
Waiting for Messiah: The Absence and Presence of God in Adventism

by James J. Londis

There seems to be a crisis in Adventism resembling the “death of God” crisis in Christendom a decade ago. More and more of our members are confessing doubts not only about the veracity of Adventist beliefs, but also about the reality of God. Two problems seem to undergird this skepticism: the first is a loss of confidence in certain aspects of the triumphalism of historic Adventism, and the second the increasing strain of living with a delay in the second coming of Jesus.

The Loss of Confidence in Adventist Triumphalism

There are two kinds of mystery in the world. There is the mystery that can be solved, such as whether or not the Loch Ness monster really exists, and there is the mystery that cannot be solved, only explored.¹ Solvable mysteries are the subject of scientific inquiry; something may not “fit” what is known about nature, but, nature being what it is, the scientist is convinced that it must fit. Mysteries that cannot be solved are the subject of philosophy, theology, and art.

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Adventists need as never before a sense of God's mystery. In our beginnings, we believed that in our doctrine of the Sabbath, in our interpretations of the prophecies, and in the ministry of Ellen White, God was again unveiling the divine mystery. However, in time, Adventism began to overemphasize the *unveiling* and did not dwell enough on the *mystery*. We became convinced that we had it all figured out, that we alone were God's agency of salvation in the world and the only bearers of the truth. This notion led to an obsession with doctrinal clarity, an obsession that gradually milked us of our sense of God as mystery. Even the doctrine of the sanctuary, a symbol of the mystery of God in glory and transcendence, was sometimes reduced to detailed explanations of every piece of furniture and every motion of the priests in the service. As a result, our worship services degenerated into the didactic; they became celebrations of how much we knew and how wise we were rather than how great and ultimately inscrutable God is. We missed the insight of Harvard philosopher Hilary Putnam: “The most valuable parts of any discipline—poetry, philosophy, religion—are always on the edge of contradiction.”² Gerard Manley Hopkins once wrote to Robert Bridges: “You do not mean by mystery what a Catholic does. You mean an interesting uncertainty. But a Catholic means by mystery an incomprehensible [that is, ‘presently incomprehensible’ not ‘incapable of comprehension’] certainty.”³ For this reason, paradox and metaphor

are often the best vehicles for religious ideas. They are not “comprehensible” as the statement “there are 45 people in this room” is comprehensible, but they are logically explorable. John Macquarrie uses the example of the bishop who, tired of high “up there” imagery when talking about God, shifted to symbols of depth and found that he had only made matters worse. One makes an advance in thinking about God if one holds both of these in tension and avoids a “literalistic one-sidedness that leads to idolatry.”⁴

H. D. Lewis says that religious faith begins in

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a sense of wonder that flows from our humility before the mystery of being. When one simply gazes at the stars for half an hour and thinks about the size of the universe and our human place in it, a religious sentiment is difficult to avoid. Therefore, if we acknowledge that at the heart of reality there is mystery, and that we find God most surely when we enter the realm of mystery, it will help us correct our Adventist propensity for an overly rationalistic approach to religion, theology, and the Bible. Revelation is, by definition, an unveiling of “mystery,” the mystery which was kept secret or hidden for long ages but is now disclosed through Christ (Romans 16:25, 26; Ephesians 1:9; Colossians 1:26). But even in Christ it is a disclosure that, while giving us everything we need to know to be in right relationship to God, deepens our sense of the mystery that is God. This is the paradox of the doctrine of progressive revelation, a paradox that exists throughout reality: the more answers we discover, the more questions arise; the more we know, the more mysterious it all seems. Mystery can be experienced and grasped, in a sense, but even then what

one experiences and grasps is *mystery*. It is this awareness that keeps us humble before God.

