adventists have a common birthright, the religious ferment of western New York in the early nineteenth century. The Adventists trace their lineage back to William Miller—the millennialist revival preacher in Vermont, New Hampshire, and New York who predicted Christ's coming for the mid-1840s—through those who, after the Great Disappointment, gathered around the "Adventist prophetess" Ellen G. White. She had converted to Adventism in 1840 before the Great Disappointment and lived to shepherd those who believed in her unique historical and doctrinal teachings and special views on health and diet into the twentieth century (she died in 1915).

Though 150 years have accentuated the divergent aspects, Mormons and Adventists remain in some metaphoric sense siblings whose lifelines continually cross and part and intertwine. The contemporary controversies in Mormondom mirror to a remarkable degree currents of strain and questioning and debate among Seventh-day Adventists (SDAs). Writers of Adventist history must deal with the central fact of Ellen G. White and her writings—the nature of her inspiration and the degree to which her works assume the role of scripture among Adventists—just as writers of Mormon history must deal with the prophetic claims and sacred writings of Joseph Smith. In recent years this challenge has been increasingly joined by Adventists trained in history and religious studies at various secular universities, with mixed reactions from the community of Adventist believers.

In 1976 a faculty member at an Adventist university, Ronald L. Numbers, published a social history about the health teachings of Mrs. White, a book recognized as a piece of first class scholarship and writing in numerous journals. "As one raised and educated within Adventism," wrote Numbers in the first pages of his book, "I admittedly have more than an academic interest in Mrs. White's historical fate; but I have tried to be as objective as possible. Thus I have refrained from using divine inspiration as an historical explanation." This omission was unforgiveable for the Adventist community as a whole, and Numbers lost his job in the aftermath.

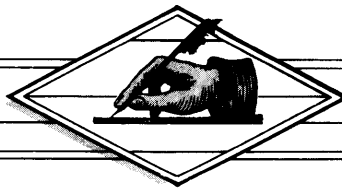
Despite the risks, research and writing about the Adventist past by faithful Adventists have continued and even proliferated. Jonathan M. Butler, an associate professor at Loma Linda University, the SDA flagship in Riverside, California, exemplifies this trend. Trained at the University of Chicago in American church history under Martin Marty (MA in 1972, Ph.D. in 1975), Butler teaches courses in American religious history, the history of Christianity, and Adventist history and writes for various SDA publications. He is presently at work on a book about Ellen G. White.

He talked with SUNSTONE editor Susan Staker Oman in San Francisco during the meetings of the American Academy of Religions (December 1981) about the challenges and tensions which face the insider who tries to stay in the good graces of his religious community while writing responsible academic history about that same tradition.

SUNSTONE: Most of our readers will probably wonder why we have decided to interview a Seventh-day Adventist historian. What would you tell them?

BUTLER: In a way, Mormons and Adventists are like fraternal twins who were separated at birth. Both

groups come out of the Burned-Over District of western New York, both have prophet founders, both view the American experience as revelatory in some sense, both form rather comprehensive religious systems, both are worldwide missionary groups. Getting to know each



other after a lifetime of separation, so to speak, can only contribute to our mutual self-understanding.

Too often, though, there's misunderstanding and ill will, at least from the Adventist point of view. The polemic against Mormonism is a kind of American

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commonplace. But it has been particularly high-pitched in the Adventist community. I grew up hearing about the "Satanic delusion" of Mormonism—a group that came into existence as a "counterfeit" of Seventh-day Adventism. Maybe Mormons are just too close for comfort. Like the Spiritualists in the nineteenth century who were similar enough to our prophetess that she spent her career lambasting them. Or like the Jehovah's Witnesses who get a lot more bad press among Adventists than, say, Episcopalians. I think of R.G. Collingwood's point that polemic usually suggests an attraction. Certainly Adventists are attracted to Mormons, maybe even envious of you. After all, we've never produced anything so fine as a Marie Osmond.

In my case, I was practically a Mormon missionary once. I worked my way through college in the mid-sixties selling religious children's books in Utah. I went door to door in white shirt and tie (if not with a bicycle)—one summer in Salt Lake City and one in Utah Valley. In effect, a friend and I impersonated Mormons. We learned the idiom. Not that we fabricated deliberately. But if people assumed we were Mormons, sales went better. In our Adventist selling school, we were told to refer to God as "Our Heavenly Father" and never show the pictures of angels with wings. In fact Adventist publishing has been entirely altered in this respect. Books now appear from the Adventist presses with wingless angels—a direct impact of the Mormon market. In making my sales pitch, occasionally I'd make a mistake. I wasn't always sure where I'd gone wrong. But this look of smugness would come over my Mormon customer, and I'd know my cover was blown. I was suddenly a Gentile. It's the same smugness I'd seen in my own people, a sense of certitude and superiority, but now I was seeing it in someone else. Like in a mirror. This probably gets to the heart of what is most similar about us, and why the likeness also repels: we both think we're right.

