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## Church and Society in Adventism: Some Reflections

In an assessment of Seventh-day Adventists' involvement with social issues, the following remarks were made in an unpublished paper: "Today the church is split between isolationists who have little interest in the Church's participation with society other than what is necessary to protect institutional interests, and activists, who want the Church's voice to be heard on the great issues of public morality that face society" (Standish 2006:4). The current state of affairs follows a period of institutionalism, which in turn, was preceded by an earlier stage of activism. It is widely reported that worldwide, as of 2002, only about 29 percent of Seventh-day Adventists were involved in community activities. Activists, however, are divided. There are *traditionalists* who are more concerned about issues that are considered to herald Sunday laws (national ID cards, the rise of the religious right, government support of religion, etc.), while *conservatives* would rather have the church work on issues on the broader conservative social agenda such as abortion and same-sex marriage.

Others, concerned about issues on the broader liberal social agenda, would like to see the church involved in matters such as universal health-care, racial/gender discrimination, world peace, the elimination of poverty, the death penalty, and the protection of the environment (Standish 2006:4, 5).

Of course the church has neither been totally negligent nor silent on these issues. It has issued statements on wide ranging matters, from abortion and AIDS to climate change, cloning, homosexuality, homelessness, poverty, to gene therapy (Dabrowski 2005). The church's significant health and educational ministry around the world should also be understood as an immense contribution towards uplifting the lot of the less fortunate. Adventists believe that the well being of the human person depends on an inseparable interrelation of such matters as physical and spiritual health, education, and human rights. On these initiatives, the

church is known worldwide to be a significant player. The church is also known worldwide for its championing of religious liberty. Furthermore, in different parts of the world, constituencies of the church have been visibly involved in social activism. A week before the 2005 G8 meetings in Scotland, members of the Crieff and Edinburgh churches were among some 222,000 anti-poverty campaigners as part of the “make poverty history” demonstration. In 2008, Mozambique’s president commended the government’s partnership with the church to combat poverty and improve communities. Several of these stories could be multiplied around the world.

Nevertheless, other situations such as apartheid in South Africa, the genocide in Rwanda, and the conflict in Kenya following its recent controversial elections in 2008 cause people to ask: Should not the church be doing more about these things? But how does the church know if it should get involved, and when and how should it get involved? These questions raise ethical issues that are inherently complex. Besides, the evidence seems to present a mixed picture of both noble and bad behavior on the part of some Adventists. What can we say about these things? Without denying the church’s positive influence both corporately and as communities of believers around the world, certain situations call for reflection. It is impossible to get into the details of all the matters related to the church’s involvement in the public square. Neither is this paper intended to provide a social doctrine of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Much more cooperative effort will be needed to undertake that task. The paper simply focuses on those matters that are of interest to this conference, and takes a diagnostic tone with the view to providing some general points of reflection that could be helpful to the church as it thinks about what more could be done on these issues of concern. First, we will throw a little bit more light on the nature of some of the social issues that are of interest to the conference, second, we will try to give a succinct statement of the church’s theological stand on those issues, and finally, we will explore the concept of *ethical discourses* as a way of raising the level of sensitivity and activity towards social issues in the church.

### **Matters That Call for Critical Reflection**

There seems to be important reasons why the church needs to be more alert towards certain social issues in different parts of the world. What is provided below is by no means exhaustive, and is not intended to describe the situation of the church everywhere. But it is given as a caution to what could become a disturbing pattern in some sections of the church around the world.

## War and Political Conflicts

From the Rwandan massacres in 1994 which actually led to the sentencing of a former Adventist administrator by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (BBC News, February 20, 2003), to the conflicts in the Balkans, the tensions in the South Pacific (coups d'états in Fiji and the Solomon Islands) (see Kukolja 2000:61-65), to the recent post-election crisis in Kenya, a consistent picture emerges: Adventists in regular standing have either actively participated in political conflicts or condoned them. Meanwhile, the perception persists that in such circumstances official denomination responses are often either not forthcoming or belated (as in Rwanda) or vague (as in the crisis in Kosovo). Tihomir Kukolja observes that when Adventists become actively involved in political conflicts with racial undertones it is not enough for the church to repeat "the well-worn statement . . . that the Church is not involved in politics" (Kukolja 2000:63).

Rather, "such circumstances should move the worldwide church to do something other than simply publish moralizing and doctrinal pamphlets about its commitment to pacifism and peace. The church has an obligation to voice its moral concern—even outrage when necessary—in a clear, unbiased, and fair way during times of political crisis, times when its own people might be confused about issues of nationalism and racism" (Kukolja 2000:63).