The failure of Adventists to cling to the God of mystery, what Rudolph Otto calls the *mysterium tremendum*, has shaped our evangelism. Because so many conservative Christians shared our respect for Scripture and used the same more-or-less proof-text method we adopted, our way of explaining the Bible and defending our doctrines was effective with significant numbers of people. Now the Bible is being subjected to intense critical scrutiny by historical and literary scholars who reject the proof-text hermeneutic. As a result, not only are conservative, thoughtful Christians not easily persuaded by us, we ourselves may experience significant doubts about the biblical and theological foundations of our faith. Our almost rationalistic basis for believing in Adventism and ultimately in God has been shaken to its foundations.

Where is the evidence? Are we really all that we have claimed to be in history? Have our interpretations of Scripture really been faithful to what the texts are actually saying, including the prophetic books? Was Ellen White really given all her information supernaturally? We thought we had answers to these questions. Now that those answers seem less certain, some have become Baptists, Presbyterians, or Methodists; still others end up skeptics or agnostics. For them, critical thought has erected an intellectual obstacle not simply to Adventism but to faith as a whole.⁵ Intellectual concerns about Adventist doctrine have expanded into concerns about the incarnation, the resurrection of Jesus, and theism itself.

How are we to respond to this crisis of faith in Adventism which, for many, is also a crisis of faith in Jesus and God? I have a few suggestions. One benefit of our situation is gaining increased humility about what we think we know. Perhaps what is happening to us will teach us the wisdom in Isaiah when he quotes Yahweh as saying: “My ways are not your ways, neither are my thoughts your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8, 9). Perhaps, like Job, we will learn to be content not with answers to all our questions but with a new vision of the greatness and glory of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

As I see it, there is no need to give up either

faith in God or confidence in Adventism because of our recent trauma. If some doubt part of the traditional teachings of the Adventist church, they should not also doubt God. There are good reasons for believing not only in the existence of a personal God but also in an actual, historical resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Works like Mortimer Adler's *The Existence of God: A Guide for Twentieth Century Pagans* or Edgar Brightman's *Person and Reality* show the intelligibility and intellectual usefulness of some form of theism.

And, it seems to me, there is evidence (not indisputable proof) on which to base our faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. One may argue about the prophecies and the nature of inspiration, but no teaching of Scripture is more clear or more fundamental to our faith than the resurrection of Jesus. That is the heart of who we are as Christians. If we lose that, as Paul so eloquently reminds us in 1 Corinthians 14 and 15, we lose everything.

One mark of our skeptical time is the fact that many liberal ministers and theologians, and perhaps even some Adventists, would disagree with this statement. My colleague, James Cox, and I had lunch with a leading medical ethicist who, like Jim, had been a seminary professor. He told us that he no longer believed in the physical resurrection of Jesus and was now persuaded that there was no life after death. "My only existence will be that I am remembered," he said, the same response given by Rabbi Harold Kushner to those who ask him if there is any hope beyond the grave. My response is that I don't want to be remembered, I want to *remember*. And there is reason to believe that we shall.

It is here that two contemporary German theologians, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann, boldly challenge the notion that faith in the resurrection of the body and modernity are irreconcilable. Pannenberg admits that it would be a mistake to understand the resurrection of Jesus as the resuscitation of a corpse as we know it. If Paul's description of the differences between the old and the new, the perishable and the imperishable, is to be believed, he thinks an essential personal continuity is maintained. However, Paul also insists there is a radical transformation be-

tween this body and the resurrected one. Moreover, the resurrection story in the Gospels should not be dismissed as an obsolete myth that spoke only to the people of that era. If that is all it is, then primitive Christianity has little or no relationship to the contemporary church and the foundations of Christianity have crumbled.

What needs to be revised is our understanding of historical reality. Once that happens, we will not be enslaved to the Troeltschian analysis of what one must believe about history if one examines it critically. If one's concept of history already precludes a resurrection, then one approaches the gospel texts unable to allow those texts, if necessary, to revise one's concept of history. One is closed even to the possibility of mystery.

