

## SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE CHRISTIAN SCHOLAR FACING RESEARCH

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Introduction

Research, in the various meanings of the term, represents an imperative of the human mind, a constantly renewed challenge to broaden the horizons, to discover other aspects of truth, to add new knowledge. God endowed humans with inquiring intellectual faculties and the ability to connect logically the results of their research. They owe Him the responsible use of their minds. As Ellen G. White puts it: "God has given to every human being a brain. He desires that it shall be used to His glory" (1 SM, p. 100 - 1904). It is a matter of human dignity, faithfulness, and growth.

Of course, by exercising his or her<sup>1</sup> mental faculties, the Christian may experience tension between truth revealed by God and truth discovered, between truth apprehended by faith and truth reached by exercising a critical, inquiring attitude. The methodic doubt inherent in many disciplines may seem to foster the erosion of faith.

Yet Christians are born to search. If they do not follow this inner mandate, they face a perilous future, especially in the area of biblical truth. Ellen White warns:

When no new questions are started by investigation of the Scriptures, when no difference of opinion arises which will set men to searching the Bible for themselves, to make sure that they have the truth, there will be many now, as in ancient times, who will hold to tradition, and worship they know not what (CW, p. 39 - 1915).

In this context, and being convinced that truth--whether

revealed or discovered--does not contradict itself, what are the premises of an Adventist scholar undertaking research? What qualities should characterize his professional attitude toward research, also in the light of the examples provided in the Scriptures? What should be the objectives of research done by Christians? Are there priorities? Pitfalls? How should research be fostered? What about the financial implications? How should one deal with the results? These are some of the most obvious questions dealt with in this paper.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Christian Presuppositions

There is no intellectual undertaking devoid of religious or scientific presuppositions. The scholar's worldview determines the orientation of his research. Even the empiricist approach is unconsciously slanted by the person engaged in a particular project. Christians should not be ashamed of the foundations of their worldview. On the contrary, they should be open about their premises, although these should not be synonymous with bigoted biases.

As Calvin Seerveld summarizes it, a Christian worldview is "a philosophical systematics which critically admits and shows that its leading ideas are cued by the revelation of God."<sup>3</sup>

God, the source of truth--the ultimate reality beyond whatever may hide Him--reveals Himself through Scriptures, nature, and the impulsions of the Holy Spirit, but especially through Jesus Christ, who is both the truth and the way to it.

A Christian can hope to find truth only as long as his search is consistent with the framework of God's revelation, although his efforts may suffer from the numerous layers that tradition often su-

perimposes on the perception of reality.

A consistent Christian scholar, true to his moral roots, can only approach research with an attitude stemming from a commitment to an all-embracing Christian worldview.

## 2. Characteristics of a Christian Scholar

In addition to possessing the indispensable intellectual abilities and mastering reliable research methods, a Christian scholar is a person of integrity, who gives credit to whom credit is due. He is open-minded, practices discretion and self-discipline in his inquiries, shuns suspicion, and accepts to be vulnerable, in an attitude of true humility.

He manifests tolerance and respect for the opinions of others. He seeks the advice and counsel of his peers--or of other qualified persons from different areas of specialization--for support through collegial checking and constructive criticism.

A Christian scholar, even more than other scholars, practices perseverance in his search, is thorough in his investigations and honest in the interpretation of data, being always ready to examine alternative conclusions, thus maintaining his intellectual credibility. He remains consistent with his principles when he faces tensions and dilemmas, since truth does not contradict itself. Michael Pearson underlines, among other germane virtues, "genuine intellectual curiosity," "intellectual suppleness," and "wholeness."<sup>4</sup>

One cannot attempt to be exhaustive in such a list of desirable qualities for a Christian scholar. It is evident, however, that he will display readiness to make sacrifices, will exercise his Christian convictions in minor as well as in important aspects of

research and will pursue his search of truth in a spirit of prayer, asking for the assistance of the omniscient God to uncover new pages of the book of knowledge. He will avoid putting excessive trust in the human ability to discover truth by itself, unguided by the Holy Spirit. He will be humbly and honestly conscious of his limits, recognizing his finite nature. And he will always be ready to bow before Christ's lordship over human wisdom, if a conflict arises.

