

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09148-0 - Millennial Dreams and Moral Dilemmas: Seventh-day  
Adventism and Contemporary Ethics

Michael Pearson

Excerpt

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# I

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## INTRODUCTION

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# 1 · Confrontation with the issues

## General context of the research

Even the most cursory examination of publishers' lists from the last two decades will reveal an enormous upsurge of interest in matters of private and public morality. Other media reflect the same trend. While the reasons for this are no doubt extremely complex, two factors must figure prominently in any attempt to explain it. Recent and rapid technological developments on many fronts have placed us in some extraordinarily difficult moral predicaments. Previous generations have not had to face the dilemmas posed, for example, by the availability of safe abortions, sperm banks, and prostaglandins. They have not had to come to terms with the fact that new industrial processes, modern farming techniques, and unchecked exploitation of natural resources may precipitate an ecological crisis of unimaginable proportions. Worst of all, only in the current generation have human beings had to recognize that they have the capacity to destroy themselves and their environment. Such issues have provoked endless discussion and the formation of numerous pressure groups.

By no means unrelated to this first factor is the second, the rapid erosion of traditional Christian morality. For example, homosexuality has become a tolerated sexual option where once it was not even considered a fit subject for private conversation. The indiscriminate use of violence by terrorist organizations is something to which we have become increasingly accustomed but which strikes at the very heart of the Christian ethic. The feminist movement is one important manifestation of the breakdown of traditional lines of authority. Any institution, group, or individual purveying a set of values today must expect to have to render account for it.

The Christian church has faced the stark alternative of framing

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a positive response to these changes in the moral climate, or becoming an irrelevance in contemporary society. The Church of England has dealt with such issues through its Board for Social Responsibility, formerly the Moral Welfare Council. Other religious organizations either have similar agencies, or establish committees with specific terms of reference. American churches have typically set up ‘task forces’ to deal with such matters. Such a reaction normally comes, however, only in response to an issue which has already become contentious, and on which a secular literature already exists. Formal institutional deliberations are frequently preceded, or even provoked, by contributions from those within the church farsighted enough to want to meet the secular challenge head-on.

Among the most valuable of such publications have been those that have sought to formulate an opinion on some aspect of moral theology only after having set the contemporary situation in historical context. One of the earliest and best examples of this approach was D. Sherwin Bailey’s *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*. Another similar work of seminal importance was A. R. Winnett’s *Divorce and Remarriage in Anglicanism*. The latter concerned itself primarily with the political history of the issue within the church, while the former provided an historical analysis of biblical, extra-canonical, and traditional pronouncements. Both, in their different ways, attempted to inform and shape the church’s response to the rising tide of moral relativism, by, as it were, staking out the territory. Other Christian writers have since built moral theologies on the important foundation which they laid.

The present volume is somewhat in the tradition of Winnett’s publication, and his later *The Church and Divorce*, inasmuch as it seeks to trace developments in moral thought, policy, and behaviour, in a limited area and within a particular communion. Surprisingly little work of this sort has been attempted. Kenneth Boyd, in *Scottish Church Attitudes to Sex, Marriage and the Family 1850–1914*, analysed the changing position of four major churches in Scotland to such issues as sexuality, marriage, divorce, venereal disease, and housing conditions. John Noonan’s *Contraception: A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* was in the same general category, although it concerned itself less with actual practice. And there are a number of other volumes which to some extent

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overlap with the concerns of such analytical historical works, but fewer than one might expect. This territory, then, is not entirely unexplored, but much of it remains to be charted.

### **The Seventh-day Adventist context**

The Seventh-day Adventist church has also found it necessary to address the kinds of moral issues mentioned above, not only because members encountered them in the wider world, but because they were finding themselves personally in moral difficulty. Inevitably the spirit of the age, in some measure, percolated down into the church. The present work attempts to illuminate the moral dilemmas within contemporary Seventh-day Adventism by reference to its past.

