

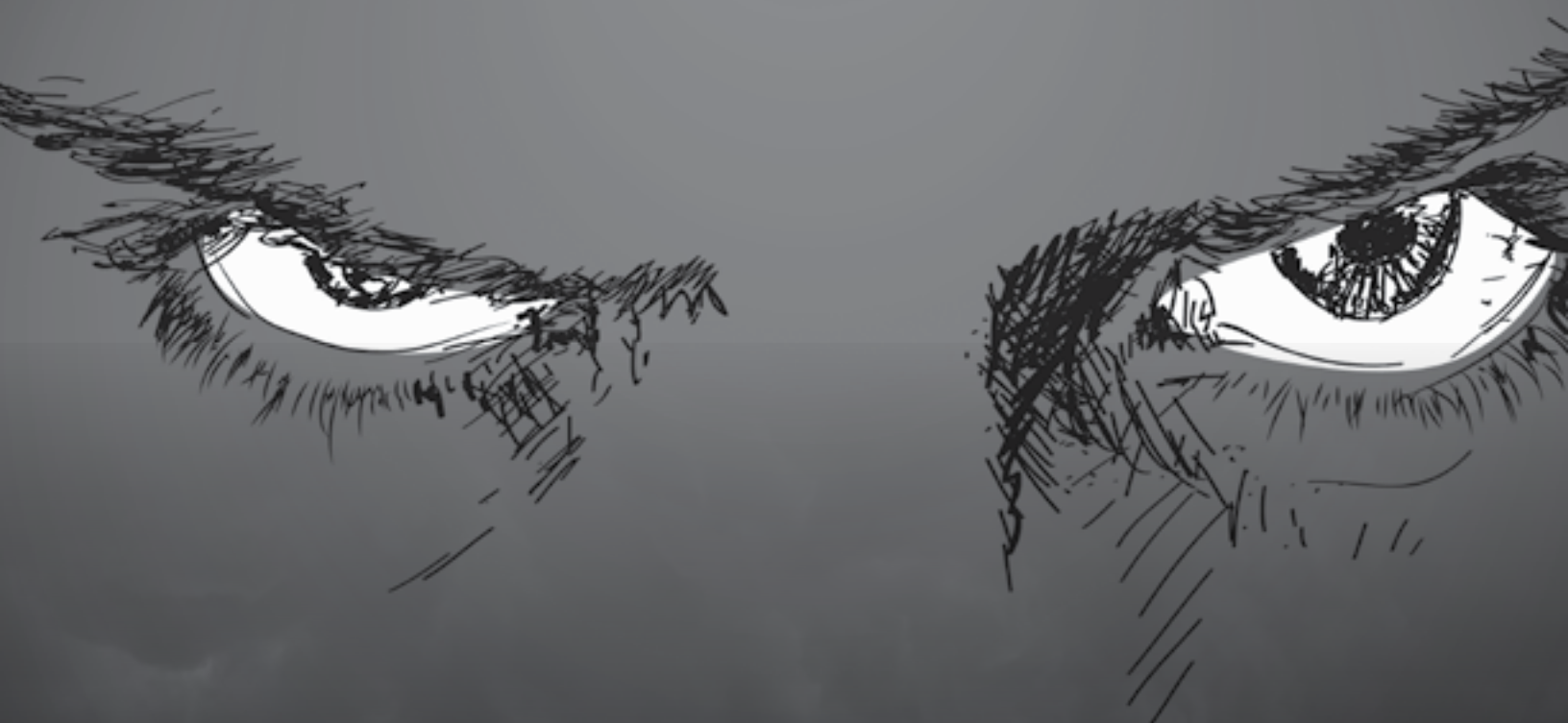
Visions in Hamburg

A Pastor's Nervous
Breakdown

In a Relationship
with Satan

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In This Issue

3 EDITORIAL

In a Relationship with Satan

By Loren Seibold

8 FEATURE

Exorcism: Inspecting the Twin Rails of Modern Science and the Bible

By Smuts van Rooyen

12 JOHN BRUNT

Disease, Demons, and Exorcism

14 ESCHATOLOGY

God and Pandemics: The Religious Impact of "Pestilences"

By Reinder Bruinsma

20 HERITAGE

The Four Seers of Hamburg

*By Holger Teubert,
translated by Dennis Meier*

26 THE EXEGETE

Mark 8:33: "Get Behind Me, Satan!"

By Olive J. Hemmings

28 SOCIAL JUSTICE

How Satan Helps Us Address Social Justice Issues

By Maury Jackson

31 WORLD CHURCH

Mapping Africa's Spiritual Universe: Spiritism, Ancestors, and the Character of God

By Admiral Ncube

34 STORY

The Pastor's Nervous Breakdown

By Debbie Hooper Cosier

38 BARELY ADVENTIST

News Briefs

39 CONTRIBUTORS

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In a Relationship with Satan

By Loren Seibold

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG PERSON, SATAN WAS EVERYWHERE.

I remember sermons in church and chapel services in the academy that were devoted mostly to Satan and his activities. The stories were scary, and we were credulous.

I remember a sermon about Ouija boards, which were said to give messages from beyond the grave, and being told that those messages were, instead, dictated by Satan. In one story the Ouija board wouldn't leave its owner's house; it kept reappearing in the closet, even though the teenage operator had watched it burn in the rubbish barrel repeatedly. The Ouija board was the gateway that eventually allowed Satan to talk to the teen directly.

I can't remember how the story ended, but I remember being astonished when I saw Ouija boards in the toy section of a store in my little town in North Dakota and realized how common communication with the devil must be. (Once, in public school, I watched from a distance as a group of fellow students played with an Ouija board. The answers they got made me think that Satan was rather stupid, but that didn't diminish my belief in it.)

Satan, it seemed to me back then, was far more available than God was. God didn't always answer prayers—or even give us any indication why he hadn't. Satan was always there, ever alert. It wasn't just that Satan would tempt you to do wrong. Satan had a presence, a solidity, that God with his “still small voice” couldn't overshadow. Satan could be exciting and horror-movie frightening.

I remember hearing sermons and stories about séances and the occult and fortune-telling. To listen to Adventists of that time, and some today, you would think that occultists and spiritists and mediums and witches were everywhere! The astrology column in the newspaper was satanic; I wouldn't even glance at it. Dungeons and Dragons was supposed to be satanic; I avoided it. Hypnotism was satanic. So was meditation, yoga, and by some accounts, acupuncture. In at least one family I know, the television comedies *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie* were prohibited as satanic. Rock music was

satanic, so I burned all of my records in the rubbish barrel, just like the teenager with the Ouija board. (Fortunately, they didn't reappear on my shelf.)

Temptations to do things we shouldn't were always satanic, but those weren't just about killing or stealing; they could be rather Adventist-specific, such as going to a movie or dating a non-Adventist girl. Even vague impressions could be satanic. A godly widowed woman in our church confessed to her daughter that sometimes when she awakened at night, she felt as if her late husband were lying next to her, almost as if she could feel him breathing. Her daughter counseled her to say, “In the name of Jesus Christ, be gone!” and the evil presence would disappear.

It seems apparent to me now that the “evil presence” was a manifestation of the grief of a drowsy woman. But that isn't how she and her daughter saw it.

Satanology

What I have come to realize is that we didn't just tolerate Satan. We needed him. He was as much a part of our salvation story as Jesus Christ is.

Satan, it seems, is strong but is not much of a tactician. He isn't subtle. Once you know how he works, you can spot him instantly and control him through the incantation “in the name of Jesus, I command you”—though not before a rather exciting brush with the supernatural.

