

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISM

Encyclopedia of Millennialism and Millennial Movements

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Originally published in Landes, R. (2000). *Encyclopedia of millennialism and millennial movements*. Routledge.

Seventh-day Adventism had urgently apocalyptic origins: as pre-millennialists, Adventists preached that the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world was imminent. Although the urgency of the belief has moderated with the passage of time, they continue to cling to the doctrine that the Second Coming will take place "soon," and this remains at the center of their evangelistic thrust. Today, they are established in 205 of the 230 countries recognized by the United Nations. In recent decades they have doubled their world membership every 10-12 years; growth has been concentrated in the Developing World.

Beginnings

Adventists trace their roots to the Millerite Movement, which proclaimed throughout New England and upstate New York that Christ would return on 22 October 1844. Although, William Miller withdrew and his movement dispersed following the humiliation and heartbreak of "the Great Disappointment," a small group of his followers reinterpreted the prophecy: that date had marked the commencement of the pre-advent judgment in heaven and was the final date singled out by time prophecy; Christ's return would follow quickly. A young visionary, Ellen Harmon (1827-1915), played an important role in confirming this interpretation. Since Adventists believed that the "door of mercy" had been shut with the beginning of judgment, they initially made no efforts to evangelize. Even after they were persuaded that the door was still open and they were called to warn others of imminent judgment and apocalypse, they delayed formal organization and foreign evangelism, believing that insufficient time remained.

In 1846, Ellen Harmon married James White (1821-1881), who was emerging as the leading organizer, editor and publisher, and, later, administrator in early Adventism. Ellen White became a prophet, preacher, counselor to the Church, and a prolific writer who published 24 books and contributed over 5,000 articles to church magazines during her lifetime; over 75 additional volumes, compiled from her articles and other manuscripts, have been published since her death. Although, she insisted that her writings were subsidiary to the Bible, her standing and their specificity made them highly influential in shaping the thought and behavior of Adventists.

Miller had portrayed governments as wild beasts which hurt God's people. Adventists elaborated on this theme as they developed their eschatology further. When, following their adoption of the Saturday-Sabbath, some members were arrested for violating state "blue laws" when they plowed their fields on Sundays, this led them to a unique interpretation of one

prophecy: beginning in 1851, they denounced the American Republic, identifying it with the second beast of Revelation 13, which "had two horns like a lamb" and spoke "like a dragon." Pointing to slavery and the religious intolerance confronting them, they held that America had betrayed the principles of political and religious freedom enshrined in its Constitution and Bill of Rights. Declaring that it was already a dragon in lamb's clothing, they prophesied that it would play a persecuting role in the world's final events.

Adventists finally created a formal organization, headquartered initially in Battle Creek, Michigan, in the early 1860s. Their belief in the imminence of Christ's return was so central to them that they blazoned this belief in their name: Seventh-day Adventist. Their membership then totaled 3,500. They began to build institutions--publishing houses to broadcast their message, schools and colleges to train clergy and other "workers," and medical facilities, dubbed "the entering wedge" by Ellen White, which offered drug-free treatments and vegetarian food. All would help Adventists spread their "final warning message," after which the "end" would come. They sent the first foreign missionary to Europe in 1874; many others followed, and more institutions were built abroad. By 1901 Adventists were established on all continents and their total membership had risen to 78,000. At Ellen White's urging, church headquarters were moved to Washington, DC in 1903.

Although Adventists had created institutions in order to facilitate their goals of spreading their message and ushering in the Kingdom, the result was gradual goal displacement: there was inevitable tension between longer-term building and organizing and the urgency of their message.