SUNSTONE: *Do you see similar parallels between Adventist historiography and Mormon historiography?*

BUTLER: In the scholarly sense, you would have to say

that Adventism is a mere "counterfeit" of Mormonism. You really are developing a rich historiography in Mormonism. We are at least twenty years behind you in that regard. Most of our history writing is still in-house. Mormons are writing sophisticated history that has begun to communicate the Mormon experience to those outside of Mormonism. Your experience should provide Adventist historians with a kind of agenda to follow, even if loosely, in pursuing our own tradition.

SUNSTONE: *What kind of history have Adventists written?*

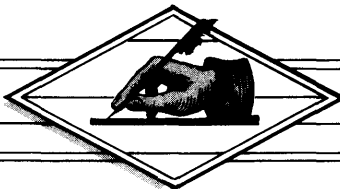
BUTLER: Most of us grew up on "salvation history" (*heilsgeschichte*)—stories of God's hand in our special history. Visions, miracles, saints, and heroes. Like the Hebrew scriptures, this was history written *by* believers *for* believers.

Then apologetic history came along in the next generation, written by believers for non-believers (though usually only believers read it). F.D. Nichol, for example, wrote what he called a defense of the Millerites in which he argued they were not "oddballs," cranks, and stupid farmers. They had not stood in ascension robes or filled insane asylums. LeRoy Froom filled half a book shelf in every Adventist living room with his four volumes on *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, tracing millenarianism through every generation of Christian history and finding it in rather respectable company (even among people who wouldn't know themselves to be "millenarian," as it turned out). Like other new, fledgling movements, Adventists needed a "useable past." Of course this made for amateur history writing by today's professional standard—not just biased but prejudiced and misconceived and sloppy. But the apologists did a huge amount of work. And they took the long view and the big view that you find among romantic historians of the nineteenth century. Their lives were not pinched into narrow, obscure little monographs.

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Sure, the apologists are now vulnerable as historians at almost every point, but that's partly because they painted such big panoramic pictures.

In the last decade or so Adventists have been writing narrative history, the better stuff resulting from dissertations in Ph.D. programs in non-Adventist history departments. Unfortunately, though the supernaturalism has been left out and the apologetics, nothing really has replaced it in the way of an interpre-



tation. It's mostly one "darn fact" after another. You really need a heavy emotional or spiritual investment in the tradition to stay awake reading this sort of chronicle, but plenty do. Adventists have that lovingly antiquarian regard for the Adventist past. Some churchmen remain a little wistful about the loss of "God's hand" in the histories. They want the historians to look up from their narratives once in a while and wink reassuringly to the believer, indicating God has supernaturally intervened in the movement; if the "Dark day" in New England signaling the end of the world was caused by smoke from a Newfoundland forest fire, God used the fire for his larger purposes. For the most part, churchmen have allowed the narrative history because, if it doesn't "prove" the supernatural, at least it doesn't seem to deny it.

Where Adventist historians feel like naughty school children is when they write interpretive history. Here the supernatural does not intrude on the level of cause and effect. The historian provides perfectly plausible, comprehensive explanations for historical events without a hint of the divine hand. The prophetess Ellen White saw visions about health and temperance, say, because Sylvester Graham had lectured in her hometown, or she was chronically ill, or she read books on the subjects. The prophetess had visions because she suffered from a form of epilepsy called "partial complex seizures." Now Adventists could do as we've done with the "Dark day" and say God used the social and cultural milieu of the prophetess to influence her. Or God communicated through epileptic seizures much as he might make contact through a person's musical sensibility. But for the most part believers cannot see it this way. The visions were of God or of the Devil, as Ellen White herself said. Or the visions were supernatural or psycho-pathological. They were not in any sense both. Of course things aren't that simple. Like the Woody Allen line about whether you can see the human soul under a microscope. "Maybe," he says, "but you'd definitely need one of those good ones with two eyepieces." Biblical prophets had those high powered eyepieces, in a sense, but ordinary historians do not. A scientist doesn't intrude on a scientific discussion with statements of faith. A pathologist doesn't find a soul in a cadaver. A cosmonaut doesn't find God above the stratosphere. History is also a modest enterprise, which neither proves the divine nor debunks it. Maybe the church, if it realized that about history, would cease being disappointed in historians. Actually I believe that good interpretive history according to the latest and best canons of historical scholarship is the highest and most refined kind of apologetics. It can actually contribute to the faith of a new generation of Adventists who do not respond to the old-fashioned salvation history.