Nationalism, however, raises its own complex issues and sometimes apparent conflicting perspectives. It is reported that the Global War on Terrorism has prompted increasing numbers of Adventists to join the armed forces (Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries 2007). On the one hand, this development appears to be cast in positive terms when it is remarked that "war hardly seems the likely venue for encouraging spiritual ventures, yet conflict can spawn great good" (Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries 2007). The report appears to adopt a *two kingdoms* approach in which it is argued that citizens prioritize conflicting loyalties by balancing the objective with the subjective: the dilemma is "resolved by exercising a practical faith that fulfills spiritual responsibilities to God by serving one's fellow man" (Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries 2007). On the other hand, one can hardly avoid the seeming tension between this approach and the Adventist statement on peace.

## Apartheid and Racism

In a paper on "The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Southern Africa—Race Relations and Apartheid," presented at the Association of Seventh-day Adventist Historians Meetings, April 19-22, at Oakwood College, Huntsville, Alabama, Jeff Crocombe alleges a pattern of discriminatory

practices that have characterized the church since its inception in South Africa in the 1890s. Crocombe agrees with the conclusion of I. F. du Preez and Roy H. du Pre in their *A Century of Good Hope* that in South Africa “the Adventist Church was always far ahead of the government of the day in applying racial segregation in the church, and far behind when it comes to scrapping racially discriminatory measures. By the time apartheid was introduced into law after 1948, Adventists had been practicing it for twenty or more years” (du Preez and du Pre 1994, quoted in Crocombe 2007:4).

It is interesting to note, however, that elsewhere in Nyasaland (Malawi) when, despite the abuse and exploitation of black farm workers by white farmers, the British colonial government introduced a poll tax and hut tax for all Africans living on white owned farms, it was the Seventh-day Adventist Church under the leadership of Priest John Chilembwe, that started to organize a protest against the colonial taxes.

Today, Adventists have a statement on racism which reads in part, “The Seventh-day Adventist Church deplors all forms of racism, including the political policy of apartheid with its enforced segregation and legalized discrimination” (Dabrowski 2005:83). Critics, however, point out that this official statement was issued only in 1985. And it was only three years after the formal end of apartheid in 1994 that the South African Union Conference Executive Committee submitted a statement of apology to the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, and it included an alibi that “the Seventh-day Adventist church community was a victim of the governmental system” (quoted in Crocombe 2007:6).

But, elsewhere, in America, the church recognizes the racial issue and has taken steps towards dealing with it. At a North American Division summit on race relations in 1999, the following ten critical issues indicative of the racial problem in the church were identified:

1. Adopt a new paradigm of inclusion.
2. Educate the members of North America regarding the negative effects of “White Flight.”
3. Eliminate all policies and practices which disadvantage people of color.
4. Become color blind and gender neutral in Church appointments.
5. Develop diversity education programs in every entity of the Division.
6. Become intentional about strategizing to become one Church.
7. Create effective ways to celebrate race relations progress.
8. Develop strategies for racial reconciliation in the paid Church structure.
9. Eliminate duplication in the Church structure.
10. Conduct sensitivity training throughout the Division (see the Office of

Human Relations website of the North American Division).

### Poverty, Injustice, and Suffering

In a recent address on the future of Seventh-day Adventist health ministries, Jan Paulsen, President of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, underscored the integrated nature of Adventists' response to issues of poverty and suffering. "Health ministry," he remarked, "is therefore indivisible from our commitment to education, to human rights, to humanitarian work, to environmental care, to our desire to be a force for good in our communities" (Paulsen 2009:10). Paulsen proposed a theology of connection as one of four values to ground the Adventist approach, observing that "living in connection with others means seeing the large problems of society as *collective* human problems. I begin to see that poverty, for instance, is not just the result of random circumstances or arbitrary luck" (Paulsen 2009:9). Here, Paulsen appears to recognize the structural nature of the problem of poverty and suffering, for which reason he may have recommended that "we must, at times, have the courage to 'wade into the fray,' to recognize and condemn structures or practices that diminish the dignity of our fellow human beings" (Paulsen 2009:10). However, he does not confuse the recognition of the structural nature of the problem with its solution, for elsewhere, he carefully distinguishes between seeking political power and seeking a voice in the public discourse. "There is a vast difference," he notes, "between seeking a voice in the public discourse, and seeking to wield political power. As a church—and individuals—we have not only the right, but the obligation, to be a moral voice in society; to speak clearly and eloquently on that which touches our core values. Human rights, religious freedom, public health, poverty, injustice—these are some of the areas in which we have a God-given responsibility to *advocate* for those who cannot speak for themselves" (Paulsen 2007:9, emphasis mine). Paulsen strikes the note of advocacy not as a novelty, noting Ellen White's observation that slavery, unjust racial prejudices, oppression of the poor and such are "a serious menace to the well being of the human race, and as evils which the church of Christ is appointed by her Lord to overthrow" (White 2002:473). Indeed, the Church Manual admonishes church members in every community to be outstanding citizens "working for the common good of all" (*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* 2005:173).

