

**Institute for Christian Teaching  
Education Department, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists**

**FAITH ENCOUNTERING CULTURE:  
THE CHURCH'S TEACHING ROLE IN SHAPING  
ADVENTIST IDENTITY AND MISSION**

by

**Darko Pirija  
Adriatic Union College**

**645-07 Institute for Christian Teaching  
12501 Old Columbia Pike  
Silver Spring, MD 20904 USA**

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# **FAITH ENCOUNTERING CULTURE: THE CHURCH'S TEACHING ROLE IN SHAPING ADVENTIST IDENTITY AND MISSION**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

To discuss identity formation within the Adventist church is to consider a key educational process which anchors a person within its cultural, social and religious setting. This aspect of socialization is about becoming and remaining an Adventist Christian. Today socialization happens within the ever evolving context of the paradigmatic shifts of modern/postmodern world on the one hand, and the growing religious pluralism on the other. These two phenomena are at the root of the changing dynamic between ascribed versus achieved identity and institutional versus personal quest for meaning and purpose.

Religion and culture define and instill virtually all human norms and values, especially in the Adventist community. In that respect we value God's self-disclosure in the Bible as our key source of these influences as we continually acknowledge the central role it plays in our individual and corporate lives. This is, then, why we have to consider from a biblical perspective the interrelationship of religion and culture in shaping our personal and collective identities as we decide who we are and who we are becoming individually and institutionally.

This paper is divided into three sections. First, it begins by discussing modern and postmodern mindsets with their associated social conditions. They provide, after all, a cultural context, a social incubator, if you like, in which the genesis of corporate and individual Adventist identity takes place. In this section I make a brief overview of the early Adventist reaction to modernity. In a nutshell, the Reformation and the Enlightenment, both grown out of humanism and renaissance, represent two radical responses to the medieval understanding of the world. They both sought to map a new path to individual and social emancipation. Since Adventism claims the Reformation as one of its historical sources of identity, I argue that the church's response to the modernist/postmodernist challenge, the broadly secular attempts to define and realize human emancipation, needs to follow and preserve the spirit of the Reformation. Unlike Descartes, with his faith in the omnipotence of human reason, Luther sought and found freedom in the redemptive knowledge and experience of Jesus Christ, in commitment to the preached and written Word of God.

Second, the central section of the paper identifies the areas of particular concern for Adventist identity formation and discusses the nature and scope of the adventist response. Finally, it suggests some practical directions to assist the church in its educational and mission work.. The basic assumption of these sections of the paper, and very much in keeping with Ellen G. White's philosophy of

education, is that as far as their primary aim is concerned “the work of redemption and the work of education are one”.<sup>1</sup>

### CHALLENGES TO ADVENTIST IDENTITY

Among the external challenges to the Adventist identity are numerous and complex strands of modernist legacy. I will briefly analyse three key meta-narratives: naturalism, romanticism and liberalism. Each is critically assessed from a postmodernist perspective so as to understand postmodern reaction to them and its proposed alternatives. When discussing modernity and postmodernity I attempt to follow closely the discussion in Andrew Wright's book *Religion, Education, and Post-Modernity*.<sup>2</sup> The internal challenges to Adventism are discussed under the subtitle «The Rise of Adventism».

#### Modernist legacy – emancipatory project

Naturalism, rooted in empirical philosophical tradition of John Locke, David Hume and logical positivism, sought to achieve the triumph of human freedom by championing, if not exactly inventing, the existence of a rational, autonomous, abstract, universal and objective human subject. Its ultimate aim was the creation of an ideal, free, rational individual and a new society. In its drive to emancipate human beings from failures, dependence and the self-deceptions of medieval times, naturalism drew a sharp distinction between objective, verifiable knowledge of observable facts, and subjective, unverifiable moral, aesthetic and religious discourse, between the world of facts and of value. The first are foundational to our understanding of the world and ourselves, and the second are reduced to “the level of emotive utterances incapable of engaging cognitively with the real world”.<sup>3</sup> The consequences of this dichotomy<sup>4</sup> for identity formation are twofold. First, any religious, moral or aesthetic discourse lies beyond the realm of verifiable and objective, and as such cannot meaningfully contribute to human understanding of reality. Second, it places scientists and scientific thinking, both supposedly value-free, at the center of all human quests for freedom, meaning and progress. This new, narrowly-conceived anthropocentric understanding of reality produced a largely materialistic understanding of life.

Modernist strand, romanticism<sup>5</sup> rooted in the philosophy of idealism, (Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel), recognized that reality cannot be reduced to the sum of our sense experiences of the physical world. Instead, it insisted on primacy and the final authority of intuition, inner feelings, aesthetic, moral and

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Education*, (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1952) 30. For a short discussion on primary and secondary aims of Adventist education see George R. Knight, „The Devil Takes a Look at Adventist Education”, *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, vol.10, Special Edition, 2001, 190-191.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Wright, *Religion, Education, and Post-Modernity* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), iii, <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=107642861>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

spiritual experiences. In doing so, modernist idealism shifted emphasis from rational to experiential mind-set. This reactive attempt to correct the modernist project of human emancipation from within was from the very start open to charge of subjectivism. It was also a tacit admission of a too reductive nature of naturalistic worldview. After all, how can we tell which emotional or experiential impulse ought to assume the mantle of our universal moral guide? In short, romanticism failed to establish a clear relationship between moral, aesthetic, and religious realm with the external reality, making it possible for some, at least, to posit intensity of feelings as the measure of reality. The consequence of such romanticism's approach for one's self-understanding is a subjective, self-referential framework of thought and the ultimate value of experiential mind-set.

