

Uni-Directional or Bi-Directional?: Sect-Denomination Theory and the Case of Seventh-day Adventism

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Abstract

Those who developed what we call Church-Sect theory (Troeltsch, Niebuhr, Yinger, Johnson, Wilson, and Stark and Bainbridge) thought of it as laying out a uni-directional trajectory from sect towards (in the USA) denomination for groups that survive and prosper. However, in 1994, in his *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation*, Armand Mauss argued that Mormon President McKay and his successors had reversed the process of assimilation and thus the trajectory towards sectarianism. He thus raised the possibility that if it was possible for a group to move towards sectarianism, as previously argued, it could also move in the reverse direction. Finke and Stark have since made that point more generally. However, Mauss has said more recently that Mormonism reversed direction once again, towards assimilation or denominational status, after his book was published. This raises the question of whether the trajectories of any successful groups are inevitably, in the long run, uni-directional. This paper tests this with another case study-- Seventh-day Adventists. Adventists have long seemed to move from sect towards denomination, as their educational and medical institutions have flourished, their behavioral requirements have become less separating, and their scholars have shown that their prophet, Ellen White, had "borrowed" large parts of her material from other writers. However, in 2010 they elected a conservative president who seems determined to reverse course. For example, he quotes Ellen White frequently (far more than recent presidents have), is intent on changing the item in the statement of beliefs addressing creation from one that is sufficiently vague to fit differing points of view to an affirmation that God created the world about 6000 years ago in six consecutive days of 24 hours each, and is trying to force the science teachers at Adventist colleges to teach this. But if this ultimately threatens the accreditation of the Adventist universities and colleges, will he persist? Do these changes represent a reversal of the Adventist trajectory from sect towards denomination that will be maintained, or are they merely a pause or a slowing of the trajectory that is inevitable for a successful religious group?

Introduction

Most of my formal education took place in Australia. As an undergrad I did Honors in History, which focused almost entirely on history. There was not yet a sociology department at my university, and I don't think I was at that time even aware of the discipline.

Upon graduation I was awarded a fellowship to do a Ph.D., and I naturally set out to do this in history. However, it was not long before I discovered sociology and its relevance to what I was doing, and by that time a department had been established. I decided to take the available sociology courses, and ultimately persuaded the two departments and ultimately the university authorities to permit me to

pursue my doctorate in both departments – my work and dissertation supervision was in both departments, and ultimately the dissertation was examined by external examiners in both disciplines.

My most important ah-ha! experience while taking those initial sociology courses occurred in my first sorte into the sociology of religion. I had grown up in a devout Seventh-day Adventist family, and when I first encountered Church-Sect theory, I remember my excitement, for I felt that it explained to me the dynamics of the changes in Adventism over time. I remember going to my dissertation supervisor and telling him that I wanted to change my topic to a study of Adventism using this theory: I felt it would help me to understand my faith much better, and in turn help fellow-Adventists do this also. However, the supervisor's response was "Do you want a job when you finish your work?" as he rejected my idea outright. I vowed to myself that I would do the research he rejected as soon as I was academically secure.

In those days (the mid-1960s) church-sect theory was taught as it had been reformulated by Niebuhr, with some further insights from Yinger. "Church-sect theory" was a misnomer—I thought of it as "Sect-to-Denomination theory," for it explained the dynamics as sects evolved gradually into denominations. In 1985 Stark and Bainbridge developed the theory considerably, building on an insight in an article by Benton Johnson. They described sects as having high tension with society, a relationship that was marked by separation and antagonism on both sides, and that over time that tension was reduced as groups became more comfortable with society, more integrated into it—that is, as they evolved into denominations.

However, I remember thinking as I absorbed the work of Stark and Bainbridge that if tension could be reduced it could, at least theoretically, possibly also increase—that the trajectory followed by a religious group was not necessarily from sect towards denomination, but could also perhaps become more sect-like over time. In 1994, in his *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation*, Armand Mauss argued that in 1950 Mormon President McKay, nervous over the loss of distinctiveness that had accompanied the increasing assimilation of Mormons into American society, had set out to put on the brakes and reverse the direction of the Mormon trajectory—a policy that was continued by several of McKay's successors. Stark and Finke, in *Acts of Faith*, later set out to explore when this kind of shift of trajectory might occur, oddly without referring to Mauss's study.

However, the "normal" trajectory was seen as that originally spelt out by Niebuhr—from sect to denomination. When, having become a tenured full-professor in 1984, I set out to do my long-delayed study of global Adventism, that was how I conceived of its trajectory over time.

Adventism had been formed in the US in 1844 in the wake of the failure of the prophecy by William Miller that Christ would return that year. Their tension with society was palpable: they rejected the American Dream, for they continued to believe that the "end of the world" was imminent, they were separated from it by their insistence on keeping Saturday as the Sabbath in a society where that day was a normal work day, by their rejection of popular culture, their peculiar diet and dress rules, and their pacifism, which caused them to reject service in the Civil War in spite of their hatred of slavery. The fact that they recognized a woman, Ellen White, as their prophet, added to their peculiarity. When they

established their own schools and “sanitariums”, which rejected prevailing medicine, these initially increased their peculiarity and separation. Their theology also proclaimed mutual antagonism with the state, for they preached boldly that it would legislate the sacredness of Sunday and persecute Sabbath-keepers—and indeed some Adventist farmers were imprisoned under state blue laws for working on Sundays, and a series of bills that sought to make Sunday the official holy day were introduced in Congress beginning in the late 1880s. Such antagonism extended to all other religious groups, for they portrayed them as behind the planned attempt to persecute them for observing the Sabbath commandment, declared that they alone were God’s “Remnant people”, the one true church, and in their public evangelism they boldly challenged clergy of other denominations to present the biblical command to switch the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, and advertized that they would award \$1,000 to any pastor or priest who could come up with such a passage, which does not exist. That is, early Adventism, as measured by the criteria put forward by Stark and Bainbridge, was highly sectarian.

