



## Cultural interactions between Europe and the United States in the nineteenth and its prospects for today

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### Abstract

While in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century - especially in France - intellectuals as Jules Michelet, Ernest Renan and Hippolyte Rivail Denizard, among many others, produced monumental works that would be studied to this day, North America - still under strong Victorian influence - was looking to build its identity. The United States, a young nation, culturally dependent on Britain, was a predominantly an agrarian State and strongly influenced by Puritan Protestantism. In this context, a frail, black woman, Ellen White wrote over seventy years, one hundred thousand manuscript pages - without the intellectualism of the French - but with remarkable depth on subjects as seemingly disparate as psychology, education, religion and diet. The purpose of this communication is to analyze the broad outlines of the holistic work of Ellen White from the context of a sense of her time and propose relations between the European production (French) for the period and her work, contributing to discussions between various areas of Humanities.

### Keywords

Culture. History. Humanities.

### Introduction

This article, as stated in its title, intends primarily to search for alleged cultural interactions between Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century from notes and observations of an American woman who lived in that period. Incidentally, the article intends to propose, from the results - and under a spiritual aspect, especially - perspectives to present society. From the methodological point of view, it will use the historiographic narrative known as micro-history from the time frame of the life of Ellen White, American writer, black, from New England, who wrote during most of her ninety-year-long life, between December 1844 and 1915 - the year of her death - more than one hundred thousand manuscript pages on the most diverse and sometimes controversial issues such as eschatology, practical religion, health, lifestyle and education, despite living under the Victorian morals of her time.

Despite such prolific career, Ellen White<sup>1</sup> is still little known outside the circle of denominational Protestant Seventh-day Adventists, the institution which she co-founded in the 1860s, perhaps exactly for that reason: being viewed simply as a religious leader, like many other women in the nineteenth century United States. There is another possible reason, however, adding up to the above: the fact that she had been stoned before 10 years of age, abruptly interrupting her studies, preventing her from resuming her formal education. She is considered to be an enemy of academic style, evidence provided by the tone

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<sup>1</sup> For a good initial introductory reading, I suggest: WHITE, E. *Christian Experience and Teachings of Ellen G. White*. Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1940; as well as LAND, G. *The World of Ellen G. White*. Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1987; DOUGLASS, H. *Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White*. Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1998; and KNIGHT, G. *Ellen Whites World: a fascinating look at the times in which she lived*. Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1998.

found in some of her specific writings. As example, according to White:

As I see the shelves piled up with ancient histories and other books that are never looked into, I think, why spend your money for that which is not bread? We do not need ancient lore to tell us the things that we must know now, just now.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these facts, her work is eminently teleological, aiming at human redemption, notwithstanding its dialectic and unsystematic character. It is under this admittedly redemptive quality and - beyond religion - a liberating quality as well, that her writings integrate physical, mental and moral discipline, reaching excellence as a body of experiential knowledge.

Hence the paradoxical motive for the choice of Ellen White as a character in a position of advantage in terms of highlighting possible interactions between Europe and the United States of her time: she was not a top academic researcher and largely ignored the European philosophy bequeathed to the United States - which most Americans of her time knew, according to Tocqueville<sup>3</sup> - and neither was she a fanatic supporter of patriotic nationalism, or even of federalism, as if it were something nearly "sacred". Still, she helped shape one of the first genuinely American religious institutions. Thus, without knowing it, she impersonated the image of a citizen who lived between two worlds separated by the Atlantic, seeing herself as a reformer half way between "philosophy and liberalism" - at the same time criticizing the new "American Way of Life" and the European fanaticism to the "rational", looking for a possible balance between these two systems.

### The United States and France in the XVIII and XIX centuries under Ellen White's review: primary annotations

In 1801, the first year of the XIX century, seen by many as the harbinger of the "fullness of time", two countries from what was viewed as the "civilized world" were experiencing different historical processes. In the Old World the post-Revolutionary France, under the command of Napoleon Bonaparte, had founded the Bank of France a year earlier, and now signed the Treaty of Badajoz bringing to an end the hostilities between Spain and Portugal at the core of the hegemonic war between France and England for the majority control of the world.