The task of liberalism, the third major modernist metanarrative,<sup>6</sup> was to mediate between these two contradicting ways of relating to the world. The primary aim of liberalism (Locke), as a philosophical outlook, was to provide a framework within which they could co-exist and have a fruitful dialogue. Hence its emphasis on the freedom of belief and the exercise of tolerance as cornerstones of a lasting social order. However, with the passage of time, liberalism ceased to function as a mediator between these two conflicting narratives and was gradually turned into dogmatic and often intolerant worldview demanding unquestioning acceptance and allegiance. "The final outcome of the project of modernity is,...., the hegemony of a closed world of liberal values rooted in a liberal meta-narrative that functions to paper over the dualistic tensions between the meta-narratives of naturalism and romanticism."<sup>7</sup> Thus, the postmodern contention is that modernity, with its self-proclaimed aim of emancipation of humanity, seeking to overcome the perceived tyranny of medieval, theological understanding of the world, has created an equally authoritarian, albeit humanistic, understanding of the world.

Modernity, despite its self-proclaimed emancipatory nature, actually limited the chances for spiritual and social growth by radically redefining the traditional view of a person's identity. First, it rejected the biblical notion that our only source of salvation is in the actions of a merciful God. Instead, it developed the idea of classical philosophical tradition that we are "formed from the eternal substance of divine reality and have within us the potential to achieve our own salvation".<sup>8</sup> Second, the biblical concept of a relational selfhood, immersed in human understanding of God and its role in a religious community, was replaced by an autonomous, anthropocentric personhood, driven by unrelenting quest for self-realization.<sup>9</sup> Its growth was predicated on the belief in the omnipotence and autonomy of human

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>9</sup> See Jacques Ellul who has also identified: (1) "the emergence of a sense of self-hood and individual identity from an earlier immersion of human identity in the group, in nature, and in the spiritual cosmos", as one of the key features of modernism. Cited in Douglas Sloan, "Imagination, Education, and Postmodern Possibilities," *Re-vision* 15, no. 2 (1992): 44, <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=77027658>.

reason. Thus, the dichotomy of moral, religious and aesthetic, on one hand, and scientific, empirical realms on another, are at the very heart of the divided modernist self. The foundation of modernist identity is, therefore, inherently disintegrative, self-referential, contradictory and theoretically and practically fragmented.

### **The Rise of Adventism**

The shaping of Adventist church and its denominational identity took place within two contradictory trajectories of thought, two radically different theological, philosophical and social doctrines of human nature, society and their relation to the world. The first was Enlightenment's optimistic view of human nature, society and the world. It held that the world could be transformed through the gradual, right use of reason. The second is that of the later, apocalyptic belief in an abrupt end of human history through divine destruction followed by new creation. Postmillennialism was a religious expression of the Enlightenment's optimistic view of inevitable human progress, individually and socially, whereas premillennialism (Millerite heritage) represented the eschatological articulation of the latter.<sup>10</sup> Through Methodist and Baptist traditions, containing both, radical (Anabaptist; Puritanism) and orthodox strands of Reformation tradition, Adventist ethos, from its inception, inherited a religious heritage rich in internal tensions. My contention is that modern Adventist collective identity harbours both trajectories with a potential to enrich or divide the church depending (1) on our faithful, creative and relevant interpretation of the Scripture and culture, (2) our commitment to open and constructive dialogue, and (3) wide-ranging educational efforts to understand and integrate these two trajectories.<sup>11</sup>

Protestantism's principal response to the Enlightenment came in the form of German pietism, Puritan revival in England, and the Great Awakening in America lead by Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. However, the early new England Puritans viewed their settlements in earthly terms as God's new Israel. The 19th Century was an era of a great optimism due to the ongoing territorial expansion, an explosive population growth, and, not least, a new understanding of the purpose of Revolution coupled with emphasis on fulfilment of postmillennial earthly dream. The destiny of the newly formed Republic was perceived in terms of leading the world to millennial glory "as the nations would increasingly adopt the American wisdom, liberty, and happiness, knowledge and religion would be diffused throughout the earth, and mankind would be prepared for the universal reign of the Son of God in the glories of the latter day".<sup>12</sup> In fact, according to P. Gerard Damsteegt, "the remaking of society in the light of the

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<sup>10</sup> P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company), 3-15

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion see Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 94,  
<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=88448137>.

establishment of the kingdom of God was considered as important as converting people and building churches. . . ."<sup>13</sup>

The shaping of Adventism that took place during the second Great Awakening was a socio-religious phenomenon in direct opposition to the prevailing postmillennial views (discontinuity).<sup>14</sup> Its emergence centered on a comprehensive denial of the above eschatological expression of Enlightenment, i.e. its optimistic views of (1) inevitable human progress, individual and social, (2) the perceived pivotal role of America as God's chosen, redemptive nation, (3) the spirit of social activism and mission, and, finally, (4) a determined but not necessarily conscious move away from God's sovereign initiative in one's spiritual development and towards substituting Him and His uniquely redemptive role with growing theological and social anthropocentrism. In opposition to these mainstream religious beliefs and social activism, Adventism adopted attitudes and doctrines which fostered and encouraged dissassociation from beliefs, practices and institutions that embodied such views. Adventism seized upon this chance and presented itself as a radical yet credible alternative worldview and lifestyle. This it did by shifting the emphasis from humans back to God as the ultimate agent of change in human affairs, religious, social or otherwise.

