Adventism and its Fringes


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Lowell Tarling, who studied English literature at Avondale College and Newcastle Teachers College, Australia, in the 1970s, has diverse talents and interests. He is a freelance writer on religious topics, a recording artist (gospel music), playwright (mostly musicals), cartoonist and fisherman. Previous publications include Thank God for the Salvos: A History of the Salvation Army in Australia, 1880-1980 (Harper and Row, 1980), and a novel, Taylor's Troubles, based upon his experiences as student and teacher at the Adventist Strathfield High School, in Sydney (Penguin, 1982).

In his introduction to The Edges of Seventh-day Adventism, Tarling applies sociological church/sect theory to Adventism, arguing that the history of the Adventist church is "the story of its transformation from a sect into a Protestant denomination". Within Adventism "there has always been a tug-of-war between elements wanting to remain sectarian and elements wanting to be denominational. Similar movements at its fringes reflect the battle which is taking place within the church itself. Some fringe movements want to retain the characteristics of a sect, others want the full acceptance of being a denomination in the Protestant sense... (A) study of all the breakaways can give a very clear understanding of the Seventh-day Adventist mind... (T)he sum of the parts of the offshoot movements is equal to the corporate identity of the mainstream church."

The main body of the book gives the history of some 20 "off-shoots" of Adventism, including all the major groups and several minor ones. While the list is not exhaustive, Tarling does claim that his three-fold classification of the groups represents all their types. This division also represents three fairly neat historical periods. The first category, "separate movements", is made up of groups that rejected distinctive SDA doctrines or the authority of Ellen White during the first decades of Adventist history, and developed into separate denominations, forgetting their connection to Seventh-day Adventism. Included here are the other three groups that emerged from the Millerite movement after the disappointment of 1844, and the Church of God, which separated from Adventism in the 1860s and its later subdivisions, including Herbert W. Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God and its offshoot. "Perfectionist and reform movements", the second category, which emerged during the 40 years following the death of Ellen White, idealized an early period of SDA history and chose to remain there, stressing positions from which they felt the official SDA body had apostacized. These are so conscious of their SDA roots that their proselitizing efforts are focused there. The main groups within this category are the Seventh Day Adventist Reform Movement and the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists (Shepherd's Rod) and its several fragments. "Redemption and protestant movements", the third category, have mostly emerged during the past twenty-five years, and are led by charismatic leaders with strong Protestant leanings running ahead of the theological evolution of the SDA church. Some of these have joined existing Protestant denominations,
others spawn independent congregations rather than centralized denominations. The main discussions in this section are of Robert Brinsmead's Awakening Movement, the controversy over righteousness by faith in Australia between 1972 and 1979, and Desmond Ford and Evangelical Adventists, as well as the 1888 General Conference Session.

Tarling's material is mostly well documented: he has done a great deal of searching for sources. However, some profiles are much fuller than others, for source documents and informants were not equally available. Nevertheless, Tarling's most important contribution is to release to the general reader material concerning groups on the edges of Adventism that was not previously available. Since the main controversies of the past quarter-century have to a large extent centered in Australia, he was especially well placed to research these. Tarling is also to be complimented for maintaining a high degree of objectivity in his account. It is a pity that the proofreading of the volume did not maintain the standard: I have never seen so many errors in a book – in spelling, grammar, even dates.

Some of the material is fascinating. Margaret Rowen, one of three women put forward at different times as prophetesses for Adventism, was prepared to lie, forge a letter from Ellen White, and plot a murder to convince followers of the truth of her visions. Changes introduced by wives succeeding to leadership helped bring about the fragmentation of the Shepherd's Rod. The personal theological journey of Robert Brinsmead and the details of the other groups to emerge from the "great disappointment" are most interesting. Saddest of all is perhaps the story of the origins of the Seventh Day Adventist Reform Movement, which arose among conscientious objectors to the militaristic position taken by leaders of the European Division in Germany during World War I: these informed the German authorities that defense of the Fatherland on the Sabbath and with arms was not in contravention of either the fourth or the sixth commandments.