Here, philosophical anthropology is illuminating. A phenomenology of human existence will

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This leads to a dilemma for both theology and history, Pannenberg says:

If one assumes that the dead cannot rise, that an event of this type can never happen, the result will be such a strong prejudice against the truth of the early Christian message of Jesus' resurrection, that the more precise quality of the particular testimonies will not be taken into consideration informing a general judgment.⁷

Carl Braaten argues that the modern assumptions about what is historically possible are in direct conflict with the biblical view of historical possibility.⁸ He says: "If only that is historical which is 'humanly possible' and in principle repeatable and calculable in human experience, then it is obvious that the resurrection of Jesus is both

impossible and meaningless. But the procedure can be reversed. It is possible to define history in the light of the reality of Jesus' resurrection. Quoting Moltmann, Braaten adds:

The historical question of the reality of Jesus' resurrection also turns back upon the inquiring historian and calls into question the basic experience of history from which he makes his historical inquiry.⁹

The fact that there is no immediate analogy between the Resurrection and our everyday experience of reality is insufficient grounds for denying that it happened. We must recognize the limits of the principle of analogy and admit that we may never have the means for establishing whether the event really happened.

For these reasons, some theological quarters are more open than before to the historical reliability of the Resurrection accounts. What we are wrestling with is the historical nature of redemptive events. Because they are historical events, we need reason to understand them; because they are the revelation of God as mystery, we need the gift of the Spirit to understand it. That is the paradox, the "almost" contradiction that characterizes Christian religion.

The Great Disappointment's Challenge to Faith

Our confidence in Adventism, though not as basic as our confidence in God's reality or the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, may also be supported by keeping God's mystery before us at the same time we search the Scriptures anew for the foundations of our faith. Recent scholarship, for example, is reinforcing the importance of the Sabbath to the early Christian communities, not diminishing it. And since our prophetic interpretations cannot ever be *fully* verified or falsified until the future occurs, we must all learn to be patient and content with the mysterious ways God accomplishes His purposes.

However, even if the intellectual difficulties had not arisen, we would still be in a crisis, for we have also lost our experience of God's presence.

While related to the theological crisis in our midst, it is somewhat different, for its roots go down to our sense of disappointment that the Second Coming has been so long delayed, almost embarrassingly so. This too is a force pushing many Adventists into disbelief. Adventists after the Great Disappointment are like Jews after the Holocaust.

After Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel became a skeptic. When we imagine what he would say if he came face to face with God in the judgment, it is not: "The evidence! Where was the evidence!?" Instead, he would, like Job, clench his fist and shake it at God: "You! Where *were* you at Auschwitz and Treblinka?!" Wiesel is a believer who needs an experience of God's presence to assure him that, despite all appearances to the contrary, God is with him and with the Jewish people in their holocaust. Without that experience, the meaning of his existence, the meaning of the Jewish people and the meaning even of the universe is crushed by the weight of the concentration camps.

He once said that during those dark years he believed that either Messiah would come or the world would end. Messiah did not come and the world did not end. As a result, he was filled, not merely with skepticism, but with despair. God's "elusive presence" (to use Terrien's phrase) during the Holocaust, shaped questions that reason could not answer. To put it differently: even if the arguments for God proved God's existence, even if there were no doubts about the authenticity or meaning of the texts that proclaim the reality of God and the Second Coming, one still must explain why God "hides" during the world's anguish. For Wiesel and many other Jews, when six million of the "chosen" people perished, God perished with them.

For Adventists who also serve God with a profound sense of chosenness, the delay of Christ's parousia has filled us with a sense of abandonment, for it seems that the longer time lasts, the less credible our preaching becomes. This suffering over theology and God's absence goes to the very core of our being as a people. We are like a mother I know who screamed at God in her anguish when her daughter was killed in a

head-on collision. One feels that *everything* has been taken away, and all that is left is utter emptiness. It is a haunting intimation of the reality of our own death. For these reasons, such suffering often teaches us individually and communally the very things we do not wish to learn as life is normally lived. According to Jerome Miller, one of those things is that the “God of our childhood does not exist.”¹⁰

None of our lives turn out as we hope and expect them to, in our innocence. It is our deepest loves that are shattered; it is the things we love most of all that are taken away from us. And the deeper our belief in God before this happens, the more shattered that belief is after it happens.