Moreover, it moved the goalposts of social action from paving the way for a temporal, earthly kingdom to anticipating, and even hastening, something much bigger and quite breathtakingly different at that, the imminent physical, return of Christ and the visible reestablishment of His kingdom of glory. As such the program of early Adventism could hardly have been more radical even if it tried. In fact, Adventism distanced itself not only from a society in general, but also from mainstream religious bodies. Historical Christianity as a whole was perceived as fallen, apostate Babylon. Helped by the changing circumstances (eg. the Great Depression), Adventism succeeded, nonetheless, in creating and sustaining what turned out to be the lasting, worldwide attraction to its apocalyptic vision, physical destruction of the entire earth along with the final annihilation of all God's enemies. Not even occasional theological blunders (eg. the Shut Door theory) or episodes of theological immaturity (eg. anti-Trinitarianism)<sup>15</sup> managed to distract the newly emerging remnant from the pursuit of that grand vision whose finale is yet to materialize.

In the meantime, and in continuity with the prevailing cultural and religious milieu, Adventism, besides mainstream Reformation thinking, was strongly influenced by Anabaptism,

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<sup>13</sup> P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company), 10.

<sup>14</sup> P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission*, (Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids: Michigan), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Rolf J. Pöhler, *Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching: A Case Study in Doctrinal Development*, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), 36-40.

Restorationist movement (eg. Christian Connexion), Methodism, Deism and Puritanism.<sup>16</sup> Adventist thus joined numerous social reform movements (restorationist impulse) and employed the latest technological inventions (eg. its publishing work) as the means to achieving the movement's end. However, their primary rationale for social action was, and has always been, to prepare people for the imminent *parousia* rather than to ensure postmillennial Christianization of society. For more than 150 years, the church has refined and utilized this same approach to its mission with the ever increasing success in terms of membership growth, acquisition of material resources, and the development of its identity. In a similar fashion, church leaders recognized the value of education, a cultural trend at that time, and focused their efforts on developing their own educational system. Their prophetic interpretation, the backbone of the movement, relied heavily on rationalist analysis of its content (Baconianism and Scottish Common Sense Realism mediated through Millerite movement).<sup>17</sup> The importance ascribed to archaeological findings as a proof of the truthfulness of the Bible was just another modernist approach adopted by Adventism.

Seen from historical as well as contemporary perspectives, this tension between continuity versus discontinuity typology still plays itself out in the ongoing struggle between two conflicting schools of theological interpretation within Adventism. Whether the apocalyptic or the social perspective is ultimately more correct is not the subject of this paper and is, perhaps, beside the point right now. It is the conflict between the two which has usually damaged the church's cause most effectively (see Kellogg and Ford reference).<sup>18</sup> There is potential for more of the same today as the advocates of the perceived traditional/historical views and values cross their doctrinal swords with those of the contemporary/liberal outlook.

At the heart of these differences are theological methodologies, or more specifically, different hermeneutics of the Bible and culture (eg. synchronic vs. diachronic method, experiential-expressive theology as opposed to cognitive-propositional model). These differences can be traced back to all three modernist metanarratives, naturalism, romanticism and liberalism and the church's corresponding struggle to practically integrate, critically assess, maintain and balance its Reformation heritage with cultural trends.

### **The Postmodernism – a new path to achieving human freedom**

According to Andrew Wright, postmodernism at best represents only a

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<sup>16</sup> George R. Knight, *A Search For Identity: A Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs*, (Hagerstown: Review and Herald publishing Association, 2000), 29-37.

<sup>17</sup> Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 26-27.

<sup>18</sup> Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of The Seventh-day Adventist Church*, (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2000), 264-271; 633-634.

partial rejection of modernism (coupled with significant reworking of the same) rather than its radical, wholesale rejection. At its heart lies a conviction that the modernist emancipatory aim of freeing humanity from the perceived bondage of ignorance and superstition of medieval age has failed abysmally and that a postmodern critique of it offers a much needed corrective. While admitting the complex and contradictory nature of postmodern condition Wright argues for "a fundamental difference between a 'closed' anti-realistic post-modern world-view which insists that we are free to create our own individual utopias on the basis of an economy of desire, and an 'open' post-modernity, understood as a cultural and intellectual impulse operating within the boundaries of modernity to warn of the dangers of over-stating the powers of human reason and insisting that we remain open to voices of difference".<sup>19</sup>

The postmodern critique of romanticism, or more accurately its claim that our inner feelings and experiences are authoritative sources of truth, builds on Freud's argument that our "conscious and sub-conscious minds are frequently at odds with one another".<sup>20</sup> This assertion that humans are prone to unintentional self-deception calls into question "Descartes' claim that certain knowledge is grounded in self-awareness, Kant's insistence that we must have the courage to trust our own reason, and romanticism's faith in the veracity of our immediate feelings and experiences".<sup>21</sup> Thus, my inner self, as a secure foundation of my identity, begins to disintegrate for my inner feelings and personal experiences are subject to serious doubt, especially if measured against universal standards of truth. Julia Kristeva, post-modern psycholinguist, follows Freud's thought and concludes: "No longer forced to strive after the impossible goal of establishing a stable personal identity, we are free to embrace the chaotic depths of our primal desires and transcend self-obsession through an existential encounter with Otherness".<sup>22</sup> According to Kristeva, "the dissolution of the modern construct of selfhood creates a space in which love and freedom, emancipated from the tyranny of logo-centric thinking....., have the opportunity to flourish".<sup>23</sup>

Georges Bataille, a postmodern philosopher who, to a large degree, inspired Kristeva, asserts, "If I am to engage authentically with the world then I must accept that life is inherently mysterious, and consequently be prepared to risk abandoning the modernist search for a coherent and stable identity".<sup>24</sup> Unlike Descartes, Bataille welcomes anxiety, embracing it as a positive cause for celebration. Since the desire for certainty can only constrain and limit, we must seize every opportunity to celebrate the contingency and uncertainty of the world. Where Descartes feared that he might drown in the sea of meaninglessness that threatened to engulf him, Bataille invites us "to

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew Wright, *Religion, Education, and Post-Modernity* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), 38, <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=107642861>

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 40

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.



experience the thrill of riding the anarchic white-water rapids of post-modern culture".<sup>25</sup> Thus, at the heart of the postmodern quest for human emancipation lies the concept of human self-creation, an identity in a permanent state of flux and an unconstrained desire to constantly create and recreate themselves according to our personal visions and experiences.