Still, the odds against escaping Satan's clutches were better than the odds for being saved, of which none of us had any certainty.

What must not be forgotten is that we Adventists, by history and theology, are in a relationship with Satan. Our whole understanding of salvation has to do with the great controversy, a story in which Satan is one of the leading figures. This is why we reference Satan so often. The myths that swirl through the church about Satanic activity have become necessary: Satan must be real, or our story can't be.

The more I've studied religion, the more it's become clear to me that the interplay between God and Satan behaves as a sort of competitive

We Adventists, by history and theology, are in a relationship with Satan. Our whole understanding of salvation has to do with the great controversy, a story in which Satan is one of the leading figures.

polytheism. There is a purpose to life; however, that purpose isn't Christ and Christ alone, but the interplay between God and Satan, the good God and the once-heavenly-but-now-deceptive-and-still-powerful demigod. For Adventists it has never been enough to say that Jesus died for our sins and, therefore, we have eternal life. We place ourselves in the middle of a battle whose stakes are universal. Like characters in a dysfunctional family, we must try to psych out the leaders of the teams and figure out their intentions.

And both of them, it turns out, are less than fully transparent. God, as presented to me as a young person, was the more inscrutable of the two. Not everything God promised was quite as clear as it appeared: in spite of the many promises for peace and salvation, God would let people endure terrible suffering, keeping divine silence and distance so that they could grow close to Godself or learn some lesson. God would even tempt and test individuals, as in the story of Pharaoh. Sometimes God answered prayers, such as saving a person from a bad illness. But in the end, we always had to make excuses for God, because everyone suffered and died.

Not so Satan. Satan is a liar, but his activity is identifiable. He didn't make excuses; he was just a bad dude. If there wasn't enough good in your life to convince you that you were being blessed, there was always enough bad to let you know that Satan was busy. Given that we're born in sin, suffer through life, and then die, here on Earth evil was a more substantive reality than goodness.

Supernaturalism

I know now that most of what I was told about Satan was fiction. It was exciting to teenagers and gullible adults. Those of us who heard those stories as children carried the terror of them for years.

Yet Satan could also serve a purpose: he was proof that something supernatural was out there. Satan is a spiritual being, and even though he may not be as powerful as God, he's way more powerful than you and me. This means that if you can pick up some proof of something happening that you can't explain, even if it is caused by Satan, *that may be enough to prove the supernatural and, therefore, that God exists, too!*

We Adventists have always been a little suspicious of anything too exciting or miraculous, even when God was supposed to be behind it. Demonic activity was at least something interesting in our often-silent spiritual reality—negatively spiritual, but spiritual nonetheless.

The great controversy story made people feel that there was more to life than the mundane getting up in the morning, more than everyday working, struggling, studying. We were part of a universal war that God hadn't yet won, and we had to pitch in against Satan to save the world.

We needed to identify Satan, wherever he was. And the more we looked for him, the more we saw him.

Satan's Guidance

Here's another illustration of how Satan plays a part in our spiritual journey. This is a true story, yet not so unusual that you have not heard some variation of it, or even thought it yourself.

I was talking with a pastoral couple about a call that had come their way. The church really wanted them, but accepting it would require buying a house in the new, more expensive area.

When I talked to the wife, she said: "Satan knows we're serving God really well here. That's why he's made that church pressure us so much." The husband, separately, said, "It seems to me that Satan is throwing up obstacles to us in the real estate market there, which makes me think that's where God really wants us, or Satan wouldn't be trying so hard to keep us away."

Not surprisingly, they'd had different opinions on the opportunity from the beginning. He was bored with his church and wanted a new challenge. She loved her house, her job, and the children's school, so she wanted to stay put. There was, as there is for all of us, a measure of self-interest in their interpretation of divine guidance.

However, here is what struck me the most: *both of them had mentioned Satan as a spiritual authority figure!* What might have been seen as God giving them an opportunity devolved into a reverse-psychology demonic struggle, in the midst of which they were caught.

I've heard this in many forms. "That's what Satan wants you to think," or "Satan is causing that feeling in you," or "Satan wants you to do that, so do just the opposite."

Often the motive assigned to Satan is legitimate: God really *doesn't* want you to succumb to the temptation to have sex with someone else's wife, no matter how entrancing that seems to you.

But sometimes, as for my pastor friend's family, it isn't nearly so clear. Stay or go? They could have done either and served God. So why were they trying to psych out Satan, trying to take their cues from what Satan didn't want them to do rather than trying to discern what God wanted of them? Or, for that matter, why weren't they using their common sense to make a decision, as I believe God would want them to do?

Satanic Eschatology

Jesus' return for us in the clouds of glory is a prospect of pure joy, but we Adventists have never allowed ourselves to embrace a salvation quite that uncomplicated.

A few years ago, I again read through our two primary works of Adventist eschatology: *Daniel and the Revelation* by Uriah Smith and *The Great Controversy* by Ellen White. The first was a "scientific" treatment of the Bible's eschatological books, which the latter then made into a narrative. Smith ran the numbers and matched up cryptic passages with unlikely bits of history. But Ellen White made it into a story—a story about Satan. To be sure, each chapter has heroes who held the banner of truth. But Satan looms over them all, and although we are assured it is going to turn out all right in the end, we are moment by moment on the razor's edge of danger. Only about three pages at the end of *The Great Controversy* are devoted to the unalloyed joy of salvation. Most of the rest is about what we humans have done and need to keep doing to beat back an attacking Satan.

Shouldn't it be enough for Christians that when Jesus "disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15, NIV)? Not for us Adventists. For us, Satan is far from defeated. We are tasked with decoding his intentions as we see them played out in governments, in the Vatican, and among apostate

Protestants, all of whom we say want to outlaw our day of worship and then persecute us.

Yet Satan doesn't give up. I remember that as a young person I read this terrifying quotation: "As the crowning act in the great drama of deception, Satan himself will personate Christ. ... In different parts of the earth, Satan will manifest himself among men as a majestic being of dazzling brightness, resembling the description of the Son of God given by John in the Revelation (Revelation 1:13-15). ... The people prostrate themselves in adoration before him, while he lifts up his hands and pronounces a blessing upon them, as Christ blessed His disciples when He was upon the earth. His voice is soft and subdued, yet full of melody. In gentle, compassionate tones he presents some of the same gracious, heavenly truths which the Saviour uttered; he heals the diseases of the people.... This is the strong, almost overmastering delusion."¹

Can't Satan read? I wondered. Doesn't he see that we know all of this and realize that we're on to him? And if he does, how stupid is he to persist? I don't know the answer. Satan isn't stupid. Perhaps he's predestined to play his part, whether he likes it or not.

In any case, in this story's denouement there is no rest nor assurance for God's people. We not only fight to the bitter end, but we are rewarded by having God's Spirit withdrawn from us as probation closes, so that our penultimate experience as mortal beings is unimaginable spiritual suffering.

Satanic Christianity

Satan is so strong that he has even poisoned Christianity. We already knew that the Vatican was teeming with demons in spiritual form and that it was satanic for Pentecostals to speak in tongues. Drums and guitars in church were satanic. Indeed, any religion that didn't teach our doctrine of the state of the dead was by definition flirting with spiritism, which was satanic.