Yet it is this sense of advocacy that has sometimes appeared to have been found wanting among Adventist communities. It is reported that only about seven percent of Adventist churches in the United States are involved in community organizing projects or advocacy on social issues in their communities (see Center for Creative Ministry, FACT Research Find-

ings, at [www.creativeministry.org](http://www.creativeministry.org)). This apparent disconnect between profession and practice calls for further reflection.

### In Search of Understanding

How does one begin to explain the phenomenon that has been explored under the three broad social concerns outlined above? How does one understand the fact that a church that officially espouses refraining from seeking political power has some of its members spearheading the violent overthrow of governments or perpetrating violence in support of ethnically charged political conflicts? How is it that the church's social pronouncements often seem slow in coming? Why do statements of social responsibility and involvement not appear to translate into action in some places? Is the church's theology on these matters clear and accessible?

### Restating Theological Positions

The questions raised above are mainly ethical questions, meaning that they are concerned about issues of right and wrong decisions and actions. Moral decisions or actions, however, are generally undertaken from particular frames of reference. The discipline of philosophy has provided several of these reference points for making ethical decisions, but Christian decisions on moral issues, however, cannot be based on philosophical systems or cultural attitudes. Christian ethics, if it is to remain Christian, has to be guided by principles derived from a biblically shaped worldview. The recovery of Christian ethics goes hand in hand with the recovery of Christian doctrine. By implication Seventh-day Adventists' approach to social issues will be determined to a large extent by their understanding of their biblically-shaped worldview as defined by the relevant aspects of their theology. Could the apparent inconsistencies noted above be the result of confusion over theology?

### Involvement in War and Political Conflicts

The Adventist position on war appears to have evolved from a stance of combatancy (where members are drafted) to a noncombatant position and finally to a noncombatant *recommendation*. How do these positions compare with other existing Christian views on war? Centuries of Christian discussion on the biblical view of war has yielded no consensus (see Hess and Martens 2008). The lack of consensus derives basically from the apparent paradox between the waging of war in Old Testament times including pre-theocracy (Gen 14), theocracy (Judg 19 and Josh 8; 10), and monarchy periods (2 Sam 5; 8) and the pacifism of the New Testament (e.g., Matt 5:39-44; Luke 6:27-35) and the latter's injunction to subordinate

oneself to civic authority (Rom 13). In attempting to resolve the apparent paradox, Christian views on war have ranged from non-violent pacifism to the idea of a qualified participation (e.g., the just war approach) and the concept of the crusade (for a brief discussion on the history of these approaches during the history of the church see Clouse 2007:714-716). On their part, Adventists prefer to see themselves as noncombatants. The beginnings of the present Adventist statements on noncombatancy can be traced to an action of the General Conference Committee on September 16, 1941 (see Haynes 1950:21-29). In Adventists' formulation of noncombatancy this is not antimilitarism, it is not pacifism, it is not conscientious objection to war as that is ordinarily understood. It is rather a discriminating recognition of the divinely stated principle enunciated by Jesus Christ that the Christian lives and moves in a two-fold area of obligation and loyalty. He has a duty to his government as well as to his God. He is to render those things to Caesar which belong to Caesar just as faithfully as he renders to God those things which belong to God (Haynes 1950:22).

Several Annual Council resolutions (1954, 1969, and 1972) restated the basic noncombatancy stance of 1941 with some variations. Some historical accounts, however, have pointed out that early Adventists had pacifist roots (see Harwood 2008:4-10; Osborne 2003:14-16; Morgan 2003). Osborne writes, "The church's founders were New England pacifists who had roots in the Radical or Anabaptist Reformation, and they shared a tradition of social and political dissent that had given rise to Quakers, Mennonites and other religious communities committed to the ethics of non-violence" (Osborne 2003:14). This became quite evident in 1862, after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln, when according to Ginger Harwood, "Adventists had to decide whether they would embrace 'just war' theory or maintain their non-resistance position despite the high stakes involved" (Harwood 2008:7). Ellen White's view at the time, in spite of Adventists' empathy for those enslaved, was that "God's people, who are His peculiar treasure, cannot engage in this perplexing war, for it is opposed to every principle of their faith. In the army they cannot obey the truth and at the same time obey the requirements of their officers" (White 1948:361). Subsequently the General Conference session of 1865 voted, "While we thus cheerfully render to Caesar the things which the Scriptures show to be his, we are compelled to decline all participation in acts of war and bloodshed as being inconsistent with the duties enjoined upon us by our divine Master toward our enemies and toward all mankind" (*Review and Herald* 1865:196).