### **Postmodern spirituality**

Postmodern spirituality cannot be properly understood if one does not take into account the most dominant, cultural concern of modernist, Western societies, i.e. the sanctity of human life. This is seen in massive investments in prolonging human life, in genetic research, growing interest in alternative methods of healing, efforts to improve quality of personal lives, human rights legislations, equal opportunity programs, pro and anti-abortion conflicts.<sup>26</sup> Postmodern spiritualities, New Age and theistic spiritualities of life, are also very much concerned with therapeutic value. Spiritualities, which promote a quality of present life rather than some distant, transcendent God, or eschatological realities, are sometimes described "as adaptations of religion to new social circumstances".<sup>27</sup> The nearest theistic equivalents are the popular pentecostal/charismatic movements.

Both theistic and New Age approaches to constructing spirituality in a postmodern era share three common features: (1) "Our true essence is of spiritual nature"; (2) "lower self" is a deeply unsatisfactory way of life, and (3) various spiritual disciplines provide the key to transformation to "higher self" or "true self". In addition, theistic emphasis on the importance of life is combined with the appeal to traditional sources of authority (Scripture), belief in a personal God and stress on the importance of Spirit's indwelling in believer's heart (spirituality of life). This has led to the hypothesis that these two forms of spirituality owe their success to the most widespread cultural concern: the issue of life. They both promise a new reconfiguration of a person's identity on the premise that the higher self can be achieved through the indwelling of the Spirit within myself. This is highly individual, personal, unique and, therefore, doubt proof way of understanding oneself in relation to God.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Fletcher, Hiroko Hwanami, David Smith, Linda Woodhead, eds. *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 371.

<sup>27</sup> Lorne L. Dawson, "Anti-Modernism, Modernism, and Postmodernism: Struggling with the Cultural Significance of New Religious Movements," *Sociology of Religion* 59, no. 2 (1998): 134, <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=97810225>.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Heelas, "Chapter 17 The Spiritual Revolution: from 'Religion' to 'spirituality'," in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations* ed. Linda Woodhead, Paul Fletcher, Hiroko Kawanami, and David Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 357-372, <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=107340451>.

## ADVENTIST RESPONSES

H. Richard Niebuhr once said that "it is much easier to declare what we oppose than what we propose, and yet that the latter is far more important task. It's easy enough to condemn and point out faults, but another thing entirely to remedy and to edify".<sup>29</sup> Adventist response, in the spirit of the Reformation, needs to present Christ-centred, biblical teachings as the basis for an integrated life and evaluate constructively its own heritage as a source of guidance and encouragement.

### **Biblical interpretation**

The Biblical teachings as the basis for an integrated life should inform every aspect of our lives. For instance, a separation of counselling profession from theological and spiritual concerns (a typical modernist dichotomy) creates an opportunity for the church today to increase its social influence. It could respond to the onset of a postmodern therapeutic culture more effectively by investing serious time and effort in recapturing the place of religion in the counselling profession.<sup>30</sup> For instance, the emphasis on our distinctive beliefs such as Sabbath rest, confidence and hope in God's future for us could constitute a religious basis for this integration. Two compelling reasons inform this proposal: (1) Biblical perspective on life offers a way of disengaging from established identities and self-understandings, and (2) Adventists have a long history of using the health message in their mission and so would do well to focus on "therapeutic" value of religious experience. Religious counselling, in the spirit of Christian gospel, offers opportunities to do just that. For a good, basic proposal on how to use Biblical interpretation in the counselling profession see David deSilva's article on how to use the epistle of First Peter in a counselling profession.<sup>31</sup>

Second, we need to continually rely on the Biblical wisdom to learn how to disengage from dysfunctional aspects of contemporary culture. The theology of the book of Joshua and Numbers points the way. They teach us how to draw and maintain healthy boundaries in often very hostile and overbearing cultures.<sup>32</sup> "The distinction between insiders and outsiders are not always drawn along ethnic or biological lines, but depends on whether one recognizes the holiness and power of

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<sup>29</sup> Ralph C. Wood, *Contending for the Faith: The Church's Engagement with Culture*, (Waco, TX; Baylor Univeristy Press, 2003), 105.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis M. Andrews, «Religion's Challenge to Psychology,» *Public Interest*, Summer 1995 (database on-line); available from Questia, <http://www.questia.com/>; Internet.

<sup>31</sup> David A. deSilva, «1 Peter: Strategies for Counseling Individuals on the Way to a New Heretage,» *Ashland Theological Journal*, 32 (2000), 33-53.

<sup>32</sup> See Dennis T. Olson, «Negotiating Boundaries: The Old and New Generation and Theology of Numbers» *Interpretation*, 51, no.3, 1997, 229-240.

Jahweh."<sup>33</sup> Learning to disengage constructively from certain cultural practices on Biblical principles is a skill that needs to be developed and taught across Adventist age spectrum.