### 3. Objectives of Research

A responsible Christian scholar holds as general objectives of research the pursuit of truth, service to society and benefit to humanity. This comprehensive aim encompasses an inexhaustible amount of morally legitimate endeavors open to those who are committed to investigate all areas of relevant human activity and thought and make contribution toward the knowledge of God, peace, justice, and a better life.

A conscientious Christian scholar will often face a difficult task in establishing the priorities of his research, but his worldview will determine the way he reaches his decisions. Offered a choice between studying the habits of a minute and rare mollusk living on the bottom of the sea and looking for a cure for cancer, he will not hesitate. But all decisions do not benefit from such a clear-cut alternative.

In his preliminary exploration of fields of research, a Christian scholar will be torn between evident practical usefulness and pushing farther the frontiers of knowledge. In the words of Nicholas Wolterstorff, he will agonize between the principle "Choose whichever holds the greatest promise of yielding knowledge of

greatest intrinsic worth to the greatest number of people" and the principle "Choose whichever holds the greatest promise of yielding results or utility of greatest worth to the greatest number of people," since the results do not necessarily coincide.<sup>5</sup> The responsible scholar will identify real needs--theoretical or practical--compatible with his abilities, available time and reasonable hope of a positive outcome, and endeavor to decide and act accordingly.

Figuratively speaking, a true Christian scholar will go to the mountaintop or to the bottom of the deepest ocean to discover what is there and to tell what he has seen or to share what he has found. He will pursue his search as a servant of humanity. He will function like a bridge; he will act as a trailblazer toward new knowledge. He will help to appreciate the dimensions of a worldview that many do not recognize. He will strive to reach wisdom through knowledge, especially the knowledge of God, which is eternal life (John 17:3).

#### 4. Biblical Examples

In the Bible, there are at least ten different terms in Hebrew and four in Greek which are translated by the verb "to search." The original expressions meant the following: to search, to dig, to break through, to seek, to inquire, to search out, to investigate, to traverse, to spy out, to judge, to sift again, to trace, to track, to make diligent search. Most of these meanings are worth pondering over.

The first biblical character who comes to mind, in thinking of scholarly pursuits, is certainly Solomon. This king, to whom the

Lord granted "a wise and discerning mind" (1 Kings 3:12),<sup>6</sup> applied his "mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven" and concluded that "it is an unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with," that "all is vanity and a striving after wind" (Eccl. 1:13, 14), although he left for posterity some very wise sayings as a result of his "vain" endeavors. Should the Christian scholar follow the implicit advice that the dispondent king uttered at the end of his universal search?

The relative importance of many a research, the weariness which often results, are feelings experienced at one time or another by most persons engaged in research. Even doctoral dissertations sometimes fall into oblivion in the very minds of those who have written them. And what about the readers? A well-known university professor was tempted to destroy the library copy of his doctoral dissertation, of which he was now ashamed. He gave up, however, when he realized that, in more than twenty years, it had never been checked out. Should research, however, be abandoned? Certainly not. Who knows ahead what might bring important results?

A case in point is the rebuilding of the temple after the exile. Once again, there was danger that this important project would be interrupted. When the search was made in the royal archives of Ecbatana, a scroll was found. The house of the Lord continued to be rebuilt and was completed because of this search (Ezra 6:1-16). The Christian scholar's research may also build or rebuild the house of the Lord, His church.

Daniel searched in the prophetic writings vital information appropriate for his day (Daniel 9:2). Up to the last moment, in the darkest prison, Paul needed his books and parchments--probably the

Septuagint--for study and research (2 Timothy 4:13). Luke, the beloved physician of the early church, gave a perfect example of accurate and thorough research followed by a systematic presentation, which was compatible with inspiration (Luke 1:1-4).

The challenge and privilege of research was not reserved to a few isolated individuals. The Bereans, for example, "received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11). The verb used here is "anakrínō," which means "to investigate," "to sift evidence."

The Bereans used sanctified intelligence in studying the Scriptures. . . . Having examined the evidence and having found what was true, they proved their sincerity by accepting the new teaching. The Berean converts . . . [are] regarded . . . as representative of those who exhibit the right relation between reason and faith, avoiding credulity on the one hand and skepticism on the other (SDABC, vol. 6, p. 344).

Following the example of the Bereans, the pioneers of the Adventist church not only investigated "to see if things were so": they also discovered "present truth," indispensable light for their time, still precious today.