Ronald Osborne is of the view that following the death of Ellen White in 1915, the Anabaptist ethos of the early church eroded (Osborne 2003:15). According to Osborne, "The consensus of the new generation was that it



was no longer the church's role to question the rightness of military adventures or foreign policy so long as Adventist soldiers were allowed to continue in their peculiar commitment to Sabbath observance. It was in this spirit of patriotic cooperation with the government that the Adventist Medical Cadet Corp was created, with beginnings in the early 1940s. The Corps sought to prove that good Adventists were also 'good Americans,' eager and willing to serve in the military, albeit in noncombatant roles" (Osborne 2003:16). With his captivating article title, "The Great Disappearance: Adventism and Noncombatancy," historian George R. Knight remarks that "in the early 21st century, the church is in danger of losing an important teaching related to the Christ who claimed that Christians must love their enemies, rather than be trained to kill them" (Knight 2008:14). Knight's assessment of noncombatancy appears to differ from Osborne's pacifist inclination. For Knight, the Medical Cadet Corps, a creation of the church in the 1930s, was a positive way by which the Adventist public was kept aware of issues related to noncombatancy and military service (Knight 2008:13) whereas, for Osborne, the Corps was part of the beginning of the spirit of patriotic cooperation.

Obviously, some misunderstanding exists on the church's understanding of noncombatancy which needs to be cleared up. Does the Adventist position on noncombatancy, even when stripped of its present *recommendatory* stance, come close to the "just war" approach? Is this the reason why some Adventists get involved in national and tribal conflicts?

### Involvement in Issues of Poverty, Injustice, Suffering

Statements issued by the Seventh-day Adventist Church on social issues, we have noted, are many, including positions on domestic violence, tribal and national warfare, human rights, use of tobacco, abortion, euthanasia, human cloning, caring for the environment, and homelessness and poverty (see Dabrowski 2005). Each of these statements embodies a basic theological perspective that has been expressed in the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, namely, that being "an integral part of the civic community, a Christian cannot evade responsibility towards society" (Kis 2000:700). By way of providing some basic guidelines for carrying out the Christian civic responsibility, Miroslav Kis provides three basic principles: the principle of obedience to God first (Acts 4:19); the principle of obedience for the sake of law and order (Rom 13:1-7); and the principle of social justice. Under the last principle, Kis' remarks are generally representative of the official church's position.

The principle of social justice demands that human rights be respected and that *Christians lead society* in that direction (James



5:1-6). Beginning within the church and expanding to relations in the civic domain, discrimination on the basis of race, gender, or status *must never occur without Christian opposition*. While the church as an institution cannot resort to immoral or political means it can use all appropriate avenues allowed by the political structure of a country. There should be room for those feeling a call to occupy public office. (Kis 2000:701, emphasis mine)

Similar remarks are made regarding Christian social responsibility, noting that “there is no such thing as poverty; there are humans who are poor. There is no suffering, no hopelessness, no war, no disease in the abstract; there are only suffering humans, homeless people, fighting neighbors, and sick persons” (Kis 2000:702). Christians find themselves under a principle of identification which causes them to emulate Christ’s identification of himself with the unfortunate (Matt 25:31-46). To the extent that these remarks reflect the theology of the church, they do not only sharpen the need for the church’s sensitivity to the situation of the unfortunate, they embody a certain degree of advocacy on its part.

The question that needs to be addressed now is the following: If the church has a noncombatancy position, albeit recommendatory, on issues of war and political conflicts, why are Adventists increasingly getting involved *voluntarily* in wars and political conflicts? (see Lechleitner 2007). If the church has a theology on social issues that makes no room for civic and social irresponsibility why is the church often showing up in research findings to be socially significantly uninvolved? Any attempt to provide adequate answers to these questions requires careful attention to the variety of moral discourses relevant to the subject.