What of Tarling's contention that a study of SDA off-shoots can tell us much about Adventism itself? The fact that in the early decades of this century most groups exited to the sectarian right, but that they have been breaking off from the denominational (or liberal) left more recently, is further evidence of considerable changes in official positions. However, this evidence supports an interpretation of sudden change around 1955-1965, rather than a gradual transformation from sect to denomination. (Maren Lockwood Carden and the author expect to publish a paper, "Seventh-day Adventists in Conflict: A Nineteenth Century Religious Movement Meets the Twentieth Century", arguing such a "sudden change" thesis shortly.) Implicit in Tarling's account is a sense that changes in Adventism are often produced reactively – that the off-shoot tails wag the church dog. This evidence supports the conclusion of Paxton's The Shaking of Adventism, which focused on the official responses to the evolution of Brinsmead's theology. It is distressing to find all parties involved – both the mainstream church and the offshoots – so unaccommodating, so quick to polarize, condemn and disfellowship, so uncharitable.

Church/sect theory has become widely used as an analytical tool within Adventism in recent years. But its adoption has usually been naive, uncritical and deterministic, and in this Tarling is no exception. Sociologists have a difficult enough time with these concepts, so it is no wonder that non-sociologist Adventists do. "Church" and "sect" are "ideal type" poles which summarize many variables. (Tarling presents yet another list of variables, the sources of which are not acknowledged.) Most religious movements tend to move along the continuum between these
poles over time as they are institutionalized (become integral to society) and rationalized (become hierarchical, bureaucratic). (Secular movements usually undergo a similar process of institutionalization: the labor movement, for example, developed from short-lived, isolated strikes to the AFL-CIO.) But considerable evolution is not inevitable (consider the Amish, Hutterites, or even the Jehovah's Witnesses). Nor is change in each variable necessarily linked and therefore parallel (for example, the socio-economic status of the Quakers has risen while on the whole their formal organization has remained fairly static; the situation is the reverse for the JWs). Moreover, the direction of change may on occasion be altered: much of U.S. Judaism retreated from the liberal Reformed position it had attained by the 1930s. Thus it is not inevitable that Adventism will continue to evolve towards Protestant denominationalism, and the direction of its evolution, measured grossly, could even reverse. Indeed, Paxton would argue that as the church hierarchy reacts to liberal would-be reformers this has already begun to occur. This would certainly be the result if much of the educated-@liberal-@scholar wing splits off or, in discouragement, wanders off – the remnant would be likely to be quite sectarian along some dimensions.

The church/sect typology was developed by the German sociologist, Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, first published in German in 1911). His third pole, "mysticism", is often neglected, but I think it relevant to Adventism today. According to Troeltsch, "mysticism arises when 'the world of ideas' which makes up the religious belief system has 'hardened into formal worship and doctrine.' Religious life then, for some people, becomes 'transformed into a purely personal and inward experience.' The result is the 'formation of groups on a purely personal basis, with no permanent form, which also tends to weaken the significance of worship, doctrine and the historical element.'... (Mysticism) attracts varied types of people, but especially the intellectual and cultured groups." (T.F. O'Dea, *The Sociology of Religion*, 86, quoting Troeltsch, II, 993.) When religious groups have been able to contain diversity – church-like, sectarian and mystical elements – within their ranks, this has proved to be an important source of vitality for them (for example, the energy and innovation accruing to the Catholic church when, rather than sloughing off sectarian and mystical elements, it channeled them into religious orders). On the other hand, when religious groups have instead been unaccommodating and have expelled diverse groups, this has weakened them and narrowed their relevance. There is no doubt that Adventism has become increasingly diverse in recent years. However, Tarling has demonstrated that Seventh-day Adventism, and its offshoots in turn, have been eagerly schismatic.