And yet, one who has suffered such anguish may still believe in the God of his childhood who was expected to protect him from being devastated. But he believes in him bitterly, as the God who failed. The most real part of ourselves is the suffering we keep private. What smolders there, to the degree that we are no longer children, and yet believe in our childhood God, is an unspoken accusation of this God who has allowed us to be mortally wounded by allowing our world, in one way or another, to be shattered.¹¹

This is what has happened, and continues to happen, to Seventh-day Adventists who grew up believing in the entire doctrinal schema, especially the soon coming of Jesus. They thought they would not age but be translated without seeing death. Now that they are aging and dying, the God of their childhood is dying, and they are left wondering whether any God exists. Because we made triumphalist claims for our unique role in history as God’s special people, claims which almost require history to unfold in a certain way, we have been left holding a two-edged sword: One edge produced an evangelistic fervor that resulted in one of the greatest missionary outreaches in modern history, while the other edge meant that any perceived weakness in that view hacked away not only at the authenticity of the church but the very reality of God. *The delay means God is not behaving as we expected God to behave.* The “signs” do not seem to be occurring as we anticipated. Consequently, what the signs point to is threatened. For many who leave our

community, this mindset has created the following equation: To lose Adventism is to lose God, for if the community preaching the only true message about God turns out to be partially wrong, or events occur in a way fundamentally inconsistent with that message, then we are forced to ask: How could God allow this to happen? Can God be trusted anymore?

The intense suffering of realizing that we hold one-way tickets to oblivion can tempt us to con-

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clude that there is no God holding the future in her/his hands. If that is true, human existence is absurd and we should despair. If God is not real, it would be better if we had never been. But we *are*, and the immensity of sensing the gift of existence when there might have been nothing, opens us again to the wonder and mystery of being itself. Why would the universe, especially persons, come to be only to be extinguished? Why would we value human life so much by our thought, creativity, and passion for justice if its duration is so short? Francois Mauriac said it eloquently:

If I were to give a human reason for my fidelity to Christ in this evening of my life, I would call it His quieting of the radical anguish that is in me. This anguish is not to be confused with fear . . . My very singular anguish, which I did not learn from anyone, tormented me from the moment I began to grow aware of the tragedy implied in the fact of being a man; that is to say, a creature condemned to death and who lives under a stay of execution for an unknown length of time.¹²

Even as children, that foreboding of death haunts us, dulling our sharpest moments of happiness and joy. Only the love and grace of our parents and friends keeps us from dread.

As we get older, the years we have left shrink

ever more rapidly. Our strength deteriorates, our grandparents and then our parents die, our friends battle cancer and heart disease, and our children tremble under the nuclear umbrella. However, that very same process of aging that tortures our Adventist church with the reality of a delay, can lead to a certain kind of serenity and reassurance. Mauriac says:

In the measure that I have grown old, anguish has loosened its grip on me. "The man who grows old becomes more aware of the eternal," says Romano Guardini, a Roman Catholic theologian. "He is less agitated, and the voices from beyond are better heard. The encroachment of eternity pales the reality of time."¹³

This is not a defensive reaction to anguish, for anguish has always existed. "No, my anguish did not create God," Mauriac says.

The quieting I now experience, the silence that falls upon my last days, permits me finally to be attentive to the answer which was unceasingly given during my tormented life, but to which I preferred my suffering because I preferred my sin. What more do I know today than I did as a despairing adolescent? The adolescent loved neither happiness nor peace. It took me a long time to learn to love God.¹⁴

"Because Jesus has taken my anguish upon himself," Mauriac says, "I am now free to assume the anguish of another."