Furthermore, M. Volf's argues as much in the article on a relationship of the church and culture in his sociological exegesis of the epistle First Peter.<sup>34</sup> A New Testament metaphor applied to the Old Testament here is that of «an aliens and sojourners». It memorably embodies the idea of distancing ourselves from the questionable ideals, values, institutions and actions of a host culture. The process of identity formation is a positive one, he argues, a process of developing a lasting affinity for and loyalty to a qualitatively different life in Jesus Christ and the renewing power of the Spirit. This process does not feed itself on the rejection of a wicked world, contempt towards those who have embraced its sinful ways or the expected apocalyptic end of the present social order. On the contrary! Volf argues that, even while acknowledging depravity of sin in all its manifestations, the healthy church will always first and foremost seek to define and maintain eschatological and ecclesiological distance from destructive cultural practices of the day on the basis of inner vision of present and future hope revealed to her in Scripture and the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit.

Similarly, Luke's account of Jesus' encounter with the rich ruler (Lk. 18,18-23) illustrates much the same. The rich ruler's question about eternal life exemplify a perennial human quest for deeper understanding of a future life along with a desire to rise above what is temporary, temporal and limited. However, his question already implies that our present and future life are inextricably connected, a view which Jesus affirms in his answer. He clearly shows the interdependence of the present and future life when he said: "Sell everything and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven". The personal aspect of Jesus message refers to ruler's need to follow Him by specifically overcoming his love for material wealth. However, one should not overlook the fact that Jesus first quoted the commandments which deal with the quality of human relationships and then proceeded to show how the rich ruler, despite his firm conviction to the contrary, did not fulfill the spirit of, «love your neighbour as yourself». In order to inherit eternal life (eschatological aspect of Jesus' teaching) one has to be committed to serving neighbours in the present (social aspect of Jesus' teaching). In Jesus teaching present and future are one integrated whole (see also the Parable of the Ten Virgins, Mathew 25).

### **Appreciation of Adventist heritage**

Another source of inspiration and guidelines that should inform Adventist response to contemporary culture is the church's rich heritage. A brief sketch of Ellen G. White's heritage offers

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<sup>33</sup> Robert R. Ellis, "The Theological Boundaries of Inclusion and Exclusion in the Book of Joshua", *Review and Expositor*, 95 (1998), 235-239. See also Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan, "A Teaching Outline for the Book of Joshua", *Review and Expositor*, 95 (1998).

<sup>34</sup> Miroslav Volf, «Soft Difference: Theological Reflection on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter,» *Ex Auditu*, vol 10, 1994, 15-30.

some ideas that inform this proposal. (1) Whereas modernism focuses on anthropocentric reality with an autonomous, rational human subject at its center, Ellen G. White, for instance, insists on Christ-centered reality and views human beings exclusively in terms of their relationship to God. She emphatically articulated the view that humans are holistic, integrated beings. (2) She also insists on the compatibility and complementary nature of both revelatory, experiential and scientific knowledge, a notion which modernism vehemently rejects. (3) Her educational views are based on a holistic, biblical reading of human nature as opposed to fragmented modernist and radical postmodernist philosophical understandings of human nature. (4) As far as internal challenges go, Ellen G. White's complementary and unifying treatment of both social and eschatological currents in Adventist thinking points the way forward for those of Adventism that view them as mutually exclusive. (5) A unifying view of education and mission, of knowledge and morality is also a particularly valuable aspect of her work. (6) Unlike radical postmodernist notions of human self-creation, Ellen G. White's repeatedly stresses a concept of man created in God's image and a need for a gradual recreation of this image in us. (7) E. G. White's spirituality is a balanced mixture of ethical, doctrinal, and devotional thoughts that engage the complete human being and puts Jesus Christ at the center of all activities and worship.

So, instead of viewing our heritage with the modernist, skeptical glasses of hermeneutical suspicion it would be far more useful to look for ways and means to explore further the value of her ideas for our contemporary situation. By promoting further the value of critical but constructive study of our heritage, in the spirit of openness and humility, we might be able to acknowledge and gradually transcend our own limitations as well as those imposed by contemporary culture.

### **Integrative practices**

Planned development of spirituality in our educational institutions is one of the most significant steps the church has taken in the last few decades. Given the modernist dichotomy between knowledge and morality and postmodern focus on the concept of human self-creation, it absolutely makes sense to define spirituality as a "form of integrative thinking where intellectual probing, spiritual transformation, and ethical responsibility are understood to be complementary and mutually determining tasks".<sup>35</sup> Perceived in this way, spirituality can serve as a long-term cohesive force needed to close a potentially widening rift between our understanding of Scripture and the fast-growing world of knowledge which brutally challenges our Biblical views and perspectives on a practically daily basis. However, focus on spirituality is not sufficient if it is restricted to a single module or study program offered in an academic setting. Fortunately, the church has recognized a need to disseminate the awareness of integrative nature of spirituality at the grass root level. Even so it will still take a lot of time, imagination, and sustained efforts to make this kind of integrative thinking part of the Adventist mainstream.

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<sup>35</sup> This is a definition given by Ante Jeroncic, an Associate Professor of Religion at Andrews University, in an e-mail correspondence.

Education is the second area where the Adventist church needs to explore new possibilities and challenges created by the development of new technologies. Universities and institutions of higher learning in general, including Adventist institutions, are losing their once unique function as undisputed centers of knowledge. Increasingly we are all creating, disseminating and consuming knowledge. It is an extremely competitive new world in which the issues of understanding and interpreting a vast ocean of data play an increasingly central role.