When I was a child, for the Friday night program on a church campout, as all of us clustered about a campfire on our camping chairs or convenient sections of logs, my aunt read a story that had been sent to her by a pastor from California. (She was specific about this last, which to us back then made it true.) It was about a missionary in South America

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I still say that given how little the Bible tells us about Satan and how much of what we believe about Satan consists of folk tales and mythology, it is unwarranted to give Satan or his angels as much attention as we do.

who lost his wife and two children to a tropical disease. The man descended into inconsolable grief that nothing would assuage. One night, in despair, he was convinced to attend a charismatic church service. After the music, the speaking in tongues, and the prayers for a miracle—suddenly his two dead children appeared in front of him and clambered onto his lap! He, fortunately, had the presence of mind to mutter, “In the name of Jesus Christ, I command Satan to leave this place.” The children disappeared into thin air.

The flickering campfire. My aunt, whom I trusted. A story sent *by a pastor*. I can feel at this moment the thrill, the rush of fear that went through me.

Later, I would ask questions. Where did this story come from? Who vouches for the truth of it? Why would God *not* give this man the comfort he needed, but Satan *did*? What of the psychological state of grief that causes people to hallucinate those they’ve lost?

But those questions reveal only my misunderstanding of the story’s purpose, which was to show that Satan was so devious that almost anything—*especially non-Adventist Christianity*—could be a channel for him.

Even with that “in the name of Jesus” incantation available, the story left me terrified.

Satan in the Bible

Satan makes two major appearances in the Hebrew Bible: first in the Garden of Eden, then later in the fable of Job. It is hard to take either literally—especially the scene in Job, which unflatteringly portrays God as meeting up with Satan to negotiate Job’s suffering and the death of Job’s family.

Neither Ezekiel 28:12-19, which names the conceited king of Tyre as its hero, nor Isaiah 14:12, which identifies the subject as a proud king (apparently of Babylon), gives any evidence of having a primary application to the heavenly origin of an evil demigod named Lucifer. (Lucifer, in fact, means “morning star” and refers to the planet Venus; it is not the name of an evil being, except as Isaiah 14 was mistranslated.) Whatever *secondary* application some allege is allegorical and unproven.

Because the Hebrews were supposed to eschew polytheism, the Old Testament ends up complicating our theology in another way: God, who tells the

chosen people that there is only one God, takes responsibility for everything that happens, bad and good. God causes a Flood that destroys nearly everyone, confounds languages and sends people wandering across the Earth, sends the chosen people into slavery, destroys nations, wantonly kills people (or orders them killed), and even sends plagues and punishments down on the chosen, including multiple invasions of the holy city that end in Israel’s captivity.

It isn’t until the Greek era that Satan is clearly identified and given a regular job. Almost all mentions of a personified evil one appear in the four Gospels and in Revelation. Satan makes a personal cameo in Matthew 4’s temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, but beyond that we most often encounter rank-and-file disposable sub-demons who “possess” unfortunate people and, in at least one instance, pigs. As for Paul, he acknowledges sin, a tempter, and (in Romans) principalities and powers out in the spiritual realm, but he’s less specific than Jesus about identifying those as Satan.

Revelation repopulates the spiritual universe. Satan is personally messing about in the seven churches, and it’s easy to identify him in chapter 12’s great red dragon with seven heads, ten horns, seven crowns, and a massive tail that sweeps stars out of the heavens. It is in Revelation 20 that Satan comes into his own as the Bible’s villain: he’s captured, imprisoned on Earth for a thousand years, then inexplicably set free with a resurrected army of evil followers to attack the holy city, which has just landed on the new earth like a cubical spaceship. It is there that his existence ends in fire.

Trickery and Gullibility

Is it any wonder that our Adventist forebears were so conscious of Satan? While our calculations come from Daniel, our picture of the war between God and the evil demigod, with the saints caught in the middle, is from Revelation.

It was 19th-century American religious history that solidified Seventh-day Adventists’ relationship with the devil: about the same time that Adventists were getting traction in eastern New York, the Fox sisters in western New York were starting a new fad of

communicating with the dearly departed in the spirit world.

One would suppose that today, in a world where we have demonstrated humanity's ability to imagine and carry out indescribable evil, and where science has mapped our psychology and can more easily expose sources of deception and cruelty, we would find a personified evil unnecessary. Not so. While the action has shifted from gullible Ouija boardists to reputed devil-worshippers who sacrifice children, Christians are still calling on Satan to scare the faithful into heaven.

I don't know if there's a real devil or not, though I've seen no convincing evidence of one. Evil seems to me better explained as the absence of good and as disobedience to God's moral principles. We weak human beings require no anti-hero in the spiritual aether to make it happen. As for the occult or demonic manifestations, most of that is better explained by psychology, deception, trickery, human cruelty, or play-acting. Even in the heyday of Spiritualism, honest exposers such as Harry Houdini debunked so many séances (often by just turning on the light) that mediums went out of business by the thousands. The Fox sisters openly admitted that their mysterious "rappings" were a hoax—though many of the movement's true believers refused to believe their confession.

Even today, what is supposedly "scientific" spiritualism by "psychics" such as John Edwards is just a trick called "cold reading," assisted by heavy video editing. People believe this nonsense because they want to believe it—or perhaps because, as expressed in the quote persistently but erroneously attributed to showman P. T. Barnum, "There's a sucker born every minute."

Theologizing with the Devil

Even saying what I have is going to frighten some who read this. It is extremely important to many Adventists that we believe as strongly in the devil as we do in God. When I once mentioned in a sermon that the man among the tombs was clearly mentally ill, I was denounced by a cluster of people in my congregation because, they said, mental illness can't be cast into pigs. They reported me to the conference office. I can't

be a true Adventist if I don't believe in demons, they said, and it was to them not a sufficient defense that I believed in the power of God.

Yet I still say that given how little the Bible tells us about Satan and how much of what we believe about Satan consists of folk tales and mythology, it is unwarranted to give Satan or his angels as much attention as we do. Pastors who preach sermons about Satan, with mythological stories to back them up, are guilty of malpractice. Teachers who scare children and teens with such stories should avoid being in the proximity of millstones (Mark 9:42).

Please understand that to quit talking so much about the person of Satan in no way suggests that we minimize evil thoughts and actions. We human beings think evil, do evil, and perpetrate evil. We must fight against evil temptations constantly. Yet the Bible says, in a thousand ways, that God is more powerful than evil. The New Testament message is that God has overcome sin, death, and Satan (if there is such a one).

You are not saved by fighting against a crude depiction of an invisible caricature of evil, which is as far as many Christians get in their understanding of sin. You are saved by keeping your eyes on Christ, by trusting in God's power and doing God's will. You defeat Satan by opposing the sin in the world as Jesus did, both in your personal moral choices, and in the unjust systems and structures in which we live and work.

Finally, can there be anything more foolish than trying to psych out Satan and making decisions based on what you think Satan doesn't want you to do? First, if there is a Satan, he is smarter than you and understands reverse psychology better. Why take your cues from the father of lies? And second, if you believe that God has your best interests at heart, why do you need to know what Satan thinks?

Enough of this crude satanic mythology. Let's instead start following God and battling the effects of sin that are so apparent around us. **AT**

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (1858, 1888 ed.), p. 624.

EXORCISM:

Inspecting the Twin Rails of Modern Science and the Bible

BY SMUTS VAN ROOYEN

I am by training both a psychologist and a theologian, so I wondered: What would result from a clinical diagnosis of the demon-possessed man crying amidst the tombs (Mark 5:1-20)?

Yet when I compared the man's symptoms to the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, his malady didn't precisely match any of its pathologies or disorders. Clearly, the American Psychiatric Association had not encountered a mental disorder that could transfer from a person into 2,000 pigs.