Eschatology

Meanwhile, Ellen White had elaborated on Adventist eschatology, with special attention to the events just before the Second Coming. The main players were to be Satan (the dragon of Revelation), and his henchmen the Roman Catholic Church (whose "deadly wound," received at the hands of the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution, would be healed to such an extent that "all the world would wonder after the beast"), "Apostate Protestantism" (all the Protestant church organizations together with those members who failed to accept the Adventist message), Spiritualism, and the US government. These would persecute God's "Remnant"--the loyal Adventists--beginning in the US. White's eschatology was published in final form in 1888 in *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan*. Its details--from "the little time of trouble" to "Jacob's time of trouble," from the "loud cry" to the "shaking time," from the "early rain" to the "latter rain," from the "close of probation" to the "seven last plagues," from the passage of a "national Sunday law" and application of the "mark of the beast" to God's final intervention to save His saints--were to inspire both fear and hope among Adventists, and countless charts attempting to order the "last-day events."

White's eschatology reflected the times in which she wrote--spiritualism was in vogue, and a Protestant establishment was attempting to shore up its position by, among other things,

introducing a "national Sunday law" that would protect and codify the state blue laws. Much of the argument of The Great Controversy was familiar to evangelicals of the time. It celebrated the achievement of church-state separation in America as a legacy of Protestantism, and displayed a Protestant predisposition for strict Sabbath observance, temperance, law, order and morality. However, the Adventist prophetess diverged from nineteenth-century evangelicals regarding which Sabbath should be strictly observed, and she protested coercive measures to enforce Sunday observance as a betrayal of religious liberty. Although White declared that "the final events" would be "rapid," the complexity and detail of her accounts created the impression that the end was more distant.

Putting Down Roots in Society

The elaboration of Adventist eschatology had involved some reshaping, especially of their view of the US. While Adventists continued to identify America with the two-horned beast, they no longer portrayed it as already in the dragon phase, but as still lamb-like, and its demise was therefore seen as more distant. That is, the time believed to be remaining before the Second Coming of Christ was lengthening, and tension with the state was beginning to relax. Moreover, Ellen White now counseled rapprochement with civil authorities in order to facilitate missionary work, urging Adventists to help prolong the future of America so that their message could go "forth and flourish." That is, Adventists found themselves in an anomalous situation where they wished to delay the end of the world in order to have greater opportunity to preach that it was at hand. Consequently, although their re-honed eschatology saw the passage of a national Sunday law as the culmination of the prophecy concerning the two-horned beast, and thus a sure signal that the Second Coming of Christ was at hand, Adventists felt obliged by Ellen White's counsel to "extend the time" to respond boldly to this threat. They established a magazine devoted to religious liberty; their lobbying against threatening legislation included petitions to both Houses, the reading of papers before congressional committees, and the presentation of legal briefs in court; and they founded the National Religious Liberty Association to defend the "wall of separation" between church and state and what later became the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department [PARL] at Church headquarters, which institutionalized the Adventist Church's role as a watchdog of the First Amendment. Their initial efforts were successful, helping defeat Senator H.W. Blair's Sunday-Rest bill in 1888 and 1889.

Henceforth, there was a tension between the public presentation of the Adventist message that Christ's return was "even at the doors" and the dogged determination of Adventist leaders to foster the separation of church and state, and thus to postpone the prophesied passage of a National Sunday Law. There was also growing tension between their public preaching that the end of the world was at hand and the extent to which Adventists were prospering and putting down roots in American society.

During the following decades, Adventism continued to accommodate to the state. It transformed its stance on military service from conscientious objection during the Civil War to

participation without arms, preferably as medical orderlies, during the major wars of the twentieth century and then ultimately, towards the end of the Vietnam War, declared that the bearing of arms was a matter of individual conscience. It pursued accreditation for its colleges, and then accepted government aid for its schools and hospitals. In order to receive accreditation, it exposed its academics to graduate study at major universities, which inevitably impacted the content of their courses, and thus also their students; ultimately, it also impacted their pastors, when religion departments, which were not obliged to be accredited, played "catch-up" with the other college departments. Meanwhile, accreditation prepared the way for widespread upward mobility among graduates of Adventist colleges.