With employers constantly raising the threshold of what they see as the worker's minimum knowledge and skills, Ungar rightly points out that a concept knowledge-based society can be a "profoundly misleading way of describing the proliferation of technical knowledge, extraordinary division of mental labour, and the ever-growing dependence on specialized expertise".<sup>36</sup>The end-product of such "instrumentalization of the university as it embraces market values and information technology"<sup>37</sup> might well be a knowledge-averse society. So, we should not be surprised if "individuals in the future adopt a less complex and more entertainment-oriented attitude toward most non-work knowledge domains as a result of technological knowledge intruding in the rest of one's life".<sup>38</sup>

### **Community of faith**

The concern of postmodern spiritualities with individual self-creation is in a stark contrast to Jesus' teaching in Luke 9, 23.24: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it". Biblical revelation does not concern itself primarily with individual self-fulfillment but with God's personal self-disclosure and restoration of humanity's relationship with Him. Our educational and mission strategies need to be geared toward offering alternatives to modernist/postmodernist individualism, uncritical and unbiblical holism and religious syncretism, in short, spiritual development motivated by and directed towards self-fulfillment. The postmodern emphasis on community is not a viable alternative to modernist individualism because it only provides a new framework for a person's self-fulfillment. The biblical concept of a faith community as a visible manifestation and witness of God's presence and love is the source of our spiritual nourishment, wisdom, and support. It also functions as a vital corrective in matters of doctrine and practice.

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<sup>36</sup> Sheldon Ungar, «Misplaced Metaphor: A Critical Analysis of the «Knowledge Society», *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 40, no. 3 (2003) [data-base online]; available from Questia, <http://www.questia.com/>; Internet.

<sup>37</sup> Gerard Delany, «The Governance of Universities: What Is the Role of the University in the Knowledge Society?», *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 2 (2002) [database online]; available from Questia, <http://www.questia.com/>; Internet.

<sup>38</sup> Sheldon Ungar, «Misplaced Metaphor: A Critical Analysis of the «Knowledge Society», *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 40, no. 3 (2003) [data-base online]; available from Questia, <http://www.questia.com/>; Internet.

Rice argues that as a community of faith, we need to develop more extensively a belonging aspect of our communal life along with the already existing aspects of believing and behaving. Arguably, it is something we, as a church, have never done in a systematic way. It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of this task in the light of modernist/postmodernist emphasis on individualism. If we are serious about developing and maintaining balanced Adventist communities, the ones that are in equal measure sustained by clearly defined beliefs, behavior and a deep sense of fellowship, then a particular attention should be paid to developing a belonging aspect of the church. First, belonging to the family of God, the church, is the most pervasive New Testament concept and thus, it is not possible to talk about authentic Christianity without talking about the church.<sup>39</sup> Second, if we are serious about evangelizing and fostering an edifying dialogue on a whole range of issues, nothing else makes more sense, either morally or practically, than doing this in a family atmosphere of mutual closeness, trust and love. Developing and maintaining a healthy faith community is essential to our successful teaching and to actually living a message that we proclaim. Since contemporary expressions of faith tend to be far more individualistic and private a meaningful and engaging communal expression of faith poses a tremendous challenge to the Adventist church. But if successfully done, it is also the most effective way of communicating our message and instilling our values.

A balanced development of these three aspects should provide a foundation and impetus for a fourth aspect, a gospel outreach. Since identity formation is not a self-serving exercise, the outreach activities should be a natural extension of who we are or who we are becoming, individually and socially. In turn, such activities would reinforce the very identity the church is trying to shape.

### **Spiritual formation in a family**

Living today often means fragmentation of self through (1) pressures of work and loss of quality social life, (2) spiritual alienation caused by proliferation of technology, (3) the emergence of visual culture, (4) the lack of unifying educational philosophy, and, not the least, the state education offering primarily knowledge and specialized skills for a job market. Clearly, Adventist educators have their work cut out.

There is a need for more information regarding emerging cultural trends, which require specific response from family and church educators. They also need to research, learn and teach how to develop and apply specific educational strategies to deal with these new social conditions. For instance, "a growing interest among family practitioners to be more intentional and proactive about developing family life education, marital enrichment and family communication programs"<sup>40</sup> indicates

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<sup>39</sup> Richard Rice, "From Core to Community: Reconfiguring the Adventist Center," *Adventist Today*, November/December 2001, Vol.9, No. 6. See also R. Rice, "Believing, Behaving, Belonging: Finding New Love for the Church", (Roseville, CA: The Association of Adventist Forums, 2002).

<sup>40</sup> «Strengthening Families: Illustrating Scholarship on Family Strengths with Biblical Texts», *Family Ministry*, vol. 13, no.4, Winter 1999. p. 10.

that others have recognized this trend. As signals go, this surely is a clarion call for Adventist formal and non-formal education to seize the day and take the lead. Renewed emphasis on “family education could be the key to preventing academic under-achievement, premature school leaving and facilitate the transition from conventional education to developing skills to learn and maintain the knowledge”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, “early education brings long term benefits not only by reducing spending on adult remedial programs later on, but by equipping people with learning tools that will serve them for the entire life”.<sup>42</sup>

The difficulties many children experience with conventional educational practices call for Adventist family-centered education to step into the breach. This offers numerous opportunities for the church’s relief work, assuming, of course, there are members with adequate skills and training willing to combine their expertise with the gospel calling to serve the needy. The dissemination of industrialized entertainment – now part and parcel of our collective mindset, challenges the church to turn these disadvantageous consequences into an educational opportunity.

For instance, “the truncated imagination now appears natural” social theorist Stanley Aronowitz explains one such trend. “Recent psychological research discloses: a tendency towards narrowing of perception, imitative pattern of child’s play, disruptions of concept formation among school children, the visual character of thought and the increasing difficulties experienced by children in performing abstract and logical functions. The research suggests a correlation between TV watching (and consumption of mass culture in general) to a tendency towards literalness in thought. Here, the merging of thought with the object seems to have become the new universal of human consciousness”.<sup>43</sup> The cost of social exclusion due to misreading, negligence of such cultural trends or not adapting the content and methods of our education to them, could be prohibitively expensive.