The church's moral theology is best understood, of course, in the light of its general history. A good deal has been written about the history of Seventh-day Adventism, and this is not the place to repeat it.<sup>1</sup> However, it may well prove worthwhile to digress briefly at the outset in order to provide the reader with a basic historical framework with which to work.

The first four decades of the nineteenth century witnessed an enormous amount of religious activity and revivalism in certain parts of the United States, which became known as the 'Second Great Awakening'.<sup>2</sup> To most native Americans and immigrants this was the land of promise; reform movements and utopian ventures mushroomed. Many Americans believed that theirs was the land where the kingdom of God was to be established; a stable, moral and devout Republic was to be the fulfilment of the millennial dream.<sup>3</sup>

However, a section of the population – and by no means simply an eccentric fringe – rejected such optimism. William Miller, a leading figure among them, attracted large audiences from various denominational backgrounds with his apocalyptic preaching. On the basis of his study of Bible prophecy, he believed that something eschatologically significant would happen around 1843. As the time approached, the Millerites found themselves increasingly ostracized by the religious establishment, as their own proclamations became more strident. Finally, attention focused on 1844 as the year when Christ would return triumphantly to the earth to collect his people. If the passing of the spring date for the advent caused dismay among

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the believers, the disappointment of 22 October dealt a mortal blow to the Millerite movement, and many left it disillusioned.

Of the various rationalizations for the apparent failure of prophecy, the most enduring was that on that date Christ had in fact passed, not from heaven to earth, but from one part of a sanctuary in heaven to another, there to begin a work of ‘investigative judgement’. This gave new vitality to a minority among the adventists, who also soon came to believe that God was calling them to observe the seventh-day Sabbath. Confirmation of this came, they believed, in a vision granted to a young woman in their midst, Ellen Gould Harmon, who had earlier been deprived of membership of the Methodist church because of her adventist beliefs.

So strongly convinced was this core of sabbatarian adventists that Christ’s return was still imminent that they held to a ‘shut-door’ theory, that is, that the ‘door of salvation’ was now closed to all except those who had passed through ‘the great disappointment’ of 1844. However, the view that these were the only ones to whom sabbatarian adventists should bear witness soon crumbled as others, not involved in the events of 1844, sought to ally themselves with them. The group grew considerably, and, for various administrative reasons, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists was founded in May 1863, even though the original Millerites had eschewed all forms of religious organization. The new church prospered particularly under the charismatic influence of Ellen Harmon, now Ellen White after her marriage to one of the staunchest of the Millerites, James White. Although she never had any formal authority in the organization, she, and others, believed that God had chosen her to be the recipient of visions and divine instruction. She it was who held the movement together in the face of considerable turmoil in various phases of the first fifty years of its existence.

The leaders of the fledgling church – once of the opinion that their mission to proclaim ‘the truth’ was restricted to ‘the world’ as represented in the melting pot of American society – soon lifted their sights higher. Adventist literature sent by immigrant converts back to their relatives in Europe soon created interest and a demand for a visit by a representative of the church. In 1874, John Nevins Andrews became the first official Seventh-day Adventist foreign missionary when he began work in Switzerland. So began over a

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century of Seventh-day Adventist missionary activity on a world-wide scale. By the time of Ellen White's death in 1915, the church had grown to a membership of 125,000<sup>4</sup> scattered throughout the world, although as yet the majority was still resident in the United States.

Since then, the church has involved itself in an enormous range of educational, medical, welfare, and evangelistic ventures. It has invested huge sums of money in the erection of all kinds of institutions besides churches, from bush clinics to universities, from health-food restaurants to publishing houses, and in the provision of myriad services from 'stop-smoking' clinics to disaster relief, from 'dial-a-prayer' telephone networks to mobile open-heart surgery teams. The power base of the church remains in the United States although by 1984 only about 15 per cent of its 4.5 million membership was American.<sup>5</sup>