SUNSTONE: How are Seventh-day Adventist scholars who are attempting to write interpretive history treated?

BUTLER: Unfortunately the scholars who face the severest criticism within our church are precisely the ones who are doing this, who put their minds to the issues that matter most to church members. It can be a

somewhat thankless task to come to terms creatively with the tradition.

One strategy Adventist scholars adopt under these circumstances is to avoid any direct study of their own religion. A church historian, for example, might study sixteenth century Lutheranism rather than nineteenth century Adventism. He can make a scholarly contribution this way and benefit the church. But if this is the extent of Adventist scholarship I think it will have shirked a fundamentally important function. For any tradition to remain faithful to itself it must transcend itself. Adventist scholars may make impressive contributions in archeology or historical theology or literary criticism or behavioral science, but if none of these methodologies are turned on our own tradition, and used to advance it, then we are intellectually

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schizophrenic indeed. On a cosmetic level this may look healthy, but it's really not healthy at all.

The last generation of religion scholarship offers a good case study in this regard. Of all the scholarly disciplines in Adventism, religion was the last to seek graduate or professional training. Medicine was the first. Technology and the hard sciences never seem to present the philosophical threat that the humanistic disciplines do. But in order to get accreditation for the pre-medical and medical programs, the colleges needed full-fledged liberal arts programs, so medicine had a domino effect on Adventist higher education. At first, though, we wanted only educational certification from accrediting boards as a kind of gesture, while carrying on educational business as usual. We did this in the sciences, the humanities, the arts, and so on. Religion teachers did not want to bring up the rear academically, so they got into Ph.D. programs too. At first religion scholars educated themselves in biblical languages, or archeology, and speech for the homileticians. In those days—about 20 years ago—these were the "safe disciplines" in which to pursue doctoral studies. The next wave of religion scholars ventured into religion disciplines proper—biblical studies, church history and theology (though historical theology for the most part), and, belatedly, ethics—but these scholars avoided specifically "Adventist" topics at the dissertation level and ducked scholarly study that might put them at odds with their tradition. This was good for the church then but not good enough in the long run. Now the newest



generation of Adventist scholars have begun to sift the tradition with the methodologies they've acquired in the non-Adventist universities.

In history a comparable development occurred. Historians circumvented Adventist history at the graduate level. They studied Elizabethan England or the American colonial period or Latin America, but now they are using the historical method on Adventist history. The church has had to "come of age" with this late-breaking development, and there's no way of telling yet how this will come out. In the academic setting, they usually say "publish or perish." But in Adventism right now, as we've seen recently in the Missouri Synod or the Southern Baptist Convention, it has been more like "publish *and* perish." Ironically, it seems to me that the

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scholars who come to grips with their traditions are the ones with the most confidence in it. They believe it can hold up under historical and theological scrutiny. They take the tradition seriously enough to want to transform it and adapt it to the needs of a new generation. Their critics too often do not display the same confidence or creativity.

SUNSTONE: Your prophetess Ellen White and the matter of her literary borrowings have been in the press lately. Have Adventist historians been in the middle of that?

BUTLER: Yes. This is a good example of the kind of sensitive issue I was talking about. Adventist historians have been doing some thorough investigation. One historian has written over 200 pages of source criticism on a slim chapter in one of her books. In this case it was not the historians or theologians who brought the issue into the news, however, but a southern California Adventist pastor named Walter Rea. He had been essentially a verbal inerrantist regarding Mrs. White's writings, had commanded great portions of her work to personal memory, and collected anthologies of her writings for publication. He read only the Bible and Mrs. White. Then Rea was casting about for something more to read and decided that reading from Mrs. White's own library should be O.K. What was good enough for the prophet should be good enough for him. It was then that he happened upon numerous parallels between her writing and the books in her library. Close paraphrases, verbatim quotations—without the quotation marks—structural dependence. He was personally devastated by

his discoveries. Scholars had been aware of some of this, but not the degree of it which Rea, with an excellent memory for Mrs. White's work, uncovered. He remained of "fundamentalist" temperament, but was now a fundamentalist scorned. He became as adamant in his opposition to the prophet as he had been in his support of her. And as a result, he has had and will have a much greater impact on Adventist laymen than the scholars. He lacks the scholarly discipline and tools, but he has the sense of outrage which registers with ordinary people.

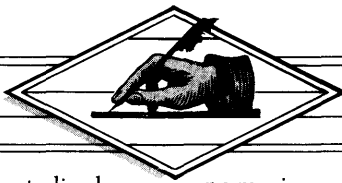
SUNSTONE: What is your personal view of the controversy?