Adventism also began to adjust to the religious economy. It had remained very isolated from other American religious bodies until well into the twentieth century, because of their negative reactions to its teachings and its sheep-stealing practices and also because it feared that ecumenism might foster the persecution it was expecting. It held aloof when the Federal Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches were formed in 1908 and 1948, and when the FCC was transformed into the National Council of Churches in 1950. Evangelicals had proved especially antagonistic, regularly labeling Adventism a "cult" in their critiques. However, in the mid-1950s Adventist leaders initiated a series of meetings with two well-known Evangelical scholars, Walter R. Martin and Donald Grey Barnhouse who, in the process of writing a series of studies on Christian "cults," had begun researching Seventh-day Adventism. There was widespread exhilaration when Barnhouse authored an article replying affirmatively to the question "Are Seventh-day Adventists Christians?" (1956), and Martin's subsequent book, *The Truth about Seventh-day Adventism* (1960), declared that Adventists were not a cult but "brethren" of the Christian Evangelicals.

Such acceptance encouraged Adventists to lower barriers further. Their representatives began to attend meetings of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches as observers in 1968, and they also affiliated with several subdivisions of the National Council of Churches. In 1975 the Adventist Church began to invite other denominations to send official observers to its quinquennial Sessions, and in 1980 it established the Council on Interchurch Relations to deal with ecumenical relations. Meanwhile, in 1977 the International Religious Liberty Association, which is sponsored by PARL, organized the first of a series of World Congresses on religious liberty, in which major figures from other religious traditions have participated. PARL has also been successful in its pursuit of official dialogues with other denominations, the most successful to date being with leaders of the World Lutheran Federation between 1994 and 1998.

Meanwhile, there were signs that tension between Adventism and Catholicism was also easing. Adventists participated as observers in Vatican II during the 1960s. In the early 1970s, when the Pacific Press was sued by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission because of its discrimination against women in salaries and promotions, the defense brief distanced Adventism from its "earlier" anti-Catholicism as "nothing more" than a manifestation of an attitude then common among conservative Protestant denominations "which has now been consigned to the historical trash heap so far as the Seventh-day Adventist Church is concerned"

(1975). In 1995, the previously unthinkable occurred, when PorterCare Adventist Health Services, the Adventist hospital system in Colorado, and the Catholic Sisters of Charity Health Services Colorado joined together to form a new corporation, Centura Health, in order that both could survive in an increasingly competitive market. Adventist officials involved in this decision argued that Adventist hospitals had more in common with Catholic hospitals than any others because their missions were so similar.

In spite of their belief that the "end of the world" was imminent, Adventists were successfully putting down roots in society and, in the process, becoming world-affirming. As a corollary of this process they, in effect, postponed the apocalypse. Sometimes this was recognized explicitly by Adventist spokespersons. For example, when, during World War II, Supreme Court decisions strengthened religious liberty and Roosevelt included freedom of religion as one of his four basic freedoms, the editor of the official church paper, the *Review and Herald*, commented that what Adventists had prophesied clearly lay further in the future.

Continuing Expectancy

This does not mean that the Adventist Church had abandoned its eschatology--far from it. Adventists continued to believe that Jesus was returning "soon," which, for many of them, meant that they did not expect their children to reach maturity or themselves face death. They also continued to look expectantly for signs of the fulfillment of Ellen White's whole eschatological scenario, and remained prone to excitement whenever they found evidence that Christ's return might be near. Although the Adventist Church, as a corporate religious body, learned the lesson of 1844 and has never set a date for the Second Coming, groups of Adventists have focused on particular dates for that event more than 20 times in the past 150 years. Sometimes these were based on analogies to biblical events: 1884, because the Israelites wandered 40 years in the wilderness, or 1964, because Noah preached 120 years and Jesus said "As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be at the coming of the Son of Man." More often they were based on world events which seemed likely to fulfill Adventist predictions.