Above all, the Christian scholar is reminded to "search the scriptures; they bear witness of Christ" (John 5:39). This is the science of all sciences.

##### 5. Some Pitfalls and Warnings

It is not uncommon to be carried away by meticulous research on minor matters. There is a sad truth in the saying, "To major in minors." A historical event illustrates this point. In 1453, Byzantine theologians were fiercely debating in Constantinople about the sex of the angels. In the meantime, the Turks took the city.

Each human being has only a relatively short life, during



which barely a few projects can be completed. The Christian scholar's research should be relevant. He should shun trivial topics and not engage his time and efforts in irrelevancies. Ellen G. White addresses a clear warning:

We must turn away from a thousand topics that invite attention. There are matters that consume time and arouse inquiry, but end in nothing. The highest interests demand the close attention and energy that are too often given to comparatively insignificant things (8T, p. 316 - 1904).

The apostle Paul, probably the most intellectual writer in the Scriptures, issues another warning, which underlines the importance of working in harmony with a Christian worldview:

Be careful that nobody spoils your faith through intellectualism or highsounding nonsense. Such stuff is at best founded on men's ideas of the nature of the world, and disregards Christ (Colossians 2:8, Phillips).

Paul uses some pointed expressions in advising his closest disciple in 2 Timothy 2. V. 14: "avoid disputing about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers." The verb is "logomacheō," "to fight word battles," used only here in the Bible. V. 16: avoid such "godless chatter" (RSV); "profane and vain babblings" (KJV); "empty and worldly chatter" (NEB). The term used is "kenophōnía," which means "empty sounds," i.e. idle chatter, meaningless talk, sound without any value. V. 23: "Have nothing to do with stupid, senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels." Paul's words are quite strong, but they describe frequent realities, also in academic communities.

It is the Christian scholar's responsibility to use sanctified common sense before he risks committing himself to research and debates that generate useless quarrels. Of course, truth often engenders strong reactions; but one should be sure it is genuine and

oriented toward good before accepting to pay the corresponding price.

Useless speculation represents another trap. Ellen G. White reminds those who are tempted by it that

Satan is constantly at work to divert the mind into wrong channels, so that the truth may lose its force upon the heart. And unless ministers and people practice the truth and are sanctified by it, they will allow speculation regarding questions of no vital importance to occupy the mind. This will lead to caviling and strife; for countless points of difference will arise (GW, p. 312 -1892?).

"Caviling" means objecting unnecessarily, resorting to trivial fault finding, raising frivolous questions. The corresponding French word has the meaning of sophism, playing on words, using captious arguments, quibbling. What a warning for those who deal with the Word!

A different pitfall consists in thinking that, in certain areas, no research is needed anymore.

Let no one come to the conclusion that there is no more truth to be revealed. . . . The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people, is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation (CW, p. 35 - 1892).

Other temptations are of a different nature. For example, to look for personal privileges and professional advancement as a result of research, although these may represent an inevitable consequence of a job well done; or to seek prominence through shoddy research and mediocre professionalism (see the recent uproar caused by the discovery of the so-called memory of water).

Fashionable objects of research, even those which are of general interest--like ecology, equal rights, antislavery--may well deserve some disparaging remarks. One may wonder why, in such areas that appear a priori as a predestined chasse gardée for Christians,

the latter almost always act as imitators and followers of secular research instead of being initiators in matters concerning "my Father's house."

Another tendency for some is to engage mainly in scholarship to be respected only by secular peers, to whom they pay homage, and not by their church, which receives the alms of the leftovers.

On the other hand, Christians may tend to be too parochial in their research and choose mainly church-related areas for their endeavors, thus fostering the danger of corporate sclerosis that usually accompanies constant inbreeding.

Still others avoid undertaking research which their convictions would seem to make inevitable, because they are afraid of the consequences associated with the possible results.

The most tragic pitfall, however, for a Christian scholar is, like Solomon, to lose divine wisdom, and maybe his soul, while pursuing human knowledge.

## 6. Fostering the Appropriate Atmosphere

Christian scholars are somewhat delicate plants, which need an appropriate atmosphere for thriving. In institutions of higher learning, the administrators can do much to foster a climate conducive to research.