Faced with this problem, my revised purpose becomes to explain how a prescientific New Testament should relate to modern science in life today. But how?

If you've seen the movie *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?*, you'll know that a jigger is a small handcar with pump handles that is used for inspecting the railroad. I posit, for our examination, that the New Testament and modern science are two separate and parallel rails held in place by strong ties. We will inspect these rails, using for our jigger the concept of exorcism.

The Biblical Rail

Isn't it interesting that Jesus never discussed hard science? He never solved a problem using the scientific method! It seems he could at least have helped clear up his generation's scientific misconceptions by telling them where the sun went at night, or how it's held up in the sky. His intention, however, was not to elucidate science but to show us the Father and to establish his kingdom. He used nature, lilies, rain, and sunshine to impress us with what God is like.

An early president of Union Theological Seminary, William Wisner Adams, contended: "The Bible is merely an effort, and a metaphorical effort at that, to cram into the human imagination the unimaginable immensity of God."

While this description may overstate metaphor and downplay history in Scripture, nevertheless I am deeply moved by it. Cramming God into the human imagination is a magnificent depiction of what the prescientific Bible does for me. I cannot live my life trapped in laboratory glassware.

To those who are leery of the notion that biblical truth is often metaphorical, I would simply say that its metaphors and myths are given us by God. These stories are ours. We claim them as our heritage.

The Bible is not science, but it takes us beyond science. It is conceivable, for example, that archaeology could prove that the crucifixion of Christ did occur in history. If everything came together in the right way—the discovery of the real nails, the actual wood, and a handwritten note in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin—we could reasonably say, "Jesus died in A.D. 31." But one could never conclude from the archeological evidence that "Jesus died in A.D. 31 *for me*." Yet it is precisely this "for me" that goes beyond science, that captures our hearts and imagination.

Exorcisms

The exorcisms (dare I use such a loaded Hollywood word?) in the New Testament also take us beyond science—that is, beyond the *DSM-5*. As prescientific accounts, they do what science cannot do. Generally speaking, they show how Jesus ushered in the kingdom of heaven. Christ burglarized the house of the devil, tied him to the kitchen chair, and inaugurated the reign of his Father (Matt. 12:25-29).

Specifically, they demonstrate:

- *How Jesus established his authority.* He shushes a disruptive spirit in a synagogue (Mark 1:21-28).
- *That all things are possible with God.* He commands a deaf and mute spirit to respond to his verbal, auditory command (Mark 9:14-29).
- *That all people are equal and are accepted by the Messiah.* Without even seeing the afflicted child, he removes a demon from the daughter of a sagacious woman in Syrian Phoenicia (Mark 7:24-30).

I particularly like the account of the possessed man crying amidst the tombs. Nothing can quell his fear of death. Nothing can tie down his anxiety. He walks the cemetery crying aloud of our human mortality. The man lives in a graveyard.

Then Jesus comes to him from across the deep waters, where the Jews believed the demons dwelled, and delivers him. What a delivery! The Lord drives his foul demons right into a herd of unclean pigs, who promptly rush down into the water, where they drown. The man living under the weight of his own mortality is restored to himself.

The Rail of Modern Science

How does the *DSM-5* depict a resurrection and the defeat of death? How does it cram the glory of God into human imagination? It simply does not do so. Yet, the scientific rail is also magnificent. It is my "godless rail," because it does not allow me to explain nature by means of God.

Scientific method is not happy with a statement such as "God makes my heart beat." Science would argue against that assertion by saying: "If that is so, why bother with understanding the electrical system of the heart? How do we learn this way? God has no explanatory power." Since the days of English statesman Francis Bacon, philosophy of science has delimited scientific method to exclude both divine and human instrumentality as the cause of phenomena.

For example, we may not assert that the South defeated the North in a given battle during the Civil War because God orchestrated it so. When we do this, we learn nothing about the

science of war. We feel no need to understand the tactics used, the terrain of the battlefield, the firepower, or other factors that win and lose battles. Science vigorously protects explanatory power, as well it should. Evidence must have observable explanatory power. This approach has made science incredibly successful. I get this delimitation, and I am perfectly willing to let that be.

The scientific branch of learning has served me very well and has given me great pleasure to boot. I am only too aware that daily doses of insulin keep me alive. Quite something, don't you think? And Google Earth opens up the planet to me in a very

Julie's Story

I once fought for Julie, using the scientific tools of the unbeliever. But I accomplished what Jesus would have me do.

While I was working at an inpatient facility for chemically dependent adolescents, Julie was admitted for treatment. She was a young woman in deep addictive distress, a very ill 17-year-old. My heart went out to her, because she seemed so crushed by sadness. Since she was a Christian, Julie was assigned to me for both individual and family counseling, because I was the minister on our therapy team.

Her father was an intimidating man, a leader in their

I could not let the notion of demon possession stand. It did not fit the young woman I had met, nor the world of science. Consequently, I chose to challenge their religious defense head-on and with some vigor.

personal way. I sometimes run my little mouse arrow over my brother's grave in a cemetery in South Africa. It helps me to make such a visit. In the morning I use my cell phone to send messages to my children as I slurp my coffee, and I often get instant replies. Science has allowed me, during the pandemic, to watch more than a hundred episodes of *McLeod's Daughters* on Netflix and thereby save my sanity.

Connecting the Rails

Although the rails do not intersect, they are connected by railroad ties that give the lines support and hold them together to reach a common destination. The two rails, in my view, are "christotelic" (Greek *telos*, or goal). Increasingly for me this term replaces the inadequate term "Christocentric," which is static and does not speak of dynamic movement toward a destination. Together the two rails of science and the Bible promote the objectives of Christ.

A scientific medical institution, by alleviating suffering, advances the goals of Christ. He, too, was a healer. But modern hospitals and trained medical staff cannot be expected to operate in a prescientific fashion. Moderns must fight in their own armor. The incarnate Christ is with them, as well.

fundamentalist church, an administrator in a national insurance company. Her mother was an overly sweet person who obviously had been trained by her husband's anger to navigate life as if walking on eggshells.

During our first family session, the father described the repeated attempts he and his pastor had made to exorcise the demon of addiction from Julie. All such undertakings had failed, he said, for this was a devil that could be expelled only by much prayer. They would try again when she came home, if our 28-day program failed. His wife spoke quietly about the insufficiency of her faith during the dramatic casting out process. Julie simply wept and repeatedly said: "Mother, it's not your fault. I'm to blame. I do have something evil inside of me. There's nothing wrong with your faith."

Clearly, the whole family was avoiding the problem, whatever it was, by using a religious defense mechanism to deflect their issues.

Religion as a psychological defense is particularly hard to dislodge, because when therapists challenge faith, they are written off as liberal secularists who undermine commitment to God. Fortunately, it helped some that I was a minister, even if of a different brand.

But Julie was broken and in danger, and I could not let the notion of demon possession stand. It did not fit the young woman I had met, nor the world of science. Consequently, I

chose to challenge their religious defense head-on and with some vigor.

I insisted they describe their exorcism attempt to me in detail. I wanted them to hear themselves speak of it. Why did their attempt fail? Did the process aggravate or help their daughter's illness? How does the devil invade the life of a Christian? Was Julie a Christian? Did Jesus authorize them to perform the exorcism? How had it affected the relationship between the father and mother? How did they know that Julie was possessed? Why would they persist in trying something that was obviously not working? Was Julie in pain? I confronted their dogmatism. I spat in their soup by exposing how ridiculous their notions were. I made them look at Julie when she cried and tell me what they saw.