On the program "Firing Line," William Buckley and Malcolm Muggeridge had several conversations about suffering. Muggeridge's comments echoed Mauriac. He said that suffering, even the most mindless kind, is best handled by prayer, loving one's neighbor, and helping others who suffer. In this sense, God's grace can make out of suffering something salvific for us. For some reason, as even Solzhenitsyn has argued, suffering often strengthens spirituality. Muggeridge then said: "I am an old man now. As I look back on my life I have to say, Bill, that all the things worth knowing were taught me by affliction."

Many, myself included, might want to quarrel with certain elements of this apparent "sanctifying" of suffering. But I am sure it is not all wrong.

Indeed, one response to the crisis of faith confronting an Adventism longing for God's presence is to seek God among the suffering. In the Olivet discourse contained in Matthew 24 and 25, Matthew, sensing in his own community anguish over the delay, tells a story about Jesus responding

to a question about the "time" of his coming and the end of the world. Jesus mentions various signs and tells parables, including at least one dealing with a delay (the wise and foolish virgins), ending the discourse with the judgment scene of the sheep and the goats.

Years ago Dr. Fred Harder suggested, and I think he was right, that this parable is the final

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answer to the disciples' question, "When are you returning?" and, it seems to me, the solution to our pain over the delay. Jesus tells us that the best way to maintain a living experience of his presence through the delay is by hurling ourselves into the suffering of the world; or, in Mauriac's phrase, "assume the anguish of another."

Somehow, those who visit the imprisoned, feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, and touch the sick and dying, who share the suffering of the world, are led to God and do become conscious of Jesus in their midst. As they bend down into human misery their eyes are lifted up to divine glory. They sense that even as human beings by nature hope for fulfillment beyond death, we also by nature want justice to be done, righteousness to triumph, and mercy to prevail.

As the insolubility of the world's suffering overwhelms us, we are more conscious than ever that if the blind will never see, the lame walk, or the prisoners go free, the universe is a place of cruelty and deceit. And we realize that the story of Jesus is not only our best hope but that it also makes sense! In him we are led to believe that the ideal for which humanity so passionately hungers is real, that our deepest longings will not be disappointed. By zealously throwing ourselves into the suffering of our communities we wait for Christ's advent not absent from him but with him. In this way faith is continually reborn.

This is why missionaries testify that they find their faith waning when they return to the affluent first world. Being away from human need has a way of hardening one against the Spirit. I can testify that in my own ministry as a pastor I too have found this to be true. As paradoxical as it may sound, I never feel more certain of the resurrection of the dead than when I comfort the bereaved or preach at a funeral. That experience of staring death full in the face in the name of Jesus somehow strengthens my conviction that this is not the end, that indeed there must be a future for all of us. Jesus is alive; we have eternal life in him.

In a conversation with Jim Cox about these matters and the gospel evidence for the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, he asked me: "Jim, have you ever wondered if this is all a hoax?"

"Yes, I have," I answered.

"Ah, Jim," he laughed, "if it is a hoax, it's the most magnificent hoax in history!"

In a lecture given by Elie Wiesel four years ago, I heard him say something I interpreted as a signal that even he was experiencing a faint reawakening of faith. He said: "I waited for Messiah to come all the days I was in the camps. I am still waiting for Messiah to come."

As Adventists we can say: We have waited for Jesus to come every day since October 22, 1844. We still wait for him. Why the world goes on in its agony because of the delay, why we are being pummeled by so many sophisticated challenges to our faith, is a mystery. But we believe that Jesus is in that mystery of doubt, suffering, and disillusionment. We must find him and cling to him until that day when he, shouting like the archangel, and blasting the trumpet of God, finds us each one to give us the crown of life.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. Quoted in Fran Schumer's "A Return to Religion," *New York Times Magazine* (April 1987).

3. *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), pp. 187 f. quoted in MacGregor, pp. 60,61.

4. John Macquarrie, *GodTalk* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 228; quoted in MacGregor, p. 63.

5. "Critical thought" here means thought that asks questions and probes, not thought that is looking for reasons not to believe. If anything, such critical thought is looking for reasons to believe, for above all else it wants to defend that which has proven most meaningful in human life—faith in God.

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14. Mauriac, p. 240.