Moreover, an important document was signed: the Concordat of 1801, July 15, held between Napoleon Bonaparte and Pope Pius VII, restoring Catholicism in that country and making the pope himself archbishop of Lyon the following year. That important letter would not completely restore the Christian Religion in France. After all, a few years earlier, in 1798, "the French army entered Rome and made the pope a prisoner, and he died in exile".<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the wounds were still open, just to mention one example. After that date and until at least 1929, with the Lateran Treaty, the papal hierarchy would not reach the power it once had.

According to the Christian protestant view of Ellen White, the French Revolution was nothing but simply a great war against the Holy Bible which begun centuries earlier by the oppression of Rome. The course that France entered should be taken and studied as an example never to be followed. To her view, "when France rejected the gift of heaven, she sowed the seeds of anarchy and ruin, and the inevitable outworking of cause and effect resulted in the Revolution and the Reign of Terror".<sup>5</sup> All her work, specially her historiography, is based on the great cosmic conflict between two antagonistic forms, of which Earth is the great battlefield. However, this strict evangelical view of Ellen White, theologically antithetical to the liberal one - in vogue in her time - is supported by some of the

<sup>2</sup> WHITE, E. *Spiritual Food*. *The Gospel Herald*, 1, n. 12, p. 103-105, 1899. at p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> "I think there isn't, in the civilized world, a country where the people do less philosophy than the United States. Americans have no philosophical school of thier own and don't bother with all those that divide Europe. Hardly know their names". (Original in Portuguese: "*Creio que não há, no mundo civilizado, país em que o povo se ocupe menos de filosofia do que os Estados Unidos. Os americanos não têm escola filosófica própria e preocupam-se pouquíssimo com todas as que dividem a Europa. Mal sabe o nome delas*"). TOCQUEVILLE, A. *A democracia na América*. Livro II: Sentimentos e Opiniões. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2004. p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> WHITE, E. *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*. Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1950. p. 266.

<sup>5</sup> WHITE, 1950, p. 230.

most prestigious European writers and historians of religion as the Scottish that wrote Sir Walter Scott's historical novel (although she definitely did not approve of the Romantic movement); historian of religion and president of the Theological School of Geneva J.H. Merle D'Aubigné, cited at least once by Stendhal through Julien Sorel in his work "Le Rouge et le Noir", and the Scotsman James A. Wylie, a Presbyterian minister and author of the famous work History of Protestantism. In the book "The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan", the basis of ecclesiastical history, and of eschatological meaning to the Seventh-day Adventists, first published in 1888, Scott is quoted 21 times, D'Aubigné 45 and Wylie 35 times. Particularly, the three quotations intertwined constitute the mainstream historical source for the composition of this vast book, considered of vital importance among her writings.

Although Ellen White did not abrogate her Christianity, both Puritan and Anabaptist (European heritage) and Congregationalist with genuinely American characteristics, as can be seen in her above mentioned book, she prefers to take the European religious historiography in full in order to write one of her own, even if her source authors did not totally agree with all of her denominational beliefs. Thus, she linked the already long-settled European intellectualism as a primary source which told of her own view of the world, a new one, but typically American and increasingly distant from the European religion and all its intransigence. We are herein confronted with an important legacy of European cultural interaction to the making of a religious denomination that hardly exists in large parts of contemporary Europe, but that is highly representative in the United States and Latin America. The biography of Ellen White demonstrates that despite the *modus vivendi* of the young nation, to look away from the Old World appears to be very difficult, if not impossible, even in terms of religious point of view, so different between the two continents.