I justified my heavy confrontation with them by reminding myself that Jesus was kind to sinners but hard on Pharisees. The therapy team supported my very assertive approach and agreed that Julie needed someone in her corner. If the parents had pulled her out of the program, I believe we would have called the child welfare services.

But her depression continued unabated.

A breakthrough finally came for her in a group session. She had a bitter meltdown as she related that her father had sexually abused her multiple times and blamed her for his acts. The members of the group were terrific in identifying with her pain, rejecting exorcism as frighteningly weird, and insisting that the molestation was not her fault. Her recovery began.

Near the end of her inpatient experience, she asked me if I would hear her confession (the fifth step of Alcoholics Anonymous). Julie looked at me brightly and said: "I want to get it all out in the open. Sewage germs die in the sunlight." Of course, I was willing to help her.

We also decided that it would benefit her to confront her father, and we prepared for that event. I warned Julie that given his dominating ways, she was not to expect him to admit to anything. He probably would try to deny her sense of reality. She said she'd decided to believe herself and that she knew what had happened.


The face-off was surprisingly brief. Julie simply smashed through his pious defense with holy boldness. She wanted to know how he dared to say she was inhabited by a devil. Did he know the harm he had done to her? Could he see his hypocrisy? Could he call himself a Christian? Would he admit to sexually

abusing his own daughter? To our amazement, he caved almost immediately and began to beg for her forgiveness. Then we brought his wife in, and he told her what he had done to their child. She meekly confessed that she'd suspected it all along and that it was time they all stopped blaming the devil for their sin. She wept for not protecting her daughter. At the close of the encounter, when the father asked Julie if he could hug her, she replied, "I've forgiven you, Dad, but I'll never permit you to hug me again."

Julie kept her sobriety and two years later invited me to her wedding. Her dad accompanied her down the aisle. Her mom wept where she'd been seated. The failed exorcist was not the presiding minister.

What I Dare Not Say

If I were either a biblical person or a scientific person, it would be a lot easier for me. But since I'm both, the answers to life's questions are sometimes ambiguous and unclear. It is what it is. Therefore, I rely on the Spirit to *lead* me into all truth.

Answers neither drop from heaven, nor bubble up from the earth. I rely on being led by God. Too much mystery exists for me to be dogmatic. I am only reasonably certain of myself. So, I keep the rails of theology and science parallel and separate, and joyously ride my jigger using both. 

Disease, Demons, and Exorcism

By John Brunt

NO ONE CAN READ THE NEW TESTAMENT, especially the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), without noticing the prominent role that both healing and demon possession play in Jesus' ministry. Jesus is a healer, and he casts out demons. What is the relationship between these two activities? Did the Gospel writers simply attribute all sickness to the activity of demons?

Perhaps the best place to begin is with the summary statements that all three of the Synoptics include of Jesus' ministry. The first of these is found in Mark 1:32-34: "That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him" (NRSV¹).

Notice that the sick are "cured" (the Greek is *therapeuo*, from which we get the word *therapy*), whereas the demons are "cast out." Parallel passages in Matthew 8:16 and Luke 4:40-41 retain this distinction, although Luke speaks in the passive of the demons "coming out" rather than using the active form, "cast out."

The same distinction holds when Jesus prepares his disciples for mission activity. In all three accounts of when Jesus sends out the twelve, he gives them authority over *demons* and *unclean spirits* (two terms that are used synonymously throughout the Gospels). In Matthew 10:1-15 the disciples are to cast out demons and cure the sick. The same is true in Mark 6:7-13 and Luke 9:1-2. When Jesus sends out the 70 as recorded in Luke 10, he gives no instruction to cast out demons, but when the 70 return they rejoice that the demons were subject to them (verse 17).

Demons vs. Disease

This suggests that the writers of the Gospels saw a clear distinction between demon possession and disease. The symptoms of demon possession differ from and are far more bizarre than those of disease. Demons consistently speak with Jesus, know who he is, and protest being cast out. They can cause people they possess to cut themselves or have unusual strength, and the spirits can even leave humans and go into pigs (see Mark 5:1-20 and parallels in Matthew 8 and Luke 8).

This distinction between disease and demon possession doesn't carry through the Gospels consistently, however. For example, in Matthew 9:32-34 Jesus confronts a mute who was possessed by a demon. When Jesus cast out the demon, the man was able to speak. In the parallel passage in Luke 11:14, the demon itself is said to be mute, and again, when Jesus casts out the mute demon, the man speaks. Matthew 12:22 recounts an incident where a man with a demon is both mute and blind until his encounter with the Master Healer. In this case Matthew doesn't say that Jesus cast out the demon but, rather, that he "cured" the man, thereby associating demon possession with disease and mental illness.

Epilepsy

After the Transfiguration, Jesus came down from a high mountain and found a man whose boy the disciples could not heal. Mark 9:17 says that the boy had a "dumb spirit" (KJV, RSV), or literally a speechless spirit. But this spirit did much more than keep the boy from speaking. It convulsed him, threw him down into the fire, and made him foam at the mouth, grind his teeth, and become rigid. When Jesus commanded the spirit to come out of the boy, it convulsed him and left him

so debilitated that the crowd thought he was dead.

Mark never uses the word "demon" in this passage, but Matthew and Luke do. Scripture says that the boy had epilepsy (Matt. 17:15) and also that a demon came out of him (verse 18). Luke 9:42 says that the demon convulsed the boy, the unclean spirit came out, and Jesus "healed" him. (The Greek word for "healed" is different from the word translated "cured" in other passages we have reviewed.) The word "epilepsy" that Matthew uses appears in only one other passage in the New Testament, and that occurrence is also found in Matthew.

Matthew 4:24 lists a whole array of maladies that Jesus cured, including "all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics." Another example of the merging of healing and demon possession is found when Jesus cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits (Luke 7:21).

One of the most intriguing passages tells us that among the women who supported Jesus and traveled with him and the disciples were some "who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities" (Luke 8:2), including Mary Magdalene, "from whom seven demons had gone out."

Demon Possession?

Thus, we see that all three of the Synoptic evangelists distinguish between demon possession and illness, but at other times they can attribute to demon possession illnesses such as being mute, blind, deaf, or—as Matthew writes—epileptic. Some other diseases, such as being lame or having leprosy, never appear to be associated with demon possession.

What are we to make of all this? Clearly the writers of the Synoptic Gospels believed in the existence of demons that

could play havoc in a person's life and, in some cases, cause disease. What did this mean for them? Was there a purpose in including so many encounters between Jesus and demons?

The answer comes in the conflicts between Jesus and the religious leaders who opposed him. They accused him of casting out demons by the power of Satan, or Beelzebul (Matt. 12:22-30; see parallel in Luke 11:14-23). Jesus answered that a house cannot be divided against itself, and he concluded: "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his property, without first tying up the strong man? Then indeed the house can be plundered" (Matt. 12:28-29).

Casting out demons is evidence that Jesus is bringing a kingdom more powerful than that of Satan. Every exorcism is another rope around the strong man. Jesus is winning a victory against the forces of evil.

Luke recounts something similar when the Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod is out to get him. Jesus responds: "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work'" (13:32).

The Messiah demonstrates the power of his kingdom with both healing and exorcism, and his death and resurrection will be the final nail in the coffin.

