
The Intellectual World of Adventist Theologians

by Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart

The 1980s seem to have been a wintry season for the more ambitious Adventist theologians. Some, optimistic about the future, are looking for signs of spring, but others appear to have settled for a lengthy hibernation.

If there is a thaw in the church's intellectual climate, what ideas might emerge? Results from a survey of religion teachers in Adventists colleges and universities hint at the form new ideas may take. Fresh thinking is likely to come from such teachers between the ages of 40 to 54. They are the ones best acquainted with the secular thought, and many of them would like to develop an Adventist theology relevant to, and informed by, the concerns of the wider society. If they have the opportunity to do so, they may be able to create a new synthesis of the Adventist tradition. However, if the opportunity fails to materialize, the chance to give Adventist ideas wider currency is likely to be lost. Older theologians are rapidly approaching the end of their careers, and younger ones do not, at present, appear to have the inclination to give Adventist principles broader application.

In the summer of 1985 the authors, in order to gain a clearer idea of the Adventist mind for a book on Adventism they are writing, distributed a questionnaire to almost all religion teachers in

the denomination's colleges and universities. Replies were received from teachers in all the institutions and over 50 percent of the questionnaires were returned—a respectable figure for a survey conducted without incentives or follow-up.

The survey was designed to establish the intellectual content within which Adventist theologians operate. It sought their opinions on non-Adventist theologians and secular thinkers rather than their views on internal issues such as Daniel 8:14 or the alleged plagiarism of Mrs. White.¹ All of these points have some force, although the doubts regarding the theological literacy of the sample group proved unfounded.

In a small-scale survey of this type, the margins of statistical error are likely to be quite wide. Religious issues are, furthermore, notoriously resistant to objective formulation. Highly educated respondents are likely to be frustrated by anything other than open-ended questions. However, a free response can conceal more than it reveals. What, for example, can the researcher learn from this eloquent reply to a question which simply asked respondents to categorize their beliefs as liberal, mainstream or conservative: "I would not describe myself in any of the categories listed. I am free but not maverick, open but not gullible. I am dialogic. I think. I talk. I listen. I move toward synthesis whenever such a move is warranted."? No doubt a study which measures such fine distinctions needs to be undertaken. Unfortunately, this survey was not designed for that purpose. It was intended only to sketch the contours of an intellectual landscape, not to dig beneath its surface.

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Profile of the Adventist Theologian

From the results it is possible to build a composite picture of the Adventist theologian (see Profile p. 34). He is typically white, male and in late middle age. He considers himself to be a strong Adventist, but feels that his beliefs may be more liberal than those of other church members. He will probably have a doctorate from a non-Adventist institution, but will have commenced doctoral study only after spending five or six years in the church's colleges and universities. He is highly unlikely to have received a complete theological education outside the Adventist system.

The typical religion teacher will have been influenced by his Seminary professors, particularly Edward Heppenstall. He will also have been very impressed, however, by non-Adventist religious thinkers such as C.S. Lewis and Abraham Heschel, and, to a slightly lesser degree, by Berkouwer, Dodd, and Barth. He is unlikely to be as interested in Catholic theologians and is largely unfamiliar with the work of radical theologians who interpret the gospel in racial (Cone), political (Gutierrez) or feminist (Reuther) terms. In general, however, he is willing to give most theological authors a sympathetic reading. Rudolph Bultmann and Paul Tillich are sometimes looked upon with disfavor, but it is for the fundamentalist, Harold Lindsell, that the Adventist theologian reserves his most negative feelings.

As far as the various historical schools of thought are concerned, he prefers Aristotle to Plato, Tertullian's rigor to Origen's speculations and Augustine to Pelagius. He is not particularly interested in the relative merits of the scholastics, Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. He is more interested in Calvin and Erasmus in the Reformation era, but shows no preference for either one. His preferences for Tertullian, Augustine and Calvin indicate that, in the spiritual realm, the Adventist theologian is largely pessimistic about man's moral nature. However, this view is oddly reversed in the secular sphere where he eschews

the philosophies of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Voltaire, whose views of man were as pessimistic as those of Augustine and Calvin. Instead, he prefers the thought of Locke and Rousseau, thinkers more optimistic about the human condition.

Of the thinkers who have contributed to his understanding of the world, the existentialist Kierkegaard has been the most important. Immanuel Kant and William James also come very high on the list as do some thinkers who have emphasized the role of conflict in the world such as Darwin. The psychological conflicts posited by Freud are also very influential, but the conflicts between the sexes described by Simone de Beauvoir are not. The class conflicts described by Marx are considered to be more informative. However, Marx even more than Darwin, is the one thinker who is most likely to be rejected. The Adventist theologian knows little, and probably does not care, about the free-market economics of Milton Friedman.