Attention was usually drawn to these events by Adventist evangelists, for eschatology remained at the center of their preaching--it attracted crowds and gained conversions, especially during times of crisis. Evangelists made much of both world wars, the great depression, the election of Kennedy--the first Catholic--as president, the Cuban missile crisis, the first expedition to the moon, the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and the Cold War. However, these events were often seized upon eagerly amid a general situation where there seemed to be major obstacles to the development of Ellen White's final scenario. For example, the introduction of the five-day working week in the 1930s made Sabbath observance much easier, the US Supreme Court showed a growing commitment to protecting religious liberty after 1940, and later the Cold War, the rising strength of China and the Muslim world, and the weakness of the Papacy in Communist and Muslim countries made it difficult to see America imposing Papal domination on the world.

The collapse of the Soviet Union led many evangelists to refocus their preaching. Although they had previously portrayed the danger of the Cold War heating up as a sign of the end, they now proclaimed that the emergence of the US as the sole "super power," its partnership with the Papacy in undermining Communism, and the consequent increase in Papal prestige were sure signs that Ellen White's eschatological scenario was being fulfilled.

The Adventist Church used the expectation of the return of Jesus--and fear of not being ready--to maintain the commitment of its members and to control their behavior. These teachings make a special impact on children. Many Adventists recall childhood dreams in which Jesus returns and they are not ready. Some report having played "Catholics and Adventists" rather than "cowboys and Indians." Many Adventist academy and college students have expressed the hope that the Coming would be delayed until after they had married and experienced sex--the prospect of the judgment closing and one's fate being sealed increased the risk associated with illicit sex. Revivals have been used to maintain a sense of urgency among both adults and youth.

Problems Flowing from the Delayed Apocalypse

However, considerable burnout on the issue occurred as the extended delay made its impact: it proved increasingly difficult to maintain a high level of expectation. Observers from very different vantage points within Adventism have noted that, in general, while members of the baby-boomer generation have "held onto the Sabbath," they pay little attention to the Second Coming--they are embarrassed by the wild, apocalyptic, Adventist-centered interpretations.

As Adventists have buried generations of forebears who believed that they would live to see the Second Coming, they have tried to find reasons for the delay. Two main explanations have been put forward: The delay has been caused because members' characters are not yet ready for translation; and, since Jesus stated that the gospel would be preached in all the world and then the end would come, the problem must be that Adventists have failed to complete this task. The former causes those who embrace it distress, for it makes their imperfections responsible for the delay. The latter is the explanation espoused most strongly by the administrators who then pour more resources into spreading the "Advent message."

While the statement that Adventists have, over time, reduced the urgency of their apocalyptic summarizes a general trend, the process of change has resulted in considerable theological pluralism. Some members continue to grasp at any sign or rumor that can be construed that a national Sunday law is in the offing. In this they are oblivious to the changed religious context in the US, which has been so pervasive that it has almost certainly left this category of Adventists as the only Americans even thinking about the possibility of such a law. Other Adventists view Sabbath observance as a good idea rather than a test of who is loyal to God among earth's final generation, see their congregation as an important source of community rather than as part of the one true church, and find any declaration that other denominations are "the beast" or "Babylon" acutely embarrassing. Such diverse views often erupt into conflict in adult Sabbath

School classes, on church committees, or in Adventist segments of cyberspace. However, many members are able to avoid conflict by choosing a different class or driving further to church in order to surround themselves with people holding compatible views.