BUTLER: My own view is that the source and redaction criticism of Mrs. White's literary efforts cannot discredit her achievement. She produced religious classics for a large, dynamic community of people. "Higher" criticism cannot possibly plumb the meaning of them. Like the phenomenologists tell us, it's not so much the text but what's "in front" of the text that engages us. Mrs. White's writings hold rich significance for people. The whole is more than the sum of the parts for them. Why texts take on this religious authority for people is the fascinating story, more so than even where they came from. Why people continue to reinterpret them from generation to generation without ever wearing them out. Why in fact a former Adventist pastor would have devoted almost twenty years trying to dismantle a corpus of writings. That in itself speaks of their significance. David Donald, the Civil War historian, finds the Lincoln myth as historically significant as the real Lincoln. I would say the same of Ellen White.

SUNSTONE: Making sense of Ellen White is as central for Adventists then as is making sense of Joseph Smith for Mormons?

BUTLER: Exactly. And right now my church is in a real paradigm shift in regard to its understanding of Ellen White. The model of inspiration with which an entire generation of Adventists have operated is crumbling all around us. Old truisms we grew up with regarding the prophetess cannot be said anymore with any kind of security. Since the revelations about her literary dependence, I hear Adventists quoting her by saying, "Ellen White (or whoever?) said, . . ." Most people in the church try to explain her literary dependence by saying that she selected only the best material, that she edited the best possible anthology. Even this formulation has hardly passed the lips of church leadership when it appears obsolete in the face of new literary findings. She drew from historians in a historical argument, for example, who were not the best among her contemporaries, who held to errors in fact as well as in judgment.

I imagine Adventists by and large will survive these historical revelations with faith in Mrs. White's inspiration intact, but it will have to be a *different* faith. My children will not grow up on the knee of the same Ellen White I did. She may be more of a grandmother to them than a mother. That is, she will retain an important and respected position in their spiritual heritage, but they will acknowledge, and be untroubled by, their historical distance from her. Already, I notice in the



religion classes I teach that a professor cannot clinch an argument with a quotation from Ellen White. Now students want some corroborating evidence, a scientific or historical authority that backs up inspiration. Students are even willing to quarrel with the prophetess on occasion, or contrast her to scripture and favor scripture. This would have been unheard of a decade ago.

One difficulty for the teacher is meeting the needs of this new generation of students with the older generation eavesdropping on the conversation—members of the Board of Trustees, parents, local ministers whose belief in Ellen White's inspiration cannot work for their children. I think their children will still believe but only on their own terms. Reinhold Niebuhr comes to mind here, where he says that it's no easy task to build up the faith of one generation without destroying the supports of faith for the other.

SUNSTONE: You have quite a task: teaching the younger generation while staying in the good graces of the older one—especially since you work at an Adventist university.

BUTLER: It certainly does take the skills of a diplomat. But I firmly believe that historians and theologians have a good deal to contribute to their church. They can help church members through the breakdown of one paradigm and the rebuilding of a new one. Still they need to speak and act responsibly. It would be too bad if their potentially constructive contribution wasn't made

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because they were just too obnoxious in trying to communicate it. Historians do have the opportunity for popularizing their history. Everything they do need not be iconoclastic revisionism. A historian with a particularly provocative thesis to get across to his religious community can spin-off some less threatening narrative history, or apologetics, or devotional material that the devout can put on their end tables and feel good about. In this case, the historian is like a musician. Sometimes it helps his cause if he can sit down at the piano and play some of the good old gospel hymns for church members. Then maybe they'll allow him to compose the more exotic contemporary music as well.

For me, there always has to be that opportunity to do history as an art form. I am happy to teach and write popularly. Editing and writing for the journal *Adventist Heritage* allows me to do this for the general Adventist public. But all this only makes sense to me if there

remains a preserve where I can truly, uncompromisingly, pursue history artistically. Not as a salesman, a popularizer, an evangelist, but an artist. Our church still struggles with this. It would rather pour all its energy and support into "marketing," to adopt a corporate business model, with nothing left for "research." (That's not even "good business" on an utterly pragmatic level.) But more than that, it fails to recognize the church needs its artists. If the church

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snuffs out its artists—its intellectuals, its scientists, its historians, and writers—that tells the world that artists have no place in that church. A basic drive of the human spirit—to think, to create—has no place in the church. Students, of course, pick this up quickly, and in an intellectually fertile period of their lives it does no good for the church's credibility to discourage their active minds.