Concerning his own tradition, the Adventist theologian believes that the complete understanding of human existence—or “wholism”—is the denomination's major contribution to the world. Next in importance as theological contributions are Adventist eschatology, Sabbatarianism and the Great Controversy theme. However, the religion professor is quite likely to believe that Adventism is not in a position to make significant intellectual or theological contributions to the world at large.

Educating the Adventist Theologian

Such then is the composite intellectual profile of the Adventist theologian. How much of this character is formed by the nature of the graduate education he received? It would appear that Adventist theologians who received their graduate education within the Adventist system are more conservative than those who did not. Of the 17 respondents who did not possess a non-SDA degree, 29 percent considered their beliefs to be liberal. This percentage rose to 55 percent in respondents who possessed

non-SDA graduate degrees. The 17 were also less likely to be familiar with the work of non-Adventist theologians and half as likely to be influenced by secular thinkers. It may be thought that these correlations are due to the lack of graduate education *per se*, but most of the 17 either had, or were working toward, an Adventist doctorate.

There were also marked educational differences in regard to specific thinkers. Of those educated within the system only 41 percent had been influenced by Marx, compared to 66 percent of those educated outside. Those within the denominational system are also less likely to favor the work of Thomas Aquinas. Those without a non-SDA graduate degree were almost equally divided between Aquinas and Duns Scotus. However, those who possessed a non-SDA graduate degree favored Aquinas over Duns Scotus by a ratio of almost 3:1. In general, the

statistics showed the latter group's appreciation of the Catholic tradition to be comparatively high as its members were also twice as likely to be sympathetic to the work of Karl Rahner.

It would be unwise to draw definite conclusions about the effects of study outside the denomination. But Adventist theologians educated in non-Adventist institutions appear to be intellectually more eclectic. Those who do not possess a non-Adventist degree seem to draw on a narrower range of sources and feel closer to the mainstream of the church. Characteristic, perhaps, of their intellectual world-view is the fact that 35 percent of them suggested the Great Controversy theme, with its polarized view of human history, as a major theological contribution. The same idea occurred to only 11 percent of those educated outside the Adventist system.

The other major differences in outlook were

A Profile of North American College Religion Teachers

Number of surveys distributed: 105
 Number of surveys returned 55 (52%)

1. In which of the following age categories do you fall?

	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Number</u>
Under 39	24	13
40 - 54	38	21
55 and above	38	21

2. What is your primary area of academic interest?

Biblical	53	29
Historical	16	9
Doctrinal	33	18
Pastoral	26	14

3. How would you describe yourself as a church member?

Strong	91	50
Average	5	3
Weak	0	0
No Response	4	2

*Most Influential Seventh-day Adventist Writers**

Edward Heppenstall	33%
Ellen G. White	18
Earle Hilgert	15
Fritz Guy	9
Hans LaRondelle	9
A G. Maxwell	9
Raoul Dederen	7
Siegfried Horn	7
Roland Loasby	7
Roy Branson	6
James Cox	6
Malcolm Maxwell	6
Jack Provonsha	6
William Shea	6

*Please give in descending order the names of the writers or teachers associated with Seventh-day Adventism who have most influenced your thinking about theology and religion.

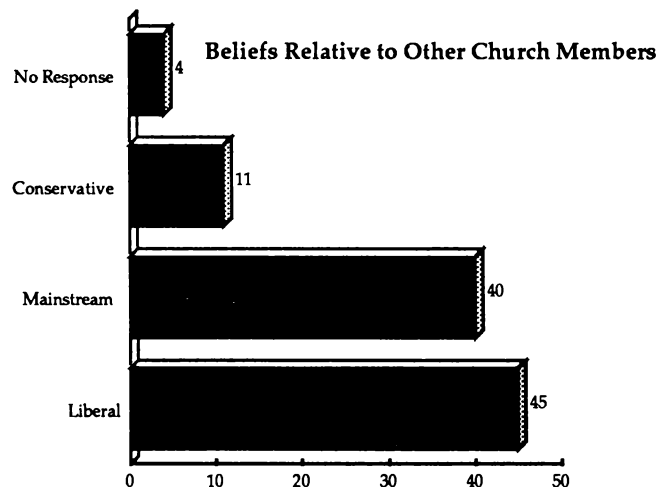
found to relate to age categories rather than to education. (It should be noted, however, that just under half of those in the under 39 age group are without a non-SDA graduate degree). Of the 21 respondents aged 55 and over, 76 percent considered their beliefs mainstream, whereas in the 40-54 age groups only 14 percent did so. This figure increased to 30 percent in the under 39 age group. Most of the members in the oldest group considered Edward Heppenstall a major influence on their thinking. Heppenstall was also popular in the 40-54 age bracket. Neither name was mentioned by the youngest group for whom Hans LaRondelle was the most influential figure. These results appear to be related to the impression these theologians made on the respondents at the time they studied in the seminary. This may indicate that Adventist theologians tend to be influenced through personal contact rather than

through the written word. The influence of Ellen White was noted quite frequently by respondents in the upper two age brackets. However, none of the under-39s listed Ellen White as a major influence on their thinking.