The data suggest that the diversity of belief is segmented. For their part, Church leaders continue to highlight the 28 "fundamental beliefs," one of which declares that "the present condition of the world...indicates that Christ's coming is imminent." The then President of the General Conference, in a book published to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the Great Disappointment in 1994, noted that some were asking whether "we still have confidence that Jesus is coming 'soon'," whether "150 years can be characterized as 'soon,' in any sense of the word?" His reply was that, in spite of the delay, "WE STILL BELIEVE!" (Folkenberg 1994:9)

Church leaders keep devising new programs which are designed to keep the Adventist growth-rate high. They have been very successful in this in recent years: the official world membership grew from 500,000 in 1940 to 1.2 million in 1960 and almost 3.5 million in 1980; it passed 10 million during 1998. Growth has been concentrated in the Developing World; the membership in the US has now fallen to less than 9% of the total. While the successful evangelistic programs are advocated in terms of "finishing the work," the leaders who propose them also oversee a widespread network of hospitals and schools that are rooted deeply in the world.

Since Adventist evangelism still focuses on "end-time events," converts are usually those attracted by this topic. However, when these join local Adventist congregations, they find that their pastors typically give far less emphasis to eschatological subjects than do the evangelists. This is related to the fact that the Adventist Seminary and the departments of religion at the Adventist colleges in the US are, in general, avoiding the traditional Adventist approach to eschatology. While large majorities of laypersons show a belief in the doctrine of the Second Coming, urgent apocalypticism is much less widespread, being concentrated especially among new converts and racial minorities and, often fearfully, among younger students exposed to indoctrination in Adventist schools, large numbers of whom admit in surveys that they worry "very much" "about not being ready for Christ's return" or "not being faithful" during the expected persecution of the "Time of Trouble."

The dissonance between the preaching of evangelists and church pastors has contributed substantially to the growth of urgently apocalyptic "independent ministries" on the fringes of Adventism. (The best known of these to the media was David Koresh's Branch Davidians.) The leaders of these groups often continue to identify with Adventism, even after being disfellowshipped, and therefore focus their efforts on reaching Adventists.

The fringe apocalyptic ministries are much more urgent in their apocalypticism than most mainstream Adventists. They generally differ from the latter in at least one of two main ways. First, many of them are so impatient with the long delay in the Second Coming since 1844 that merely pointing to recent world events as new evidence that the general Adventist eschatological scenario is on track (as Adventist evangelists typically have) is unsatisfactory to them: they want more direct proof that these are the very last days and Christ is about to

return. To accomplish this they often develop some kind of prophecy focusing explicitly on the current period. Some of these groups hold that the sixth millennium of earth's history is closing. If each millennium is symbolized by one day, the seventh, or Sabbath, millennium--that period, referred to in the book of Revelation, as THE millennium--is about to open. As pre-millennialists, they proclaim that Christ will return before then. Others arrive at a similarly urgent apocalyptic through calculations associated with the Old Testament Jubilee Cycle or by applying the time-line prophecies of the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation to the present. The second group of apocalyptic ministries on the fringes of Adventism often regard the Adventist church leadership as so compromised with the "world" and the members so "lukewarm" in their spirituality that the church is unready to receive Christ and is thus responsible for his delay. Some of them charge that the official church has obscured the "last warning message" bequeathed to it through Ellen White by shifting positions on beliefs and behavioral standards, and present their own group as the true "historic Adventists." Since Ellen White foretold a great "falling away" among Adventists immediately before the end, this identifies the present time. When their criticisms of church leadership are met, in turn, with charges of heresy and attempts to subject them to church discipline, the rancor escalates.

Conclusion

In October 1994, Adventists celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Great Disappointment--and of a century and a half of believing and preaching that Jesus would soon return. This anniversary highlighted the tension between the Adventist belief in an imminent apocalypse and the delay in its fulfillment. As the decades have passed, both the Adventist Church and Adventist lives have become increasingly world affirming. Although the Adventist Church continues to endorse the eschatological vision developed in the nineteenth century by Ellen White and other Adventist pioneers, variations in expectations among its members and, especially, in the urgency with which they await its fulfillment, inevitably engender discomfort and distrust. While the Adventist growth-rate has fallen substantially in the US and other parts of the Developed World, and indeed has often remained positive there only because of an influx of immigrants, it remains high, and has even increased, in much of the Developing World.