Scholars are asked, "Why aren't you converting other scholars and intellectuals? Why do you simply raise problems for the church rather than supporting solutions?" Adventist scholars can point to the Association of Adventist Forums which is a far-flung community of Adventist scholars, professionals, ministers, and laymen, who hold meetings, entertain wide-ranging discussions of contemporary interest to the church, and publish a quarterly journal *Spectrum*. *Spectrum* started out very much like *Mormon Dialogue*. In fact, I believe there was some dependence on the part of the Adventist founders of the journal about ten years ago. In the last few years, however, *Spectrum* has shifted from a strictly professional scholar's format to more of a magazine, with increased circulation and a larger impact on church affairs. In design it falls somewhere between *Dialogue* and *SUNSTONE*.

I know many Adventists who say the only reason they've remained Adventists is due to *Spectrum* and the Adventist Forums. It seems to me this is to function evangelistically within the church. Clearly, you're not going to convert thoughtful, academic types through the usual door-to-door missionary efforts or mass evangelistic meetings. But if you can show to the world outside that intellectuals find a place within the church, they are nurtured and fulfilled there, you've done something for your evangelistic outreach. I can't bring an academic colleague to church or encourage him to remain there if his kindred spirits are being ignored or misunderstood or harassed by the church.



SUNSTONE: *But do you meet the needs of intellectuals at the expense of others?*

BUTLER: This can happen. You can be honestly trying to solve one person's problem and in doing so create a problem for somebody else. As a rule, I would rather not cause problems for anybody, but if a person has a problem then I want to grapple with it. I suppose there are always casualties, but there would be casualties either way. If you stick your head in the sand, ostrich-like, and ignore the problems there will be more ill-effects, it seems to me, than if you face the problems. C.S. Lewis commented at one point in his writing that if this chapter does not prove helpful to you, skip over it and read the next one.

I think of a student who said he had converted to Seventh-day Adventism because he believed that Adventism, unlike any other religion, had never changed. His faith, then, had been based on a naive historical sense. After a very short time in my denominational history course, he either had to reject history or mature in matters of faith. He was able to remain a believer, but based on some different assumptions. I always have a number of students who believe in Ellen White as a prophet because she never made a mistake or she was not influenced by her cultural context or she experienced no spiritual or intellectual development or she was impeccable personally. None of these assumptions hold up under historical scrutiny. For some this shatters their faith and for others it transforms their faith.

I think of the Pauline image that some are ready for milk and others for meat. We need to be sensitive to people's various "dietary needs," so to speak. But we can't nurse people on milk forever, if we ever want them to grow up. In Adventism, I sense a tremendous hunger for more substantial food. We underrate our lay people when we only spoon feed them.

SUNSTONE: *Isn't part of the problem between historians and their church that historians point up the flaws and human foibles of the church's past?*

BUTLER: Yes, that's true. The doctrine of evil is one doctrine you can believe without any leap of faith. It's plain enough even to the unbeliever. And historians cannot sift through the past very long before developing a pretty healthy doctrine of evil. People tend to be

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rascals. And the most high-minded of people, such as you find in religious institutions, can be the worst and most devious of rascals. They're as bad as other people, but they cover it up—to themselves and others—with giant moral rationalizations. Their religion becomes one more expression of human evil.

But historians can draw on theological models for their work here. In traditional Christianity, the Incarnation mingled humanity and divinity. The Christ was not only human or only divine but fully human *and* fully divine. It's been a heresy in Christian history to emphasize either Christ's divinity or humanity at the expense of the other. Historians force us to recognize a church's humanity, denying us the Docetic heresy which would completely divinize Christ's body. The historian who says that his tradition is human is not implying that

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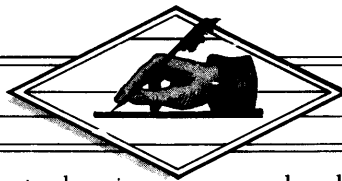
it's *only* human. But the nature of the historical discipline constrains him to comment on simply this aspect of Christ's body. Mormons too emphasize the humanity of God in the very highest echelons of their theological doctrine. It seems to me that Mormon historians could draw upon this as a rationale for their work. In their work historians in a sense are living out the theological emphasis on God's humanity.

Martin Marty used to quote Ortega y Gasset in class at the University of Chicago to the effect that "I am I and my environment." That is, not I am I apart from my environs, my background, nor I am my environment with no "I," no potential for novelty. But both together. It's been a watchword for me as a religious historian.