It is now over 140 years since the Millerites earnestly anticipated the return of their Lord in 1844, and more than 120 years since the official foundation of the church in 1863. As the expected advent has failed to materialize, and as the experience of the Seventh-day Adventist pioneers becomes increasingly remote from that of their modern heirs, the church has faced some major problems in the area of faith and practice. At the level of doctrine, some members have difficulty in sustaining a lively adventist expectation in the face of an apparently indefinite postponement of the parousia. Debate continues as to the extent to which Adventists should emphasize their distinctive features. The controversial book *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*, published in 1957, was seen by many as a conscious attempt to lead the church away from the backwaters of sectarian religion into the mainstream of evangelical Protestantism. Some members were offended by what they saw as its betrayal of the uniqueness of Adventism. In this regard, the doctrines of the heavenly sanctuary and the investigative judgement,<sup>6</sup> which are peculiar to Seventh-day Adventism, have recently been the focus of a debilitating internal struggle, partly because, according to some, they can be substantiated only from Ellen White's writings, and not from biblical sources. Indeed, the authority of her pronouncements on matters of faith and practice is currently under severe scrutiny (see below, pp. 46–7).

Any religious group operating in the modern world and boasting

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a prophet from the Victorian era will face the problem that rising generations of members will find the prophetic word, in part at least, outmoded. Furthermore, any religious group whose members move relatively freely in the wider world, will have to respond to issues which are current in that society, and seek to resist the forces of secularism while maintaining its credibility. The Seventh-day Adventist church is no exception. In the last two decades, it has encountered serious difficulties over the representation of ethnic minorities at all levels of church government. It has witnessed among its members an increase in the incidence both of divorce and what it considers to be illicit sexual behaviour. It has faced legal charges of sexual discrimination from its employees. It has had to confront accusations of mismanagement of large amounts of church funds. And so on. All this has produced in the denomination a ferment of ideas which is still in process. Membership of the church, however, continues to grow rapidly, particularly in the Third World.

### **The purpose of the research**

The primary purpose of this work is to break new ground in the chronicling and analysis of significant developments in Seventh-day Adventist moral thought. The bulk of the book seeks to provide a detailed chronology, from the church's beginnings to the present day, of Seventh-day Adventist responses, official and unofficial, to certain ethical problems which attract considerable attention in contemporary society. The five issues are all bound up in some way with human sexuality: contraception, abortion, the role of women, divorce, and homosexuality. To facilitate a thorough analysis of these responses, the account of Seventh-day Adventist thinking and behaviour in these matters has been set in historical and social context. The responses of other Christian denominations have been recorded to lend a further perspective. The historical background provided is by no means exhaustive; for that, the reader must go to volumes cited in the notes. It merely provides, as it were, a series of 'still images' against which the continuing account of developments within Seventh-day Adventism can be viewed. The earlier chapters attempt to identify the mainsprings of Seventh-day Adventist moral decision-making, by examining

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matters of broader ethical and socio-political concern before the focus narrows to issues related to human sexuality.

A further objective of this research is to probe beyond mere pronouncements, official or otherwise, on these issues, to discover something of the actual practice of Adventists. The subjects under discussion are, of course, highly sensitive ones about which it is extraordinarily difficult to gather reliable data. Where it exists, this has been used. Efforts to add to it for the purposes of this research have proved relatively unsuccessful. Elsewhere, it has been possible only to offer informed speculation on the basis of certain empirical indicators. Important among these are denominational publications. It is difficult to gauge accurately the extent to which the published opinion of church leaders influences the behaviour of the rank and file, or indeed reflects it. Since, as will be argued later, Adventists manifest considerable pragmatism, and since Adventist publications address a predominantly Adventist readership, it seems a reasonable assumption that denominational literature addresses certain issues only, or mainly, when there exists a practical problem of some significance in denominational life. Impressionistic evidence confirms this assumption.

While the research may contribute, if only obliquely, to the growing self-understanding of Seventh-day Adventists, it is hoped that it will allow the disinterested observer a fuller appreciation of the ethos of Adventism. Beyond the sphere of Seventh-day Adventism the work has perhaps two main values. First, since Adventism is in many ways representative of other conservative Christian organizations, this study offers a general guide to their probable thinking about sexual matters. It also draws together information about Christian responses to these issues which is perhaps not elsewhere available in one place. In this respect, it may serve a useful bibliographical function.