The over-55s were the least acquainted with non-Adventist theologians such as Karl Barth, but it was the under-39s (less than half of whom have a non-SDA doctorate) who were the least familiar with secular thinkers like Marx. However the youngest age group was unique in that all the respondents claimed to have been influenced by Sigmund Freud. Ninety-five per cent of the 40-54 age group said they were similarly affected, but this percentage dropped to 61 percent in the oldest group. The youngest group were also the most enthusiastic about wholism, 46 percent of them mentioning it, compared to 38 percent of the 40-54s and 24 percent of the over-55s.

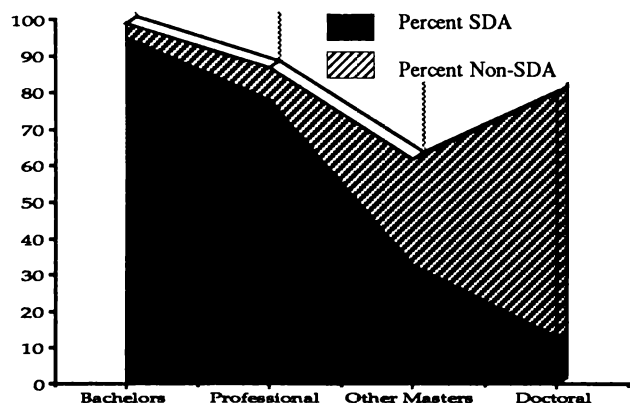
4. How would you describe your beliefs relative to those of other church members?

	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Number</u>
Liberal	45	25
Mainstream	40	22
Conservative	11	6
No Response	4	2



5. Which of the following degrees do you hold? Please indicate from which type of institution you earned your degree.

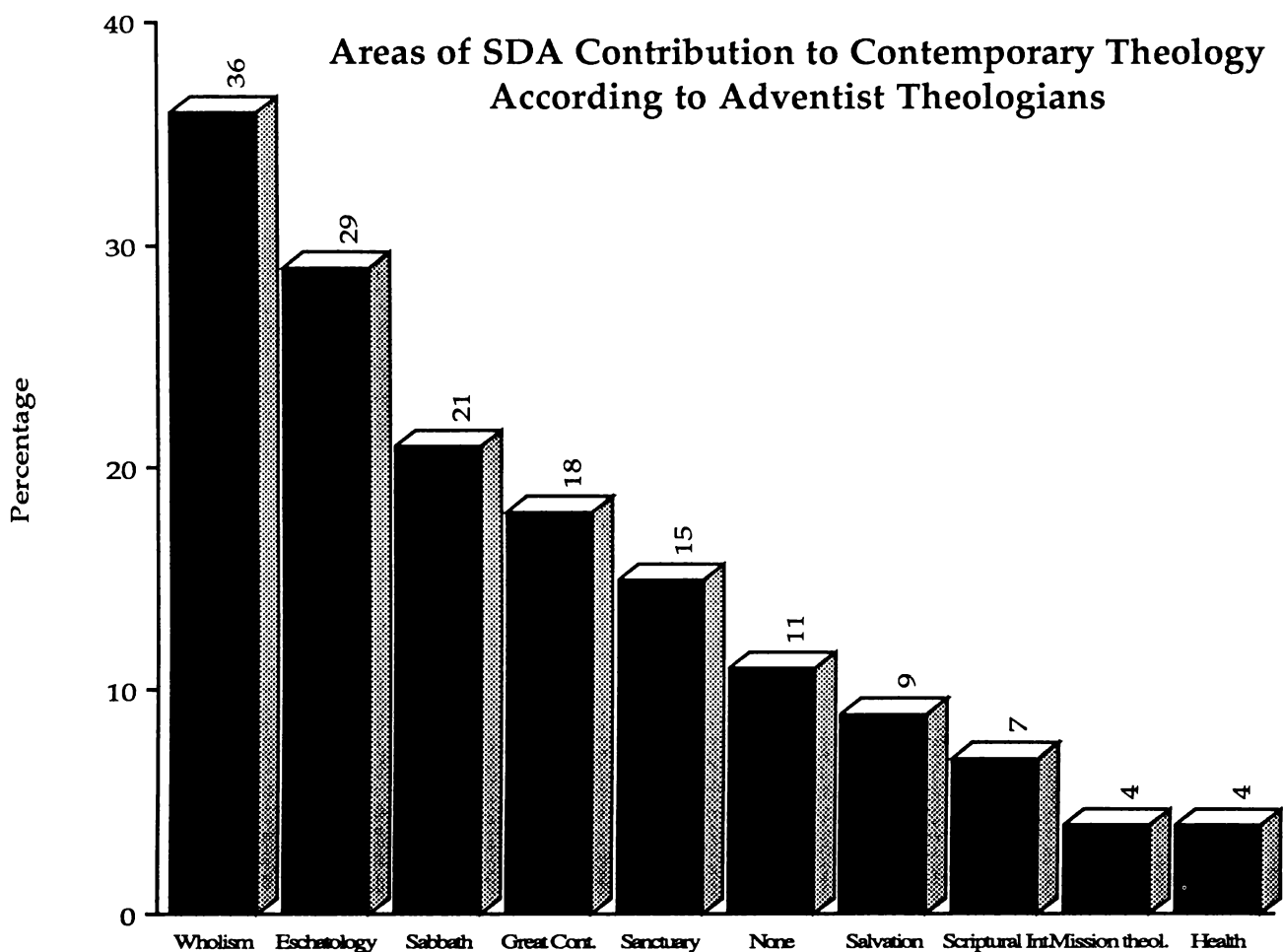
	<u>SDA</u>		<u>Non-SDA</u>	
Bachelors	95%	52	4%	1
Professional	78%	43	9%	5
Other Masters	33%	18	29%	19
Doctoral	13%	7	67%	37