SUNSTONE: *Why then is there such resistance to the scholar's efforts?*

BUTLER: One of the big problems that groups like Mormons and Adventists face is, it seems to me, our narcissism. We insist only on self-evaluation and refuse to see ourselves as others see us. We insulate ourselves from the outside and develop an unrealistic self-image. Then we're in for some surprises. Like when Captain Stormfield visited heaven in the Mark Twain story and found that earth was barely on the map and known as "The Wart."

Adventists have been covered in *Newsweek* and *Christianity Today* lately, and usually they have been disappointed and even embarrassed by such outside



coverage. There's often no specific, factual misrepresentation in these articles, but they still don't set right with Adventists. I think it's because we're not used to seeing ourselves against the larger backdrop of the outside world. We have read only our own "Chamber of Commerce" reports and believe them unequivocally, and then we see ourselves in the national press and it has a different ring to it. Take the last time that Ken Woodward wrote us up in *Newsweek* and quoted our prophetess, perfectly accurately, in her statement that evil angels will impersonate men in the last days and bedevil Adventists. In an Adventist periodical that remark would fit in. In a national magazine it seemed strange, flaky, a little sick. The wider context made this so. If the Secretary of State, for example, were to quote the Adventist prophetess before a Senate Foreign Relations Committee as an explanation for problems in Eastern Europe—evil angels are impersonating men—even the Adventists would consider him loony, and ask for his resignation. It's important, for this reason, to hold ourselves up against the larger backdrop and see how we look. This, of course, is exactly what scholars do. If we look a bit silly as a result, who's really to blame?

SUNSTONE: Can you identify any specific problems that the church faces where the scholars might help?

BUTLER: Seventh-day Adventism and Mormonism are both world churches, facing all kinds of cultures but coming from an American homeland. We need to be self-conscious about our Americanism so we're not simply transmitting cultural baggage, we're not just Americanizing people. We're drawing them into a family of God that is larger than any cultural expression of it. Sometimes it is very difficult to sort out the Americanism from the Mormonism or Seventh-day Adventism. For example, diet, which is a preoccupation in both traditions, was an American interest in the early nineteenth century. We don't say, well let's not talk diet any more because that is a fossil of American culture. I am not suggesting that. Still we ought to be aware of the fact that in American tradition there is an interest in health which is not going to be an automatic concern for a European. He doesn't relate hygienic concerns to religion. European Seventh-day Adventists simply miss some of our health and diet preoccupation; they are Seventh-day Adventists, but they are different from Americans. Too, a female prophet is not a natural European symbol. The American mom that Ellen White has become for Seventh-day Adventists does not occupy the same position for Europeans. And our American tendency toward the infallibility and inerrancy of scripture (which is carried over into our approach to the writings of Ellen White) is not naturally European. So we have a gulf to bridge, culturally even *within* Seventh-day Adventism and between Europeans and Americans.

Of course there are other places where some Americanisms resonate very well. In Latin America, people embrace Seventh-day Adventism as a kind of cultural upward mobility. The Kingdom of God means cleaning up and getting healthy and getting educated and going to Loma Linda and taking dentistry. This

upward mobility is equated with going into the Kingdom of God. So it works to the advantage as well as the disadvantage of the church—this American baggage.

I simply think we need to be self-conscious about this. We can live on the high in one area of the world and face the low in the other. But in time it will all even out. Upwardly mobile Adventists from the Third World will some day confront the same problems that Americans now face. We can continue as a church with a nineteenth century mindset and do well in areas of the world where it's still the "nineteenth century." Klaus Hansen makes this point about Mormonism and it applies as well to SDAs.

Henry Adams in 1900 looked back on the massive intellectual and technological changes over the previous 50 years that had so transformed America and said that in 1856, when he entered Harvard as a freshman, he stood as near the year 1 as the year 1900. It simply won't do in Adventism or Mormonism, anymore than in Reaganomics, to approach the world as if it's still the nineteenth century. We need to realize that we are, in most respects, as far removed from our religious founders as they were from the biblical period. Historians can help us see that.

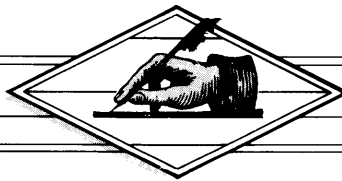
If we live under the illusion that there is no difference between the past and the present and hence try to live in the past, we will become increasingly anachronistic. Groups which do that are going to lose people. In the

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midst of the twentieth century, does a person have to become a Victorian to become a Mormon or a Seventh-day Adventist? Certainly we grew out of a Victorian context or a Jacksonian context, but now let's take that tradition and revitalize it and translate it into more contemporary terms—in continuity with the past, but growing and building on the past.

SUNSTONE: How does your own personal work on Ellen White fit into this historical mosaic you have been describing?