Meanwhile, in 1801 North America, Thomas Jefferson took office as the third president of the young country<sup>6</sup>, considered one of the fathers of

the nation (as the previous two still had to contend with post-war issues). He planned to implement the Republican ideals seeking at the same time the total equality between men (gender equality would need to wait for another century or more) in an idyllic environment made of many small towns: where they could live in harmony with nature, in a modest existence, without frills, but also without deprivation, where the noise, the distractions and problems of big cities - including the remarkable divisions of classes - were not replicated. The United States should be born without vices or vicissitudes, leading both the New and the Old World to following the same ideals of the 1776 Charter and, at the same time, a steadfast certainty of being blessed by divine favors, though Jefferson, at least in theory, was quite away from the traditional Christian conceptions of his time because, being a deist, like Voltaire, he questioned the idea of a divine revelation, while at the same time not questioning the existence of a creator God. Once again, in the very center of temporal power, the paradox was clear: a deist ruled a nation which thought itself full of revelations and assumptions that should be shown and deployed worldwide! Although Ellen White was not quite adept to deism, she agreed with the idyllic ideals, which she thought should be universal. According to her:

Life in the cities is fake and artificial. The intense passion for money getting, the whirl of excitement and pleasure seeking, the thirst for display, the luxury and extravagance, all forces are That, with the great masses of Mankind, are turning the mind from life's true purpose. They are opening the door to a thousand evils. Upon the youth they have almost irresistible power. One of the most subtle and dangerous temptations that assail the children and youth in the cities is the love of pleasure. Holidays are numerous; games and horse racing draw thousands, and the whirl of excitement and pleasure attracts them away from the sober duties of life. Money that should have been saved for better uses is frittered away for amusements. Through the working of trusts, and the results of labor unions and strikes, the conditions of life in the city are constantly becoming more and more difficult. Serious troubles are before us; and

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Jefferson took office as third president of the United States of America on March 4, 1801, precisely in the first half of the first year of the nineteenth century,

and he is considered up to this day, by the overwhelming majority of Americans, the father of the nation.

for many families removal from the cities will become a necessity.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear in this quote that she helped build a denomination that was always in tune with the national assumptions. Although she was the daughter of her own time and often her writings reflect assumptions of her era, she did not agree with any personal or national situation(s) that did not first reconcile God with everyday plans. Because of the rationalist excesses she condemned France and because of the materialistic and recreational activities, the United States, including their founding personalities, such as Thomas Paine, also a deist, whose famous pamphlet “Common Sense” helped convince the citizens about the necessity of the Revolution. According White: “Thomas Paine has passed into his grave, but his works live to curse the world, and those who doubt the truth of God’s word will place these infidel productions in the hands of the young and inexperienced, to fill their hearts with the poisonous atmosphere of doubt”.<sup>8</sup>

### Fundamental differences between the U.S. and France and the holistic view of Ellen White

The Jeffersonian United States should, in theory, follow the ideology the French deployed with their Revolution - since the American Revolution itself was inspired by the French ideologues - but without the alleged excesses of the former, especially in the religious outcome which, in France, had become a radical one. In searching an egalitarian society in idyllic towns the U.S. somehow anticipated the Romantic movement - apparently just in that particular point - that only decades later would arrive in America via transcendental personages like Ralph Waldo Emerson and his trip to England, although the movement would not effectively establish itself there in the end. According to the German-American theologian Paul Tillich:

There has never been in the United States a true romantic period. There was some imitation imported from England, but the life of more educated Americans has not received

much influence of romanticism. As a result, no much importance was granted to imagination.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that the Romantic Movement did not fully affect the United States, coupled with his well-known national pragmatism later synthesized by the philosophy of John Dewey. The American sense of what was called “manifest destiny” differentiate the U.S. both from France and from all the other countries in the world. The “manifest destiny”, has undoubtedly a much more religious tone than the “civilizing mission” of France. There was a “great mission in the destiny of its people [the U.S.], a tendency for expansion, thirst for land, thirst for power and novelty, needs that have been fulfilled by themselves”.<sup>10</sup> Americans, more than the French, according to Niebuhr “except in moments of aberration we do not think of ourselves as the potential masters, but as tutors of mankind in its pilgrimage to perfection”.<sup>11</sup>