After the Resurrection

Something interesting happens, however, after the resurrection. Whereas Jesus mentioned casting out demons every time he sent the twelve on a mission before the resurrection, none of his final instructions to the disciples after the resurrection contain any mention of casting out demons.

In Matthew 28:19-20, he tells them to make disciples, baptize, and teach. In Luke 24:47, he instructs them to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sin to all the nations. In Acts 1:8, the disciples hear that the Holy Spirit will come upon them and they will be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth.

In Luke's description throughout Acts of the leading of the Spirit in the early church, casting out demons plays a very small part. The only time the Greek word for "demon" appears is in the mouth of Paul's opponents, who accuse him of teaching foreign divinities (Acts 17:18, YLT). Philip does cast out evil spirits in Samaria, Paul casts out a "spirit of divination" that allowed an exploited slave girl to do fortune telling to enrich her masters, and in Acts 19 an evil spirit harasses some Jewish exorcists who try to cast it out in the name of Jesus.

But exorcism is not nearly as prominent in Acts as it is in Luke or the other Synoptic Gospels. In addition, Paul does not mention exorcism in any of the lists of spiritual gifts in his letters (see, for example, Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4), though he does believe that demons are present in pagan worship (1 Corinthians 10).

Exorcisms are completely absent from the Gospel of John. Jesus is accused in John 8:48 of being a Samaritan and having a demon. He defends himself against the charge of having a demon, but he doesn't respond to the accusation that he is a Samaritan, presumably because to do so could suggest that there was something wrong with being a Samaritan.

Totally absent from the entire New Testament is the mention of incantations and formulas to be used in exorcisms or any lists of exorcism practices, such as are found in other literature of the day.

The Situation Today

What should 21st-century Christians make of all this?

First, there is no way for us to go back into the first century and examine people who were deemed demon possessed. If we could, would a family physician or psychiatrist find medical explanations for their maladies? Quite possibly, but that avenue is simply not open to us. We can only recognize what the first-century followers of Jesus believed, which was clearly that demons possessed people and, in some cases, produced physical diseases or aberrant behavior.

Second, we should observe that Jesus' followers saw a *theological* purpose in exorcisms. Jesus was bringing in a new kingdom and driving out the forces of evil that were seen to control the world. Each exorcism was another battle in that war.

Third, we noted that the importance of exorcism as a part of Christian ministry waned after the resurrection, which was seen as Jesus' decisive victory over forces of evil, as well as over death, which Paul calls the "last enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26). In light of this, it is very difficult to make a case that exorcism should play any significant role in the church's ministry today.

Finally, whatever the situation was with demon possession in the first century, Christians today need not worry about demons, since we claim the following promise: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). **AT**

¹ All biblical quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*, unless otherwise indicated.

God and Pandemics:

THE RELIGIOUS IMPACT OF “PESTILENCES”

BY REINDER BRUINSMA



Many Christians are wondering whether the current global plague must be regarded as one of the pestilences that Christ predicted would signal his soon return to this world (Luke 21:11). Theories, opinions, and conspiracies abound; however, I want to look at the question in a broader perspective: What has been the religious impact of pandemics or epidemics, and how does that compare with our reaction to COVID-19?

Past and Present

Deadly pandemics in the Bible are invariably characterized as the result of divine intervention. The sixth plague in Egypt, with its “festerings boils” that affected humans and livestock (Exod. 9:9, NIV, NRSV), may certainly qualify as an epidemic. The sudden demise of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers (Isaiah 37:36) during their assault on Jerusalem, in the reign of Judah’s King Hezekiah (729-686 B.C.), was described by the Bible as God’s vengeance and explained by ancient Greek historian

Herodotus as an epidemic caused by infected mice.

The Plague of Athens (430-426 B.C.), which claimed the lives of more than a quarter of the city’s population, may have been an outbreak of typhoid,¹ and smallpox may have claimed as many as 5 million in the Antonine Plague of A.D. 165-180. A century later the Cyprian plague brought havoc to the Mediterranean region, and the Justinian Plague—possibly an early manifestation of bubonic plague—began in the

mid-sixth century and was followed by decades of new outbreaks, during which the population in some areas may have been reduced by as much as 40 percent.

The Black Death. The most dramatic plague was “Black Death,” a disease referred to as bubonic plague. It originated in China in 1334 and spread to Europe, Russia, and the Middle East. The Black Death annihilated entire communities. Although the total number of victims remains unknown, some experts put the death toll at approximately 75 million. As many as half of all Europeans died.

Smallpox. One of the great successes of humankind’s fight against deadly diseases was the eradication of smallpox (*variola*) in the early 1980s. In the 20th century alone, smallpox killed nearly 300 million people—three times more than the combined number of deaths from all of the wars in that period.² Smallpox made a tremendous geopolitical impact. The great Islamic expansion across North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula from the sixth to eighth centuries had spread smallpox across Africa and Europe. Colonization exported the disease to the Americas and other continents, in the process eliminating many indigenous populations.

In the 18th century, variolation—that is, inoculating individuals with material from a smallpox-infected person to immunize them—became a

method to stem the disease. This was the precursor to the smallpox vaccine developed in Victorian times. Objection to vaccination is not new: even in the 19th century, inoculation was suspected of being unchristian. Britain already had campaigns by anti-vaccinationists, and on the European continent, opposition against inoculation lasted even longer.³

The Spanish Flu. Seven waves of cholera rolled across the world in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Although a cholera vaccine was created in 1885, the pandemics continued, and even today the bacterial disease remains a threat when sanitary conditions are seriously compromised.

The influenza of 1918, though, is often regarded as the first truly *global* pandemic, with fatalities as high as 50 million or even 100 million—far more than the death toll from World War 1. It became known as the Spanish flu, not because the disease originated in Spain, but because that country had remained neutral in the world war and provided uncensored reporting of the death toll.⁴

Since 1918. For a long time, diseases such as measles or poliomyelitis (polio) exacted a high death toll. The extremely contagious Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which first surfaced in 2002, caused international concern because of its high mortality rate but was kept under control. Appearance of “bird flu” set off another global scare.

The H1N1 (swine flu) pandemic of 2009 infected 10 percent of the world’s population, with an estimated 20,000 fatalities, though some speculate a much higher number. The Ebola outbreak of 2014-2016, although confined mostly to Central Africa and West Africa, caused worldwide concern due to its extreme contagiousness and high case fatality rate, and recent reports indicate that this horrible disease may again raise its ugly head.

Perhaps the most notorious pandemic in the Western world was HIV and AIDS. Damir Huremović, a prominent New York psychiatrist, wrote, “HIV/AIDS is a slowly progressing global pandemic, cascading through decades of time, different continents, and different populations.”⁵ Although HIV infected tens of millions of people, so far no vaccine exists to prevent it, and the worldwide death toll is over 40 million. The number of victims would have been higher if effective medication had not enabled people to live with the virus as a chronic but controlled condition.

God and Pandemics

What is the religious impact of these pandemics? Comments by University of Cambridge historian Andrew Cunningham are worth quoting:

“For Christians the visitation of disease has always been an ambiguous matter, since their God is a benign god, and nothing happens without His will

and knowledge. Obviously, God sends disease, and obviously it must be as punishment for sin. But it was not always clear, even to men of religion, quite which sins were being punished by a particular visitation of a pestilence, nor why the good died under God's justice as well as the wicked."⁶ In actual fact, "there is no single predictable religious response," as environments also greatly differ.⁷

Let's concentrate on the religious impact of the Black Death, the Spanish flu, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the current COVID-19 crisis, with special attention to Seventh-day Adventist believers.