### **The scope of the research**

The focus of this study is Seventh-day Adventism in the United States, for, as will be argued in a later chapter, Adventism is essentially an American phenomenon. Although approximately 75 per cent of the current world membership now resides in the Third World,<sup>7</sup> the ethos of the movement is unmistakably American. It may well be that,



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in time, the emergent nations will come to dominate church structures; as yet, that process is not advanced. Although Europeans have served widely and with distinction in the movement, they have not, for a variety of reasons, succeeded in diminishing American domination of it.

The study covers the years between the middle of the nineteenth century and the present day. The period has been divided into two, 1840–1915, and 1915–85, both to make the material more manageable, and to facilitate comparison between what might be called ‘primitive’ and ‘modern’ Seventh-day Adventism. The choice of the actual year 1915 as the dividing point is somewhat arbitrary, as most such divisions are. The period around that date, however, is of significance not only in the development of Seventh-day Adventism but in the history of the wider world. It was in 1915 that Ellen White died, and the church had to begin to learn to live without an oracle. By 1915, the total membership outside North America was rapidly approaching the level of that within,<sup>8</sup> a fact which would inevitably affect the nature of Seventh-day Adventism. The wider world, of course, was involved in hostilities on a vast scale, which created social dislocation of enormous proportions, and in time provoked a reappraisal of traditional values.

## Sources

A major concern here, then, is to trace and analyse the attitudes, policies, and values of the Seventh-day Adventist establishment. One sometimes hesitates to describe these as ‘official’, since a major finding of this research is that the church has often avoided committing itself irrevocably to a fixed position on such issues. Part of what might be described as the genius of Adventism is its pragmatism, as a later chapter will argue.

The general church paper, *The Adventist Review*, is the principal vehicle for establishment views.<sup>9</sup> Between 1973 and 1979, its masthead described it as the ‘official organ of the church’; usually it has been regarded as its ‘general paper’. It regularly carries news of General Conference decisions, and articles printed therein must conform to certain standards of orthodoxy, and may thus be regarded as having semi-official status.<sup>10</sup> It has recently had

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a weekly circulation of 75,000, with individual copies tending to be widely shared.

A more self-critical analysis of developments in Seventh-day Adventism is provided by *Spectrum*, a journal produced by Adventist intellectuals since 1969, which provides very valuable commentary on various aspects of denominational life and history. Together with the *Review*, it constitutes the main periodical source for this study.

The church produces a large range of periodicals which cater for various special interests. For example *Ministry*, a magazine for clergy, and *Insight*, designed for Seventh-day Adventist youth, both reflect trends of thinking within the denomination. All have to meet certain criteria of orthodoxy, although some scope for divergence of opinion exists. The climate of opinion within the church can also be deduced from numerous unpublished manuscripts which the church has commissioned at one time or another to inform its decisions. These are housed in the General Conference headquarters in Washington, DC. The same archives contain a vast quantity of correspondence to and from leaders of the denomination throughout its history, some of which illuminates the present study.

A dominant feature of the book is the counsel of the church's prophetic leader, Ellen White, whose writings have exercised, and continue to exercise, an enormous influence on the faith and practice of Seventh-day Adventists. It is contained in innumerable books, articles, unpublished manuscripts, and a vast correspondence to members great and small. Her whole literary output contains detailed counsel on doctrinal, devotional, moral, and practical matters.

Correspondence between the author and administrators in various Adventist institutions throughout the world has yielded valuable information, particularly about recent developments. Further insight into contemporary trends within Adventism is provided by ephemera produced by special interest groups, of which there are a considerable number. *SDA Kinship Connection*, newsletter of the organization of Adventist homosexuals, is a well-produced example.

Much of the information used to reconstruct the historical context in which Seventh-day Adventists were operating when making their responses to moral dilemmas, comes from secondary sources. Further insights into the functioning of sectarian groups in general, and of Seventh-day Adventism in particular, are provided by the work of