BUTLER: I'm working on a psycho-pathological interpretation of the prophetess. A physician has analyzed Mrs. White's behavior and concluded it exhibits all the symptoms of left lobe epilepsy, which results from the kind of blow to the head that Ellen suffered at the age of nine when a schoolmate hit her with a rock. Detractors of the prophetess in the past have identified her as an epileptic who experienced



grand mal seizures, but quite rightly Adventists have been able to dismiss this by showing how Ellen's pattern diverged in a number of ways from the grand mal seizure. This latest study, however, is based on the epileptic "partial complex seizure," a more recent discovery of medical science, which far more closely fits

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Ellen's case. This would disturb the average church member, particularly in light of the author's claim that it provides an exhaustive explanation of the prophet's experience—the nature of her trances and visions (for example, her breathelessness), her abundant writing, her judgmentalism.

As I tried to say earlier, the church need not disregard this sort of pathological interpretation out of hand as if it allowed no place for faith. There is no question that Ellen White was ill in some sense throughout most of her life, and she was quite open about it, as Victorian women generally were. But I think the historian can offer a perspective here that a more clinical approach lacks. The historian can point out that a great many women in the nineteenth century experienced this sort of thing—visionaries, spiritualist trance mediums, and so on—and can raise a question as to whether they all had received blows to the head and suffered from partial complex seizures. Moreover, even if we should grant a disorder of this kind, have we really exhausted our understanding of the prophetess? We learn something about the *brain* of the prophet, perhaps, but nothing about the *mind*. Why would one epileptic experience sexual fantasies and another dream of the New Jerusalem? The strictly psychological explanation for a prophet fails to account for the content of his experience. And it especially falls short in accounting for his *following*.

Charisma, after all, is a sociological rather than a psychological category. Why does one epileptic command nothing more than medical attention while another enlists a following of devoted disciples, in fact generation after generation of them? Why is one man a crank, an oddball, a schizophrenic and another the founder of a religion? The prophet's "gift," in this sense, is not simply individual. It has to do with his capacity to bring a community into existence. It has to do with his believability. If we identify the prophet medically or psychoanalytically, we still need to explain what it is about one person that develops such a community while another does not. That ingredient comes closer to what we mean by "charisma."

For one thing, successful prophets, like contemporary

celebrities, can usually use a good agent. In Ellen White's case, it's hard to imagine her success without the dynamic entrepreneurial skills of her husband James. And Ellen could not have fulfilled a prophetic function without the encouragement of her community. In a five year period early in her career when her visions were not printed in the denomination's major periodical, she saw the visions diminish and assumed her work was done. Then as they resumed printing her, the visions increased once again. The symbiotic relationship between prophet and community was pretty obvious here.

It's really impossible to conceive of a "prophet," as we define it in the biblical sense, apart from community. Prophets serve a people. In the area of predictions, the prophet "prophesies" that an institution will be built here, or a program occur there, and unless a community finds this believable and goes about getting it done, the prophecy fails. The prophet finds validation for his experience in a cooperative people. All this, then, I would use to counter an aridly psycho-pathological definition of a prophet.

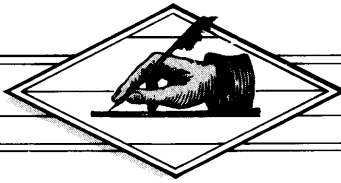
SUNSTONE: Has anyone attempted a psycho-biography of Ellen White as Fawn Brodie did for Joseph Smith?

*BUTLER: Not yet. And this would no doubt be the least palatable historical approach on Mrs. White among Adventists. Interestingly, Adventists always speak highly of *No Man Knows My History*; they recommend it for anyone who wants to understand Joseph Smith. But clearly this is not done with the self-conscious intent of endorsing psycho-biography as a methodology. When Brodie favorably reacted to Ronald Numbers' *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* with speculation in *Spectrum* as to how she might go about a psycho-historical study of the Adventist prophetess, the roof caved in on the journal. It was far and away the most explosively controversial piece that ever appeared in the ten-year history of *Spectrum*, and denominational leadership seriously discussed whether the journal should be allowed to continue or whether denominational employees should be allowed to write for it. (I might say here, parenthetically, the Mormon and Adventist intellectual communities differ in that Adventist intellectuals and academics are, for the most part, employed by the church, and therefore are directly answerable to church authorities on this kind of thing.)*

Unfortunately, where Adventists do seem to approve of a kind of psycho-history is in impugning the motives of historians—doing a layman's psychoanalysis of them—in explaining why they would write revisionist history of the church. Such reductionism is as inadequate in describing a denomination's detractors as its devotees. Finally, of course, motivations hardly matter. We ought to learn from any historical argument, if it's a good one, whatever passion or hangup inspired it.