### Exploring the Varieties of Moral Discourse

The renowned theologian James M. Gustafson has written about what he calls “varieties of moral discourse” and employed them as a means of analyzing church and society material. I contend that Gustafson’s categories will be helpful in clarifying the situation that the church finds itself in with respect to the apparent disconnect between profession and practice on social issues. The premise to the discussion below is that greater discourse on ethical issues is critical to ethical sensitivity and activity. Gustafson makes four key distinctions between prophetic, narrative, ethical, and policy discourse (Gustafson 1988:267-278).

## Prophetic Moral Discourse

Prophetic moral discourse according to Gustafson, may take the form of either indictment or utopia. The former “addresses the roots of moral or social waywardness,” the latter, an ideal future state designed to motivate a community towards its realization (Gustafson 1988:269). There is no concern here about particular failed or inadequate policies; only orientations of a broad and fundamental nature that may explain certain shortfalls. Prophetic moral discourse has its benefits, but it has limitations too. On the positive side, indictment and utopian discourse, especially where vivid language and symbols are used, have the ability to arouse human moral sentiments. But as Gustafson points out, although prophetic discourse motivates action, it does not direct it since the move from indictment or moral vision requires the interposition of other moral discourses (Gustafson 1988:272).

By way of providing some examples among Adventists, on the one hand, Calvin B. Rock’s “The Church and Society” (see Rock, <http://biblicalresearch.gc.adventist.org>) by and large falls in the category of prophetic discourse of the indictment kind. Rock finds a certain reluctance among a section of Adventists to engage with socio-political systems and issues. His analysis traces this reluctance to “some theological aspects of Adventist conservatism” including apocalyptic eschatology, sectarian ecclesiology, radical determinism, and a freewill image of man (Rock:5-12). On the other hand, although some of the church’s official statements on social issues incorporate other discourses, the statements are essentially expressive of ideal states that the church wishes to see in place. This is especially the case with the statements on poverty/homelessness, environment, and racism.

The relevance of this discussion on prophetic discourse is the following. Without arguing the validity or otherwise of any particular expression of prophetic moral discourse, prophetic discourse is good as far as it goes; but it is not sufficient. Of course the church needs prophetic discourse to arouse it from a state of complacency. Especially in some parts of the developing world, it would seem that a great deal of prophetic discourse on church members’ involvement in political conflicts at the national and ethnic levels is long overdue. Nevertheless, the church would still not have done its social ethics after it has unearthed the roots of its apparent social disengagement and put out statements of desiderata. Other variants of ethical discourse, besides prophetic discourse, need to occur throughout the church worldwide.

### Narrative Ethical Discourse

Narrative discourse refers to the maintenance of a system of narratives, stories, parables, etc., that sustains the memory of a community and is relied upon at points of particular moral choices. Its significance is related to the recognition that narrative is central to identity formation. Narrative ethical discourse can be helpful in bringing about most of the “church and society” ethical goals that the church has expressed in its statements. In the Adventist Church, the significance of narrative seems to have found the most expression on the issue of war. Consider the following observation. “Mueller also notes that much of the German reticence toward active military service probably stems from the country’s traumatic experience during World War II. According to Bruinsma, that painful memory ‘may still linger in the collective Adventist European consciousness’” (Mueller 2007:9). Here, it may be argued that World War II functions as what I may call a “massive default narrative.” George Knight refers indirectly to the power of narrative and bemoans its absence when he recounts how in the past the church maintained its noncombatancy stance. He writes,

The Adventist public was also kept aware of issues related to noncombatancy and military service by the lives of individuals who had made a difference in one way or another. On one end of the spectrum were those Adventist service personnel court-martialed and imprisoned for their religious convictions, including some 35 serving prison sentences of from five to 25 years at the end of World War I. At the other end of the spectrum were such individuals as the ubiquitous Desmond T. Doss, who received the Congressional Medal of Honor for having saved the lives of at least 75 wounded men in a World War II battle in Okinawa. Doss, the hero of noncombatants, and the only one to ever receive the award, was a frequent speaker at Adventist colleges, schools, churches, and general gatherings. (Knight 2008:13)

I wish to suggest that in places of the world church where members have been implicated in national and ethnic political conflicts, a “Truth and Reconciliation” type of committee could function in the church as a medium for needed narrative discourse. But not only on the issue of war do we need such discourse. It is needed on other issues of social concern where the church is legitimately and properly mandated to play a role. This will include expressing itself on issues such as abortion, homelessness/poverty, racism, etc. Yet, as important as narrative discourse is, it is also insufficient, for as Gustafson observes, “the particularity of the story

might impede discourse" with those who do not share its authority" (Gustafson 1988:269). For example, on the question of military service, it has been remarked that "today, many Adventists enlisted are of the Vielmann, rather than the Doss persuasion: They see carrying—and potentially using—a weapon as an undesirable but inevitable element of military service" (Lechleitner 2007:8). Thus, stories can enlighten ethical decisions but they need to be tested by a more rigorous moral discourse.