Each institution should develop a statement on academic freedom inspired by the document updated at the Annual Council of the General Conference in 1987.<sup>7</sup> In particular, it was stated that the principle of academic freedom "applies to subjects within the professor's professional expertise within which there is a special need for freedom to pursue truth. It also applies to the atmosphere of open

inquiry necessary in an academic community if learning is to be honest and thorough." The scholar should not "feel threatened if his findings differ from traditionally held views." Probably a joint committee of scholars and church leaders should reach a consensus on how much of the SDA heritage is not negotiable.

On the other hand, academic freedom

. . . places a responsibility on the Christian professor to be a self-disciplined, responsible, and mature scholar, to investigate, teach, and publish within the area of his academic competence, without external restraint, but with a due regard for the character and aims of the institution which provides him with credentials, and with concern for the spiritual and the intellectual needs of his students. . . . The Christian scholar will undertake research within the context of his faith and from the perspective of Christian ethics. He is free to do responsible research with proper respect for public safety and decency. . . . It is expected that a teacher in one of the Church's educational institutions will not teach as truth what is contrary to those fundamental truths [Fundamental Beliefs]. Truth, they will remember, is not the only product of the crucible of controversy; disruption also results. The dedicated scholar will exercise discretion in presenting concepts which might threaten church unity and the effectiveness of church action. . . . He will attempt to differentiate between hypotheses and facts and between central and peripheral issues.

Much of the document would deserve to be quoted, since it formulates important principles within the scope of this paper.

## 7. Financial Implications

Research is not done in a vacuum, also from the practical point of view. Salaries have to be paid, if the scholar is granted a research leave; rooms, equipment and computers have to be secured; material needs to be purchased; additional library holdings may become necessary; research assistants and secretaries often have to be hired; travel may be involved; and the results need to be published. All this is multiplied by the amount of time needed to complete a project. At the bottom line, research is usually closely

related to money, often big money.

Who decides what is responsible research? Who ranks the priorities? On what criteria will the decisions be based?

The tendency, also in church-associated circles, is to think of research as synonymous with science-related projects, although these deserve a fair share of support. The humanities, social sciences, art--and even religion--are usually neglected, particularly as far as the amounts of the research grants are concerned. It is difficult to convince administrators of the usefulness of projects that are not science-related, although there are philosophical assumptions--therefore "unscientific" presuppositions--behind all science systems.

It would seem appropriate to wish that the approval and support of research projects which need to be funded be jointly decided by those who know--the peers--and by those who release the funds, whatever their position may be (administrators, philanthropic underwriters, etc.).

For an organization as small as the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there are many questions for which there are no easy answers. Can it afford research? Of what magnitude? Can its institutions of higher learning survive without it? Is unfinished research acceptable? What is the price of cost-effective measures? These are currently debated issues, which may shape the future of some institutions.

Do these dilemmas mean that research in Adventist institutions is in jeopardy? There may be a blessing in disguise in the difficulty of financing costly "scientific" projects, which leave room for creative and more affordable research in neglected areas

that are closer to the heart of the message the Church identifies with.

Another aspect worth exploring is the challenge faced by the Christian scholar who, while remaining consistent with the presuppositions of his worldview, is dependent on secular bodies for funding his research. He will certainly have frequent opportunities for witnessing; but will he be able to conduct his research? This may give to the biblical formula--in the world, but not of the world--a new dimension, with the addition "yet funded by the world," when this takes place.

#### 8. How to Deal with the Results

The answer to the question "How to deal with the results of research?" seems deceptively obvious: make it available.

And yet, the decision may not be so easy. Of course, painful editorial work and funds for publication often represent a long lasting obstacle. Beyond these hurdles, however, may lie other difficulties.

Are the results different from those that were expected? Are the scholar or the church or society afraid of the answers? Within the limits of decency and respect for others, it would seem evident that both the scholar and those who have financed his research should be implicitly ready to accept the results of research and to act accordingly, if a decision is implied as a consequence.

But the challenges remain during research and when it is concluded. A final suggestion seems therefore in order. Research is a lonely work, often involving long and tedious investigation, doubts,

dilemmas, and discouragement. For all these reasons, one should pray for those engaged in research.

### Conclusion

Only some major aspects could be dealt with in such a short paper. It has been clearly shown, however, that the Christian scholar faces many challenges and risks in the openness of his investigations, which he conducts with full integrity, since honesty toward truth is at stake.