The 40-54 were markedly the most receptive to secular thought, being the only group to be influenced by such theorists as Freud, Kant, and Kierkegaard. They were also the only group which felt overwhelmingly liberal (76 percent) and of the eight respondents who listed the sanctuary doctrine as a major theological contribution only one was drawn from their ranks, the rest being almost equally distributed among the oldest and youngest groups. Although the numbers involved are very small, these results indicate that in many respects the oldest and youngest groups are quite close together, and the members of the middle group may be an isolated generation.

In answering questions on Adventism's theological contribution, many respondents suggested that Adventist theology is greater than the sum of its parts. In the words of one teacher: "It is the 'package' (the synthesis of ideas) rather than

individual doctrines that I find impressive." What bound this package together, a respondent suggested, was "the emphasis on the 'wholeness' of man which provides a distinctive framework for the understanding of several Christian doctrines—from creation to the Sabbath . . . to living the sanctified life." Another respondent felt that this emphasis on wholism had far-reaching possibilities: "There is great untapped potential here for an Adventist theology which could bring coherence to multiple concerns of a contemporary kind. I speak of concerns from that of life's ultimate meaning to nuclear winter." Others were similarly optimistic about the potential of Adventist theology to make a contribution to the wider intellectual world, but one respondent expressed the view that Adventist theology is not given "the necessary freedom of expression within the community to permit it to make a



significant impact on the field.”

Such pessimism was confirmed in interviews the authors conducted with several Adventist theologians in conjunction with the distribution of the questionnaires. There were complaints that academic freedom had been curtailed as a result of pressure from conservative groups. Some feared that the long struggle of the church’s scholars to win acceptance inside and outside the denomination had been jeopardized by the controversies of the past five years. The authors also noted a discrepancy between the intellectual aspirations of some theologians and the actual issues with which they were dealing. In some cases, Adventist religion professors eager to tackle major theological questions, seemed to spend most of their time defending the rudiments of Biblical scholarship to sceptical and sometimes hostile students.

There is still time for the younger academics to

change from a conservative to more moderate perspective. But for those in the middle age group, 40-59, who are most likely to achieve a creative new expression of Adventist belief, there is only a limited period in which to realize their dreams of a systematic Adventist theology which is both intellectually coherent and socially aware. They face retirement at the end of the century. For the most important group of theologians, and for the denomination, the next fifteen years is the last chance to develop a revitalized Adventist theology.

Note: It should be said that some respondents doubted the ability of the instrument to yield any useful results. Others, somewhat uncharitably, considered the questions to deal with matters beyond the intellectual horizons of their colleagues. Many felt the categories of response were not satisfactorily nuanced; some objected to the phrasing of particular questions.

Attitude Toward Religious Writers

	No Response				
	Don't know enough to comment				
	Unsympathetic				
	Interested but Unsympathetic				
	Sympathetic				
	%	%	%	%	%
Karl Barth	56	31	4	2	7
Gustavo Gutierrez	24	16	9	47	4
James Cone	22	13	4	56	6
C. S. Lewis	89	7	2	0	2
Harold Lindsell	13	29	44	7	7
Abraham Heschel	84	11	4	2	0
G. C. Berkouwer	67	22	2	6	4