### Ethical Discourse

By ethical discourse Gustafson has in mind rigorous, self-conscious argumentation and clarification of ethical concepts backed by Christian convictions. What is required is a careful philosophical examination or argumentation of ethical issues such as rights and justice, duties, etc., not in the context of extant philosophical systems but, in this case, within a distinctive Adventist theological context.

At this level of discourse we discover several deficiencies among Adventists. Although it is my view that there is a paucity of philosophical ethical reflection on social issues among us, I will focus on the lack of rigor in the theological base for such ethical argumentation. The purpose of this focus is to make the argument that part of the inconsistency and disconnect in practice on social issues discussed above may stem from an insufficiently rigorous public theology or social doctrine.

### **Framing the Theological Discussion (Niebuhr's Typologies)**

Whether we speak about the church's response to war, racism, or poverty and homelessness, we are involved in public theology. The church needs a social doctrine, and the doctrine needs to be properly framed. So far, this does not appear to have been done. The lack represents a significant vacuum in the church for the reason that the issue of Church and State, so critical to Adventist thought and action, is often the contact point for Christian ideals in society. Therefore, as a matter of foundational theological importance, the church needs a clear perspective from which to see the relation between the believer and the public square. This is the issue which H. Richard Niebuhr called "Christ and Culture," and for which he developed five typologies to describe the relationship: (1) Christ against culture, (2) Christ of culture, (3) Christ above culture, (4) Christ and culture in paradox, and (5) Christ the transformer of culture (Niebuhr 1951). Dennis P. Hollinger has drawn out the importance of the Christ-culture question: it affects what we think about the possible impact of Christian ethics on society; it affects one's general stance towards society (flee it,

fight it, reform it, ignore it, etc.); it determines the methods we deem appropriate to use in influencing society and its institutions; and it affects what we think may be appropriately borrowed from society in aid of worship and gospel proclamation (Hollinger 2002:190).

### Adventists and Niebuhr

How does Adventist thinking relate to Niebuhr's typology or does it? In the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* it is referred to but not seriously engaged, except to say that "Christ envisioned the church plunged into the ferment of society, yet free from the evils of the surrounding culture" (Kis 2000:700). There is no question, however, that in the recent past Adventists have approached social activism with some skepticism. In a way that may not fit neatly under Niebuhr's typology. Adventists seem to have been guided in their involvement in social matters by their stand on church and state. It could be said that "church/state skepticism" would be the Adventist response to Niebuhr's enduring problem of Christ and culture. Without reflecting on "two kingdom" theology with much theological specificity and detail, Adventists appeared to have instinctively refused to take on the role of policing society's conscience. This is undoubtedly the result of their understanding of prophecy and the role the state will play towards the end of time on matters of conscience and religious freedom. This is the reason why Adventists, as a matter of principle, are usually wary of entanglements with state and state activities; it is also the reason why the church plays a leading role in matters of religious liberty around the world. But, in a recent, more direct Adventist engagement with Niebuhr's typologies, John Wesley Taylor basically rejects 1, 2, 4, 5 by themselves while 3 is embraced with some modification. The principal modification of "Christ above culture" is that politics is "not seen as basically neutral, but deficient," leading to the conclusion that "in the Christian worldview, evil is opposed, yet human culture is affirmed and elevated, by the grace of God" (Taylor 2008:206ff). Taylor suggests an overarching perspective of the Lordship of Christ in the context of the Great Controversy motif. Apparently, setting his position over against "two kingdom" approaches Taylor writes, "The believer then sees himself not as possessing dual citizenship, but as a citizen of the *encompassing kingdom* of God" (Taylor 2008:207). The deployment of the Great Controversy motif as part of an overarching one kingdom perspective could be a fruitful line of enquiry. But Taylor's suggestion may require further teasing out to distinguish it clearly from the "Christ above culture" approach which has been the Roman Catholic stance since Thomas Aquinas. The fundamental difficulty for Adventist thought with the "Christ above culture" approach is its inbuilt two-tiered theologizing approach. The "Christ above culture" per-

spective is reflective of the classical Roman Catholic “natural-revealed” theological methodology.

The lack of a clearly defined theological perspective on the “Christ and culture” question in the church has meant that some ethical conclusions on social issues appear to be based on one or more of Niebuhr’s typologies. But, from a very tentative and rudimentary perspective, how may the outlook on social issues look like if the Great Controversy motif were to color the Adventist framing of them.