However, as time passed, this tension was reduced. Adventist schools and sanitariums gave them a stake in society. When medical schools needed accreditation to function around the time of World War I they accredited their medical school. Ultimately, however, the schools from which medical students came also needed accreditation, and so Adventist colleges then sought and gained accreditation—which prepared the way for upward mobility among Adventists. As medical knowledge improved, Adventists became more comfortable with regular medicine, and their sanitariums were transformed into hospitals. Their lifestyle became more normal over time. For example, desiring to express their patriotism while refraining from killing, Adventists trained members who were likely to be conscripted for service as medics in the armed forces, declaring that they were “conscientious cooperators”, not conscientious objectors. When the government introduced the five-day week, this removed a major source of conflict immediately. Ellen White had banned the theater, and this was transferred easily also to movies, as young Adventists were taught that their guardian angels remained outside when they entered a theater, but White had not foreseen the coming of television. Meanwhile, the reasons for antagonism between Adventism and the state became less immediate with the growing secularization of Sunday and the end of attempts to pass Sunday sacredness legislation, and as the courts sought solutions for people whose consciences did not allow them to work on Saturdays. Adventists also reduced tension with other churches as they tried not to offend them and their pastors became active in ministers’ fraternals.

While Adventists never became large enough in the US for many of their members to be elected to Congress, this was not the case in many parts of the Developing World. When I visited Papua-New Guinea in 1999, the Governor-General, Deputy Prime-Minister, several cabinet members, and four of the justices of the Supreme Court were Adventists, thanks largely to the leading role of Adventists in providing education there. When I asked for an explanation of why so many Adventists there had prospered economically, I was told repeatedly that “God blesses Adventists.” Recently, the government of Jamaica appointed the man who had been the head of the Adventist Church there as Governor-General, and some months later following an election another Adventist emerged as the Prime Minister, with several other Adventists also included in the cabinet. However, in the US the Adventist medical school has made it easier for Adventists to study medicine, for it gives preference to Adventist

applicants. Adventists have increasingly risen to positions of prominence in society: for example, Admiral Barry Black, the Chaplain to the US Senate, is the first member of a non-Mainline church and also the first African-American to hold that position.

In the 1950s, after months of meetings with Adventist leaders, two leading Evangelicals and their *Eternity Magazine* declared that Adventists were not a cult, but fellow-Evangelicals. Adventists then set out to have series of meetings with the leaders of several Mainline denominations, beginning with the World Lutheran Federation and then the Presbyterians, which resulted in public statements of mutual appreciation. In the 1990s the Adventist hospitals in Colorado joined together in a single organization with the hospitals of the Catholic Sisters of Charity in order that both might survive in a situation of intense competition among medical institutions. Many Adventists are embarrassed by the doctrine that their church is God's Remnant Church, and down-play it.

Uni- or Bi-Directional?

In October, 1978, Robert H. Pierson, who had been President of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists since 1969, announced to the Annual Council of the Church that he was retiring for medical reasons. In his final address to his Church, he invoked Church-Sect theory, which he had recently become aware of as a result of reading a paper submitted to an Adventist journal by an academic. The details of the theory, with its suggestion that the members of a group that begins as a sect later, over time, lose their zeal and abandon their peculiar behavioral norms while the sect itself, en route to developing into a denomination, bureaucratizes, establishes institutions, and accumulates wealth, and its schools, universities, and seminaries go to the world for accreditation and tend to become secularized, had grabbed his attention. He spoke with passion:

“Brethren and sisters, this must never happen to the Seventh-day Adventist Church! ... Fellow leaders, beloved brethren and sisters – don't let it happen! I appeal to you as earnestly as I know how this morning – don't let it happen! I appeal to Andrews University, to the Seminary, to Loma Linda University – don't let it happen! ...This is God's last church with God's last message!” (Pierson 1978: 10) But the process was already advanced: Pierson mentioned that there were already some who would belittle the authority of the Bible and attack the credibility of the writings of Ellen White; there were those who wished to forget the standards of the Adventist Church; who coveted the favor of Evangelicals; “those who would throw off the mantle of a peculiar people; and those who would go the way of the secular, materialistic world” (Pierson 1978: 10).

My data suggest that this process has continued apace in the years since.

However, in 2010 Adventists elected a new world president who seems intent on reversing the direction of the Sect-to-Denomination trajectory. He has placed a renewed emphasis on the authority of the writings of Ellen White and the doctrine of the Remnant. He has set up a committee to revise the article in the statement of belief that addresses Creation, with the intent of replacing the current biblical language there, that is open to multiple interpretations, to an explicit statement that God created the

world fairly recently in six contiguous days – a position that most of the scientists teaching at Adventist universities and colleges have told me they cannot accept.

Will Wilson succeed in setting Adventism on a trajectory towards greater sectarianism? Is this merely a theoretical possibility, or can it become the reality? To raise just one possible scenario, if Wilson insists that the science departments at Adventist universities teach that evolution is false and that the world was created by fiat only 6-10,000 years ago, and this then threatens their accreditation, will he hold to his course? Will the church follow him or rebel?

This is likely to be tested in the next few years.

Reference

Pierson, Robert H. 1978. An Earnest Appeal from the Retiring President of the General Conference. *Adventist Review*, October 26, 10-11.