#### **Lay education**

Educational concepts and developments, such as adult education, life-long learning, knowledge society, are the clearest signal yet that profound changes in all walks of life are taking place that require our church to adapt her educational strategies to cope with these emerging trends and opportunities. For instance, the tendency to uncritically apply educational and mission strategies from other parts of the world overlooks an important sociological truth, i.e. that “the novel and many ways in which the cultural effects of globalization play themselves out in the various contexts of the world will

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<sup>41</sup> J. Johnston, Donald. «Lifelong Learning for All,» *OECD Observer*, no. 214 (1998): 4.

<sup>42</sup> Deborah C. Simmons and Edward J. Kamenui, eds., *What Reading Research Tells Us About Children with Diverse Learning Needs: Bases and Basics* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998)

<sup>43</sup> Michael Warren, *Communications and Cultural Analysis: A Religious View* (Westport, CT: Bergin&Garvey, 1992), 50.

provide original mixtures rather than just necessarily carbon copies of western societies".<sup>44</sup> Continual non-formal education of laity is about equipping the church to understand and work in "original mixture" societies. A multi-layered and culturally sophisticated society has little interest in quick and stereotyped approaches to spiritual and life issues.

A European-wide commitment to gradual creation of knowledge societies signals a new turn in educational praxis, new learning opportunities as well as new teaching challenges. The importance of balanced development of Adventist formal and non-formal education is highlighted by Hamilton's three insights on adult education: (a) "formal education usually will result in the conservation of the societal status quo, rather than bringing about social change"; (b) "adult learning as a group-oriented activity will strengthen the horizontal ties of residents, enabling them to contribute more effectively to collective task goals", (c) "non-formal education will respond to the intended goals of social change, initiatives, reformation and transformation".<sup>45</sup> The Adventist church needs to engage in all three: conservation, cohesion and change.

The church needs as large a pool of theologically or otherwise educated laity as possible, to enrich the spiritual, intellectual and cultural output of worship and other programs. Educated laity will help ensure more even distribution of educational workload while retaining and, where possible, increasing the overall effectiveness of the Adventist church. Hamilton's observation that "the levels of knowledge and skills of an organized citizen group will determine their potential for being able to successfully pursue community social action goals" are applicable to the church is right on track. Moreover, if "the extent to which citizens share in decision making reflects their commitment to engaging in social action and maintaining high levels of participation",<sup>46</sup> then increasing the level of knowledge and skills, which would enable laity to play a more fruitful role in the decision making process, makes even more sense. Church growth literature rightly emphasizes that "a religious organization cannot survive, much less grow, unless it obtains sufficient resources from the environment".<sup>47</sup> Formal and non-formal education of lay members, theological or otherwise, could help secure access to precisely these resources.

Furthermore, the education is best served by having the majority of members educated to the highest standard affordable, rather than by an elitist "educated minority" only. After all, culture change, whether within a particular subculture such as church or in a wider society, cannot be initiated and

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<sup>44</sup> Jacques Matthey, «Mission in Secular and Post-modern Contexts I,» *International Review of Mission*, vol. XCI, no. 364 (2003) (database-on-line); available from <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/mission/jan03edit.html>; Internet.

<sup>45</sup> Edwin Hamilton, *Adult Education for Community Development*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>46</sup> J. Johnston, Donald, «Lifelong Learning for All,» *OECD Observer*, no. 214 (1998): 4.

<sup>47</sup> Laurence R. Iannaccone, «Religious Resources and Church Growth,» *Social Forces* 74, no.2 (1995): 706.



sustained by the elite few at the top of educational food chain. Just think of the worldwide failure and demise of Fascism and Communism, surely the ultimate in centralized efforts to reform and control.

A renewed emphasis on development of teaching personnel and diverse yet holistic education is particularly significant in the light of Jennifer Gidley's assessment of the future of Internet learning: "Internet learning may further distance knowledge from ethics. Problem lies in quality of thought, not in quantity of information and knowledge. Quality of thought is an ability to see something within a broader context, to understand its relational and functional qualities, and to grasp the meaning of what is observed within secular and cosmic context".<sup>48</sup> Growing instrumentalization of knowledge/education and proliferation of technical knowledge is an opportunity for Adventist to present the gospel, as Madeleine Cousineau put it, as a «meaningful cosmos» in a world that is "experienced as specifically senseless".<sup>49</sup>

## DEVELOPING MODERN ADVENTIST IDENTITY: METHODS

### Widening educational opportunities

Church constituencies (unions/conferences) need to make more use of quality education available in Adventist colleges and universities worldwide and of specific Adventist faith perspective on a whole range of religious, social and educational issues. This calls for sponsoring loyal and able lay members (not just ministerial students) to enable them to receive specialist education from Adventist perspective at these institutions, i.e. in the areas of health, counselling, and education for their professional and church mission purposes.

Given the rising cost of higher education another alternative would be developing more distance learning degrees and courses. There is a particular need for internet courses on integration of faith and learning in specific areas such as psychology, pedagogy, sociology, communication, and ethics. Once again, unions and conferences should set aside time and finances for encouraging and sponsoring lay members to use these distance learning courses in order to strengthen the resources available to local churches.