### On the Question of War and Involvement in Political Conflicts

Much is made today about the issue of loyalty to God and loyalty to country when it comes to involvement in political conflicts. Felipe Vielmann perhaps speaks for those Adventists who do not see combatancy to be in conflict with Adventist values. He argues, “For me, it was more of an issue of duty to God and country” (Vielmann 2007:9). This reasoning is obviously based on Rom 13:1-2 which speaks of civic powers as “ordained” of God. This thinking has led to a brand of two kingdom/two loyalty approach in Christian history. The just war tradition is based on such thinking. The danger, however, is the tendency to absolutize the worldly kingdom. Martin Luther, while rejecting the idea of crusade, was a firm supporter of the just war approach due to his respect for the state as ordained by God to preserve order and to punish evil in the worldly realm. The Reformed tradition, on the other hand, accepted the crusade concept because they saw the state both as the preserver of order and as a means of furthering the cause of true religion.

In Rom 13:1-2, however, Paul did not intend to convey any idea of absolute power to civic authority. The word translated “ordained” (Greek. *tasso*, to order, arrange), neither carries the implication that God always approves the conduct of civil governments nor that the Christian has a duty always to submit to them. A Great Controversy perspective, however, without denouncing the principle of the basic legitimacy of the church’s participation in the public square, should caution the Seventh-day Adventist against the facile presumption of both the inherent goodness or badness of cultural institutions. Rather, it should arm the Adventist with a “hermeneutic of suspicion” towards culture and its institutions knowing that in this conflict “He [Satan] is intruding his presence in every department of the household, in every street of our cities, in the churches, in the national councils, in the courts of justice, perplexing, deceiving, seducing, everywhere ruining the souls and bodies of men, women, and children, breaking up families, sowing hatred, emulation, strife, sedition, murder. And the Christian world seems to regard these things as though God had

appointed them and they must exist" (White 1911:508).

The foregoing argument may require us to understand the Adventist noncombatancy stance to mean that "voluntary noncombatancy" is contrary to historic Adventist values. As Angel Rodriguez has correctly noted, "There is no such thing as a just war. . . . The church must insist at all times on the evilness of human wars" (Rodriguez 2003:11). Consequently, voluntary involvement in political conflict based on national, ethnic, or any sectarian loyalty contradicts the historic Adventist understanding of biblical values.

### On the Question of Racism, Poverty, Injustice, and Suffering

We noted earlier on that there is basic agreement, theologically, on relieving the plight of the unfortunate. Ellen White wrote, "The poverty of the people to whom we are sent is not to prevent us from working for them. Christ came to this earth to walk and work among the poor and suffering. They received the greatest share of His attention. And today, in the person of His children, He visits the poor and needy, relieving woe and alleviating suffering" (White 1933:23). How may the Great Controversy motif inform this basic theological perspective? Taylor is right in the view that it calls for a reorientation of thinking—from seeing Christian engagement primarily in terms of political action, to viewing political involvement as the faithful response of witness" (Taylor 2008:207). In principle, it may call for non-violent activism that includes advocacy, mediation, conciliation, and "casting one's vote in favor of specific issues or platforms, rather than merely as a reflection of partisan alignment" (Taylor 2008:207). In addition, the Great Controversy's "hermeneutic of suspicion" should alert us to the "dangers of compromise of principle and of a corruption of values, as well as allowing an involvement with politics to become all-consuming" (Taylor 2008:207). This perspective is important in view of the admonition that "those who hold the reins of government are not able to solve the problem of moral corruption, poverty, pauperism, and increasing crime. They are struggling in vain to place business operations on a more secure basis. If men would give more heed to the teaching of God's Word, they would find a solution of the problems that perplex them" (White 1952:173). Taylor correctly points out that the position of Lordship entails perils. Precisely because it extends Christ's sovereignty to all facets of life, it risks coming close to Niebuhr's "Christ as Transformer of Culture" typology of which the social gospel, liberation theology, and the activities of what is commonly called the "religious right" are prime examples. The benefit of the Great Controversy dimension is to place matters in a proper perspective so as to avoid the tendency toward excesses not only of the



left, but also of the right including the more recent theonomic movement of the likes of Greg Bahnsen. Hollinger is right on the tendency on the part of transformers of culture to equate particular social and political agendas with the kingdom of God.

He correctly observes, "In their attempts to effect change for righteousness and justice . . . effectiveness has preceded faithfulness, and in the process, the unique contribution of Christian ethics has been lost" (Hollinger 2002:213).