He should maintain an open attitude toward the most troubling questions, being ready to acknowledge very frankly existing problems and his own limitations. He should be ready to pursue the truth wherever it may lead and be willing to face honestly the most disturbing results of his or others' research. But he should also periodically examine his motives, as openly and frankly as he faces the available data. E.G. White describes the right attitude toward research:

You must lay your preconceived opinions, your hereditary and cultivated ideas, at the door of investigation. If you search the Scriptures to vindicate your own opinions, you will never reach the truth. Search in order to learn what the Lord says. If conviction comes as you search, if you see that your cherished opinions are not in harmony with the truth, do not misinterpret the truth in order to suit your own belief, but accept the light given. Open mind and heart that you may behold wondrous things out of God's Word (COL, p. 112 - 1900).

If there are challenges, there are also rewards. What a thrill to uncover an aspect of truth, to contribute to the healing of incurable diseases, to restore the past in its integrity, to shape the future of generations through new knowledge!

And there are the changes that take place in those who search.

It is a law of the mind, that it will narrow or expand to the dimensions of the things with which it becomes familiar. The mental powers will surely become contracted, and will lose their ability to grasp the deep meanings of the word of God, unless they are put vigorously and persistently to the task of searching for truth. The mind will enlarge, if it is employed in tracing out the relation of the subjects of the Bible, comparing scripture with scripture, and spiritual things with spiritual. Go below the surface; the richest treasures of thought are waiting for the skilful and diligent student (FE, p. 127 - 1888).

By using their mental powers in the highest tasks foreseen by the Creator, human beings participate somewhat in His creative attributes and train their minds for eternity. In a certain way, they prepare the entrance examination for the university of the hereafter, where

. . . immortal minds will contemplate with never-failing delight the wonders of creative power, the mysteries of redeeming love. . . . Every faculty will be developed, every capacity increased. The acquirement of knowledge will not weary the mind or exhaust the energies. There the grandest enterprises may be carried forward, the loftiest aspirations reached, the highest ambitions realized; and still there will arise new heights to surmount, new wonders to admire, new truths to comprehend, fresh objects to call forth the powers of mind and soul and body.

All the treasures of the universe will be open to the study of God's redeemed. . . . And the years of eternity, as they roll, will bring richer and still more glorious revelations of God and of Christ (GC, pp. 677-678 - 1911).



FOOTNOTES

1. Although both sexes will be implied in speaking of the Christian scholar, only masculine pronouns and possessive adjectives will be used throughout the paper, for simplicity's sake.

2. In addition to the books and articles mentioned in the footnotes or directly in the paper, the author is indebted to the following works (he also borrowed portions of an article he published in 1988, mentioned below):

B. B. Beach, "Can a University Be Christian? A look at academic freedom on the Adventist campus," Adventist Review, March 2, 1989, pp. 19, 21-24;

Pietro Copiz, "Privileges and Risks of Research," published in German in Aller Diener (IV, 1986, pp. 53-61) and in French in Servir (I, 1988, pp. 11-18).

Laurice Durrant, "Teaching a Research Course from a Christian Perspective--Integrating Faith with Learning," Institute for Christian Teaching, 88-04;

Frank E. Gaebelin, The Pattern of God's Truth (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968);

Arthur F. Holmes, Contours of a World View (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983);

Arthur F. Holmes, The Idea of a Christian College, rev. edit. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987);

H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York, etc.: Harper & Row, 1951);

Brian J. Walsh, J. Richard Middleton, The Transforming Vision; Shaping a Christian World View (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984);

Papers and material presented at the Faith and Learning Seminar held at Collonges, France, July 12-25, 1989.

Moreover, an article read after the Faith and Learning Seminar deserves to be mentioned: Niels-Erik Andreasen, "The Responsibilities of Religious Learning in the Christian University," Scope

(Loma Linda University), July-September, 1982, pp. 15-21.

3. Calvin Seerveld, in lecture presented on July 19, 1989, at the Faith and Learning Seminar held at Collonges, France.

4. Michael Pearson, "Word Made Flesh--How the Christian World-view Affects Teaching and Learning," paper presented on July 13, 1989, at the Faith and Learning Seminar held at Collonges, France.

5. Nicholas Wolterstorff, Reason Within the Bounds of Religion, 2nd edit. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 160. (Italics supplied.)

6. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

7. This document is provided as an appendix.