There is a need for wider choice of interdisciplinary degrees and individual courses in order to help students gain better understanding of issues involved in integration of faith in various other disciplines. This is particularly significant in the light of modernist tendency towards specialization and fragmentation of knowledge. These courses should explore ethical and religious perspectives in every area of study. Making more Adventist resources available on-line is one way of offsetting the cost of the often prohibitively expensive modern education for those on the receiving end of it, especially to

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<sup>48</sup> Sohail Inayatullah and Jennifer Gidley, eds. *The University in Transformation: Global Perspectives on the Futures of the University*, (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2000), iii.

<sup>49</sup> Madeleine Cousineau, ed. *Religion in a Changing World: Comparative Studies in Sociology* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), iii.

those living in developing countries. Providing quality web resources, such as e-books and utilizing didactical potential of web-free audio visual tools, is an imperative for our time. The church simply cannot afford to miss cost-free opportunities like these to make specifically Adventist views on literally any given subject available to members and non-members alike.

### **Nurturing the spirit of dialogue**

Biblical revelation is about God communicating with human beings to bring about understanding, deepen fellowship and effect change. *Imago Dei*, one of the most relevant educational concepts in the Bible, is an invitation for us to follow God's example in modelling and nurturing the spirit of dialogue, fruitful interaction and constructive critique in our churches and schools. A sincere desire to have a dialogue creates an opportunity to explore and learn, to challenge and be challenged, to teach and effect change in individuals and communities. It is a humble admission of one's own limitations, an acknowledgment of the value we place on our fellow human beings and an invitation to jointly reach beyond who we are and what we know.

The need for intra church dialogue as well as for church's dialogue with a wider culture calls for sustained educational efforts at all level of church's work to help us maintain or create, where necessary, "a community in conversation". If our dialogue is a reflection of our Christ-likeness or an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to «teach us all things» and «guide us into all truth» (Jn 14, 26; 16, 13) it constitutes a valid theological foundation for church's educational and outreach activities. George R. Knight is right when he states that "Any religious group is in trouble if and when it formulates its theology in opposition to a real or perceived polar positions".<sup>50</sup> An alternative would be what A. Leroy Moore calls "paradoxical thinking" and then proceeds to give a following definition: "A true paradox does not mix truth with error but unites converse principles of God's Word, each of which is essential to the other".<sup>51</sup> As it happens, being dialogue-friendly is also culturally in vogue these days. Practice it and you have one barrier less to worry about when evangelizing postchristian societies and/or try to guide Adventist youth towards baptism and formal church membership. In short, dialogue is something of a magic bullet when it comes to Adventist identity formation: it is a biblical way of modeling *Imago Dei*<sup>52</sup> and – just as important – it actually works.

### **Educational relief work**

The basic assumption of this essey section is that besides the provision of assistance in natural disasters across the world, there are also social disasters on micro and macro levels in every society. They require our full attention and commitment just as much as floods and earthquakes. As Svi

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<sup>50</sup> George R. Knight, *A Search For Identity: A Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs*, (Hagerstown: Review and Herald publishing Association, 2000), 200.

<sup>51</sup> Cited in George R. Knight, *A Search For Identity: A Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs*, (Hagerstown: Review and Herald publishing Association, 2000), 200.

<sup>52</sup> For an insightful discussion on the biblical concept of *Imago Dei* see Jon Paulin, „The Image of God and Educational Philosophy: A Biblical Construct?“ *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, vol. 10, Special Edition, 2001, 190-191.

Saphiro put it, educators "must see their work as being in the eye of a vast social storm".<sup>53</sup> The church should assess the potential for social relief work of this kind at the local level and fashion her educational and evangelistic programmes accordingly. Given that these social disasters are taking place in fairly equal measure in developed and underdeveloped countries, the mission potential of our relief involvement is practically limitless. The key conditions for implementing this approach would be as follows: (a) qualified lay members coordinated by an Education Department should form a backbone of these projects; (b) joint, educational and religious nature of these projects should not be compromised by a discriminatory approach to where finances are only available if the religious objectives of the projects are not pursued; (c) projects of this kind would depend almost entirely on voluntary work of lay members willing to donate their time and efforts to advancing the work of the church; (d) the church's key interest and motivation would be in encouraging and partially sponsoring lay members to gain Adventist education for mission work from a distinctively Adventist perspective; (e) a low-key, relatively inexpensive and accessible form of service, tailored to meet local needs, would be preferred to a grand, international, institutionalized organization charged with carrying out this work; (f) this would be a long-term project which would primarily depend on successful development of a network of lay members, with firm Biblical convictions, and diverse qualifications willing to invest their time and efforts to serve the wider society. Such an integration of education and mission offers a concrete and relevant way to demonstrate convincingly the practical value and benefits of applied Christianity. It is welfare work at its noblest.

### CONCLUSION

As we ponder who we are, individually and corporately, we must ask ourselves time and again what is the nature of our presence in the world and how we can meaningfully mediate the divine revelation to different cultures we are part of. Solutions to these dilemmas vary but if they are to work at all they invariably must involve the following two truths. First, Jesus Christ, His incarnation, life, death and resurrection are central to our individual and corporate self-understanding and engagement with the world. As a faith community which strives to reflect the image of its Creator our mandate is to foster creation of wholistic individuals and communities, educate discerning minds, exemplify a sacrificial spirit and offer a compelling, integrated vision of the present and the future. Second, God's self-disclosure in the Scripture and the continual presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst is the ultimate source of truth and guidance for our church life and our presence in the world. His promise of continual presence and guidance, as witnessed in the Scripture, our history, our present and our vision for the future is the source of faith needed to remain «in the world but not of the world».

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<sup>53</sup> H. Svi Shapiro and David E. Purpel, eds. *Critical Social Issues in American Education: Transformation in a Postmodern World* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), ix.

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