God and the Black Death. Barbara W. Tuchman, a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, provides a detailed description of the impact of Black Death in "the calamitous 14th century" that includes the religious aspects.⁸ She explains that a vast majority of people were convinced that human sin had evoked divine wrath and that people needed to do everything possible to appease God. The blame was to a large extent laid upon Jews, with traditional accusations of their being Christ-killers, of desecrating the host [bread used in Eucharist], and poisoning wells. The result was expulsion, persecution, and seizure of Jewish property.

The church, which in many ways formed the backbone of medieval society, took a severe battering. Clergy died at the same rate as the rest of the population, their number sharply diminished while their reputation was severely tarnished by ethical abuses and lack of moral standards.⁹ As a result of the plague, "a terrible pessimism permeated society." Many adopted a "live-for-today" attitude, while others "went off the deep end with quackery and mysticism."¹⁰ Says Tuchman, "The sense of a vanishing future created a kind of dementia of despair."¹¹

Penitent processions were one of the most radical attempts to appease an angry God. Flagellants, for example, beat themselves until blood flowed, believing that their physical suffering was redemptive.

It was to be expected that many Christians would regard these past plagues as signs of the certainty of Christ's coming and that Adventists who lived through the Spanish flu, who saw how HIV and AIDS ravaged particular segments of society, would emphasize this.

Pope Clement's formulation of the theory of indulgences linked forgiveness of sins with the exchange of money: people could buy a share in "the treasury of merit" accumulated by the blood of Christ and the good deeds of the Virgin Mary and the saints, and thus acquire a pardon for personal sins. Tuchman concludes: "What the Church gained in revenue by this arrangement was matched in the end by loss in respect. ... The Church emerged from the plague richer if not more unpopular."¹²

God and the Spanish Flu. The Spanish flu of 1918 caused unimaginable mayhem in Europe and around the world. But

since it was of relatively short duration, the crisis soon faded from public memory and later was often referred to as the "forgotten pandemic."

Western scientists knew by this time how influenza was spread, so they recommended the temporary closing of public buildings. While many Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish leaders were willing to comply, some believed the doors of their churches and synagogues should remain open.¹³

In response to the viruses that have caused near omnipresent death since 1918, "some turn to traditional religions and deities, as before, but most are turning to our secular deity, the state" for a solution to the problems caused by the pandemic, only to find that "our faith in modern states cannot make the virus go away."¹⁴ Not surprisingly, one of the ramifications of the Spanish flu was an increase in the popularity of occult practices such as communicating with the dead.

The diverse religious response to the Spanish flu in South Africa was reflected in other regions of the world. In the space of just six weeks, the flu killed approximately 300,000 South Africans, or roughly 6 percent of the population. Hindus, Jews, and Muslims all acknowledged that the pandemic had a divine cause, but they remained mostly quiet, at least publicly, about why the people should deserve this divine action. Traditional African religions saw the plague as the revenge of indignant ancestors—or caused by nefarious witches or wizards.

Historian Howard Phillips writes that Christian clergy pointed to "divine visitation" as punishment for sins.¹⁵ As always, he says, "generic sins like immorality, drunkenness, and lax church attendance featured prominently in the list of those that were said to have called

forth God's wrath."¹⁶ And, as could be expected, both a global World War I and the devastating plague were put into an eschatological framework and seen by many as signs heralding the soon return of Christ.

A book written by James Edson White (1849-1928), which was updated and published in 1938 by Alonzo L. Baker, referred to the Spanish flu as "the most decimating pestilence of all history."¹⁷ Yet this pattern of thought did not appear to characterize Adventist thinking when the pandemic was actually taking place. Seventh-day Adventist church members were surely not immune to the Spanish flu, but we have no way of knowing how many succumbed to it.¹⁸ Most of our information about it comes from Adventist commentary within the United States. West Virginia Conference President T. B. Westbrook wrote in November 1918: "If there was ever a time in the history of the world when we needed to offer incense (pray) to God for help it is now. All our churches are closed, and some lines of the work are at a standstill. The plague, or Spanish Influenza epidemic, is raging everywhere and there are many dead bodies in every place."¹⁹

Interestingly, we have no evidence of Adventist protests against limiting religious freedom once authorities demanded in 1918 that churches and schools be closed, though one article in the *Review and Herald* noted the scarcity of medical personnel.²⁰ Church leaders at various levels urged the members to isolate when needed and to "exercise intelligent faith" in dealing with the enormous threat, mindful of the principles of the church's health message. Many Adventist schools, meanwhile, saw a significant increase in enrollment in medical courses, and Adventist periodicals carried extensive advertising for the Red Cross.²¹

A survey of Adventist reactions to the 1918 influenza as seen in the *Columbia Union Visitor* gives little indication that church leaders and members saw the pandemic primarily as a sign of the nearness of Christ's second coming. Numerous articles reported, rather, how the church did all it could to continue its various ministries.²²

God and HIV/AIDS. Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) was first identified and named in 1981. Its precise origin is still unknown. The HIV/AIDS disease differs in a very significant aspect from other pandemics, in that the initial expansion (in the United States, in particular) was predominantly among gay men.

Its connection with homosexuality and also with substance abuse, together with an initial high death rate, led many conservative Christians to believe that God was using AIDS to punish the (in their eyes) heinous sin of homosexuality. Some, such as Jerry Falwell (1933-2007), were adamant that the virus was a biological judgment on those who engaged in sexual promiscuity and drug abuse. Mainline Christian churches generally rejected such stigmatization, and several started initiatives to minister to victims of AIDS.

Many Christians still see a moral dilemma regarding how to deal with persons with AIDS. On the one hand, they "blame the victim by defining AIDS as punishment for sin" while, on the other hand, they recognize that sick people need care.²³ These views continue to underline the incorrect idea that HIV/AIDS is invariably linked to a gay lifestyle.

Because of the frequent association of HIV/AIDS with homosexuality, Adventists have seemed reluctant to speak about it. In 1987 the denomination established an AIDS Committee. A few

conferences were held at different levels of the church, and some AIDS-related initiatives were undertaken, notably in Africa. Activities by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) deserve special mention.

Gradually official Adventist journals began to publish articles about the AIDS epidemic, as a rule being careful to avoid giving the impression that HIV/AIDS was also a problem in the Adventist Church. They remained circumspect in speaking about the issue of homosexuality, due to the church's strong rejection of it. Adventist sociologist Ronald L. Lawson, emeritus professor of Queens College (City University of New York), concluded a detailed survey of Adventist attitudes toward HIV/AIDS with this sobering statement: "The response of the Seventh-day Adventist church to the AIDS crisis has been extraordinarily slight."²⁴

An official statement about HIV/AIDS issued in 1990 by the quinquennial world congress in Indianapolis referred to the moral questions surrounding the pandemic but avoided the term "homosexuality." The statement acknowledged that AIDS had made its entrance into the Adventist Church and stressed the importance of accepting persons with AIDS and ministering to them.²⁵

When Lawson conducted his research in Africa, he found that many denominational leaders there denied the existence of AIDS in the Adventist church even though, in reality, HIV/AIDS was a major crisis among believers, especially in the countries around Lake Victoria, where there is a high density of Adventists.

God and COVID-19. It is too early to analyze in any depth the religious impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Certainly, we may see significant lasting changes in the way people "do" church (or synagogue or mosque) as a result of

the physical closure of large numbers of places of worship around the world and the extensive use of online platforms for communal worship.