### Policy Discourse

Although ethical discourse informs, policy-making choices need to be made under particular circumstances. There are responsible agents to be considered, the potential for actions to effect change to be thought through, and a general deliberation on what is desirable within given constraints. But as Gustafson notes, policy discourse "accepts conditions which from prophetic and ethical perspectives might be judged to be morally wrong, or at least inadequate" (Gustafson 1988:270). Meeting the challenges of church and society in the 21st century demands thoughtful policy discourse on all matters, but here our focus will be on issues of poverty and suffering. Among the aspects that require reflection are those related to agency, that is, matters relating to who and how to address social issues.

Adventists' sensitivity to the plight of the poor and needy came quite early in the movement's history. Dorcas Societies began in America in 1874 and spread quickly throughout Adventist churches overseas. These societies are local church based and funded groups making garments and supplying food for needy families, caring for the fatherless and widows, and ministering to the sick. By the time of the World Wars, it is reported that "the Dorcas Society remained as the principal SDA welfare agency. After World War II, which left millions homeless and destitute, appeals directed to the churches and Dorcas Societies for material aid met a substantial response in the form of food, clothing, and other supplies" (*Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* 1976:344). In 1956 the church established an international relief agency called the SDA World Service (SAWS). SAWS had the main objective of alleviating pain, hunger, and suffering among people, without regard of their race, religion, or gender, and to assist in rehabilitation through self-help projects and educational services. Records show that the program was supported mainly by the Disaster and Famine Relief Offering that was promoted and received once a year in all churches around the world (*Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* 2002:1335).

In 1984 SAWS was reorganized and renamed the Adventist Disaster and Relief Agency (ADRA) with increasing emphasis on community development. Today, for many in the church ADRA is the public face of Adventist relief and welfare work, but the bulk of ADRA's funds comes

from the United States. Although Dorcas Societies and Community Service Centers continue to operate in some places, much of the corporate church's mindset seems to be a de facto "out-sourcing" of community work to ADRA. In several places around the world, instead of members contributing to the church's humanitarian work (as was the case with SAWS), some have come to believe that they have a right to receive help from ADRA. Confusion also exists in some parts of the world that Women's Ministries has come to replace the Dorcas Society, further weakening the work of the latter.

The upshot of all these organizational changes is that over the years, grass roots member support and involvement in community services has waned. Besides the need for prophetic, narrative, and ethical discourses in the church today, there seems to be a need for policy discourse that refocuses on member participation and support in working for the needy in society. A corollary issue to this discourse to refocus on member participation may be the need to reassess what appears to be an institutionalization of the church's welfare work. Given their understanding of the interconnectedness of human pain and suffering, Adventists have traditionally relied on their educational and medical institutions to respond to suffering. Could it be that this approach, depending as it does on the church's institutions, tends to emphasize the role of institutions at the expense of individual church member involvement? Indeed, as part of this discourse the question needs to be addressed whether the church should approach its role in society from an institution (*mater fidelium*) or from the perspective of the community of believers (*coetus fidelium*) (for a helpful discussion on this issue see Van Reken 1999:198-202 and Vander Meulen 1999:202-206). Indeed, there are those who may take the position that as communities in different parts of the world, the church is significantly involved in their local areas.

Further questions that need to be considered in relation to the church's agents of social intervention include the following. The church has cooperated with outside entities (the Red Cross, etc.) in the past on some matters of social action. At what levels and to what degree should such cooperation be encouraged? Also, since the church's involvement in social issues has a spiritual dimension, what spirituality, from an Adventist perspective, would be constitutive of a proper mode of engagement? (For a general discussion on spirituality in public theology, see Mouw 2005:471-484). With what voice and posture should the church's agents engage in the public square? These are the policy issues that if properly addressed in conjunction with the prophetic, narrative, and ethical discourses discussed above might encourage greater involvement by the church in social issues.

## Conclusion

In spite of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's involvement in several humanitarian activities and numerous statements on several issues of social concern, it is often criticized for not being sufficiently engaged in the public square. The reflections offered in this paper point to some disturbing patterns that require the attention of the church. These are particularly in the areas of racism, political activism, and issues regarding poverty and suffering. Quite clearly, the church's theology is in no way anti-society. It seems, however, that a greater appreciation of, and attention to the different levels of ethical discourses relevant to public theology could go a long way to improve not only the church's image but also its involvement in the public square. In particular, there is a great need for the church to develop a rigorous and comprehensive social doctrine to nurture the prophetic and policy discourse of the church both corporately and as a community of believers.

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