Despite all these differences, Ellen White was not a romantic, as we noticed, and absolutely did not focus on nationalist issues, stating that “national and denominational distinctions be laid aside. Caste and rank are not recognized by God and should not be by his workers”.<sup>12</sup> Thus, she could not agree with Renan, as in Eley who said:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of

<sup>9</sup> As in the Portuguese version: “nunca houve nos Estados Unidos um verdadeiro período romântico. Houve alguma importação da Inglaterra, mas a vida das pessoas mais educadas não recebeu muita influência do romantismo. Em consequência disso, nunca se deu muita importância à imaginação”. TILLICH, P. *Perspectivas da Teologia Protestante nos séculos XIX e XX*. São Paulo: ASTE, 2010. p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> LERNER, M. *America as a civilization: life and thought in the United States today*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957. p. 886.

<sup>11</sup> NIEBUHR, R. *The Irony of American History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. p. 71.

<sup>12</sup> According to White: “Let national and denominational distinctions be laid aside. Caste and rank are not recognized by God and should not be by his workers”. WHITE, Ellen. *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Battle Creek, v. 72, n. 14, April 2, 1895. at p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> WHITE, E. *The Ministry of Healing*. Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1942. p. 364.

<sup>8</sup> WHITE, E. *Messages to Young People*. Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1930. p. 85.

the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.<sup>13</sup>

Nor, in terms of religion, did she agree with Michelet who stated that the Revolution had given “freedom to religious people” and that she herself “carry inside a religion”.<sup>14</sup> Her texts favored a holistic human being, considering human life an endless search for comprehensive education. She wrote: “True education embraces physical, mental, and moral training, in order that all the powers shall be fitted for the best development, to do service for God, and to work for the uplifting of humanity”.<sup>15</sup> The temperance clubs, common in her time, influenced her to write, as of 1863, about having a healthy lifestyle: vegetarian if possible. In 1903, she wrote her magnum opus on education within the educational reforms being implemented since the 30’s of the nineteenth century under the influence of Pestalozzi and other great thinkers of education. She also wrote extensively on the education of the body, always linked with education of the mind, as well as on the perennially important issue of human rights<sup>16</sup>. In spite of many nationalist political issues, Ellen White wrote an eminently practical theology, concerned with man in his relationship with God, in all its senses, whomever or wherever he was.

## Conclusion

It is a verifiable fact that Ellen White was influenced by her time, both by her country of origin - in terms of religion and by Europe, mainly in terms of historiography. She specifically proposed interactions between Europe and the United States, when she took a stance on political issues as to what was the cause for the French Revolution while at the same time criticizing the founders of her own nation, using a privileged European historiography to address an eschatological theme that was typically American.

She realized in the century of the great social and historical changes, that it is impossible for human beings to avoid using the knowledge acquired, but there would be no use if this knowledge wasn’t paired with the knowledge of the Bible, the only rule of faith and morals. For our present time, troubled by economic and social issues, her writings inspire encouragement, focusing on a different and possible world, based on a brotherhood of human beings who are seeking the same goal: the redemption of anything that makes us less human. Thus, freedom, equality, and fraternity should become much more than slogans, but the common goal of everyone who longs for a new reality.

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<sup>13</sup> ELEY, G.; SUNY, R. *Becoming National: A Reader*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> MICHELET, J. *História da Revolução Francesa: da queda da Bastilha à festa da Federação*. São Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 2003. p. 381.

<sup>15</sup> WHITE, E. *Call to Stand Apart*. Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2002. p. 65.

<sup>16</sup> WHITE, Ellen. *Testimonies for the Church*. Vol. 7. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948, p. 180.