SUNSTONE: You mentioned Ronald Numbers's book. How did Adventists receive that book?

BUTLER: Ronald Numbers was, in a sense, our Fawn Brodie. His book actually was not nearly as provocative as Brodie's. It was social history of only one aspect of



Ellen White's career—her health writings—though that is an important area of her work for Adventists. He argued first of all that Mrs. White's health teachings had not been unique and original but were derivative and commonplace for her time. Second, her health ideas were not always well-selected but were occasionally bizarre and wrong-headed. Third, she underwent considerable development and change in her thinking on health. And last, she could be disingenuous as a person in protecting her image as a prophet. Nothing in the Adventist understanding of the prophetess prepared us for such an interpretation. Even the scholars abandoned Numbers in the wake of his publication. He was dismissed from my university where he taught history of science and medicine and had distinguished himself with the precocious scholarly publishing of journal articles and another monograph. Now six years later, as research has intensified on Ellen White and the

church employment. On the other hand, writing Adventist history is not necessarily the best entree into the academic world of American religious historians. While Adventism is awfully central to my life and work, I have to admit it's rather marginal and insignificant for most people. I know there are no small parts, only small actors. But I would look a bit quizzically at another historian who has spent a decade working on, say, Phoebe Palmer. So, while you're burning a bridge behind you to your own religious community, you're not building a bridge to the outside. Both on a personal and a professional level, there seem to be real advantages in leaving Adventist history to some other historian. I have several times come to the firm decision that I wouldn't continue my research and writing on Mrs. White. But somehow I find myself back with those notecards again, shuffling through them, musing over them, and realizing that I'm at it again.

MY HISTORY IS A KIND OF
INTROSPECTION. THERE IS AN
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There are many reasons I can give for what I'm doing. Marginal figures and communities can tell us a great deal about society at large. Of course, the fascination of Americans with the Mormon story, for example, is in part because it is an exotic story. It's like a novel; we enter a different world from our own and explore its richness. But there is also an intriguing sense when we enter this world apart that there are similarities too; it speaks to our own situation. We may find intolerance there, dreams of family or future, preoccupation with diet, motherhood, or God. Though it is different, it is the same. In a paradoxical way, the marginal community becomes a way of learning about the mainstream. Mormons and Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists—all these sects—preserve aspects of the American vision which are actually dimmer for Americans at large. This could be my apology for working on Ellen White and it could be the apology of Mormons working on Joseph Smith.

controversy, if anything, has only escalated, Numbers's findings no longer raise an eyebrow. They've held up over time. In our church, however, the "heretic" is never restored to the community, even if his so-called "heresy" eventually establishes itself as orthodoxy. Numbers is lost to the community in this sense. But he certainly has made it easier for other historians to function. He opened up breathing space for Adventist scholars, whether or not the scholars acknowledge it.

Being in-house, I have a unique view of that marginal community. I have access to materials which are denied to people outside. And I also have an organic sense of the community itself. I believe it was Niebuhr who said that when you are writing biographically on your own tradition it amounts to a spiritual autobiography. My history is a kind of introspection. There is an intuitive quality I have about this historical material, being an insider. When you are so close to the material, you may lack some of the perspective that the outsider can come by rather naturally. But I can tell him things.

SUNSTONE: You're thinking of your own scholarly work on Ellen White in this respect?

BUTLER: Definitely. I've published material on Mrs. White since Numbers's book which might have ended my career with the church if it had preceded *Prophetess of Health*. One of our historians did an extensive literary study of Mrs. White's historical work about the time Numbers published his book. This might have truncated his career a decade ago, but again, thanks partly to Numbers, he's now an Adventist college president.

SUNSTONE: If such writing puts you in so precarious a position professionally, you must wonder at times whether it's worth it.

BUTLER: Why I do this is a source of great wonderment to me almost all the time. In a couple of ways, writing Adventist history is something of a thankless task. On the one hand, it creates difficulties for the Adventist historian within his religious community, with the possibility of losing church membership or at least

Finally, I have to admit that the drawing power of my work is inexorable. It's more than a job to me. It's a vocation—a calling. Paradoxically, I work in this entirely human enterprise (expunged of any supernaturalist presuppositions) as a kind of spiritual, almost sacramental, act. I doubt that I'd be nearly as engrossed by any other historical materials as I am by my own Adventist past. In fact, I'm afraid to handle historical topics which do not engage or inspire me to this degree. Adventist history is my own family heirlooms, the dust in my attic, the family album. Aesthetically as well as religiously it draws me. I have a "feel" for it that I don't have for anything else.