The titles of two small books by Christian authors illustrate the different theological interpretations of the pandemic. In *Corona Crisis: Plagues, Pandemics, and the Coming Apocalypse*, Professor Mark Hitchcock of the conservative Dallas Theological Seminary places COVID-19 in an eschatological context. The global health crisis, he maintains, is a prelude to Earth's final events.²⁶

In *God and the Pandemic*, prominent New Testament theologian Tom Wright looks at the coronavirus outbreak from quite a different perspective.²⁷ We must accept that we do not fully understand events, he says, and we must acknowledge that humans play a role in what happens, and Christians in particular have special responsibilities in confronting the consequences of such events.

We find this same dual track in the Adventist media. The eschatological emphasis, which is very pronounced in the media of independent ministries on the right wing of the church, can also be seen in some official church statements. An *Adventist Review* news article about COVID-19 vaccines combined both the eschatological and pragmatic aspects: "Seventh-day Adventists look to the coming of Christ as the great culmination of history and the end of all disease, suffering, and death. At the same time, we have been entrusted with the Adventist health message" that teaches "healthful living through practical and wholistic lifestyle behaviors."²⁸

Generally, official denominational media have spent the most time on pragmatic aspects of the pandemic, such as worship services and keeping the

church running during this crisis. They stress that many of the church's ministries have continued to function and that new creative initiatives have been launched.

***Adventist Review*, to its credit, has decried false, alarmist ideas that are circulating among Adventists and pointed out that any linking of the mark of the beast with a COVID-19 vaccine has no basis in Adventism's traditional eschatological understanding.**

Conspiracy Theories

I have already said that during the 14th-century bubonic plague, Jews were scapegoated. Spanish flu conspiracy theories often focused on the Germans; fake news reports claimed that German submarines purposely spread the disease around the world.

Not surprisingly, millions have embraced various conspiracy theories in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. Existing conspiracy movements, including anti-5G and

anti-vaccine groups, have melted into new umbrella-like conspiracies, such as the ID2020 theory. According to fringe Christian conspiracy sites, the vaccines are a cover for implanting some form of microchip, radio frequency implantation (RFID) chip, or other digital tracking device. The plan is, allegedly, part of a global New World Order. These microchips, some argue, may well represent the apocalyptic mark of the beast.

It was to be expected that such theories would appeal to segments of the Adventist Church, since media on its right wing have long been open to conspiracy theories. They did not, however, speak with one voice with regard to any linkage between the COVID-19 vaccine and the "mark of the beast." One YouTube video circulated by Walter Veith "put the vaccine in the context of manipulation and control by the Jesuits."²⁹ David Gates, an independent Adventist evangelist who itinerates around the world, promotes the idea that the COVID-19 vaccines, together with the 5G signal, are a satanic tool to destroy humanity and make human beings into automatons.³⁰

Adventist Review, to its credit, decried false, alarmist ideas that are circulating among Adventists and pointed out that any linking of the mark of the beast with a COVID-19 vaccine has no basis in Adventism's traditional eschatological understanding. The article downplays the eschatological significance of the pandemic, warns against acceptance of these and other extremely speculative ideas, and encourages church members to place full trust in the vaccines that have been developed.³¹

In an article for *Amazing Facts* ministries, Gary Gibbs, president of the Pennsylvania Conference, insisted that

“the mark of the beast concerns enforced worship,” and “this is not an element of the current pandemic.”³²

Pandemics as Signs of the End

Whenever pandemics struck, Christians asked whether they were seeing a sign of Christ's second coming, and this is a question many are asking today. In Luke's version of the Olivet discourse, Christ mentions among the signs of the end the occurrence of “earthquakes, famines and pestilences in many places” (Luke 21:11, emphasis added). (In some versions of Matthew 24:7, these “pestilences” are also mentioned, but scholarly opinion almost unanimously supports the view that the original Matthean text omits this word.) The signs of the end would signal the impending doom over Jerusalem, fulfilled when the Romans destroyed that city in A.D. 70, and would also remind mankind of the certainty of the second coming of Christ at the end of time.

The traditional Seventh-day Adventist view has been that the time of the end began around the time of the French Revolution, when “the great tribulation” caused by the medieval papacy had come to an end. In line with this view, signs of the times were expected to occur from that point onward. Epidemics and pandemics that occurred *since* then, such as the Spanish flu and the current COVID-19 crisis, thus qualify as the pestilences Christ predicted.

Hans K. LaRondelle (1929-2011), a prominent Adventist eschatologist, emphasized that the so-called “signs of the end” cannot be placed in any chronological order. They are “signs of the age, and characterize the entire period between Jesus' two advents.”³³ Adventist theologian Jon Paulien likewise warns against placing too much emphasis on the time element of

the signs.³⁴ According to this view, all epidemics and pandemics of the last two millennia may be seen as genuine signs of the times. They all are signals pointing mankind to the climax of history, the second coming of Jesus Christ.

It was to be expected that many Christians would regard these past plagues as signs of the certainty of Christ's coming and that Seventh-day Adventist Christians who lived through the Spanish flu, who saw how HIV and AIDS ravaged particular segments of society, would emphasize this. It would go against our spiritual DNA if Adventists did not regard the COVID-19 pandemic as a sign of the second coming; indeed, it is surprising that the eschatological dimension does not dominate the response of most Adventist Christians to the current pandemic.

But perhaps Seventh-day Adventists have gradually learned that although the signs of the times surely are important, it is unwise to point to one particular event—momentous though it may be—as proof that Christ's coming is perhaps a matter of months, or at most a few years, from fulfillment. Perhaps we have learned, at long last, that Christ will come on his own schedule. **AT**

¹ Damir Huremović, “Brief History of Pandemics (Pandemics Throughout History),” *Psychiatry of Pandemics: A Mental Health Response to Infection Outbreak* (2019), p. 11.

² Michael B. A. Oldstone, *Viruses, Plagues & History* (1998, 2010 edition), p. 53.

³ William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (1978, 1998 ed.), pp. 255-256.

⁴ Oldstone, p. 309.

⁵ Huremović, p. 22.

⁶ Andrew Cunningham, “Epidemics, Pandemics, and the Domsday Scenario,” *Historically Speaking*, Vol. 9, No. 7 (September/October 2008), pp. 29-31.

⁷ Duane J. Osheim, “Religion and Epidemic Disease,” *Historically Speaking*, Vol. 9, No. 7 (September/October 2008), p. 36.

⁸ Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (1978), pp. 92-125.

⁹ Dan Carlin, *The End Is Always Near: Apocalyptic Moments, from the Bronze Age Collapse to Nuclear Near Misses* (2019), p. 132.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 134.

¹¹ Tuchman, p. 99.

¹² *ibid.*, pp. 121-122.

¹³ “Signs of the Times,” *Christian Science Sentinel* (Nov. 30, 1918), p. 258.

¹⁴ Uday Chandra, “Thinking Theologically with Pandemics,” *Al Jazeera* (July 28, 2020).

¹⁵ Howard Phillips, “Why Did It Happen? Religious Explanations of the ‘Spanish’ Flu Epidemic in South Africa,” *Historically Speaking*, Vol. 9, No. 7 (September/October 2008), p. 34.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ James Edson White and Alonzo L. Baker, *The Coming King* (1938).

¹⁸ Michael W. Campbell, “Adventists and the 1918 Influenza Pandemic,” *Adventist World* (April 3, 2020).

¹⁹ T. B. Westbrook, “Present-day Conditions a Call to Prayer,” *Columbia Union Visitor* (Nov. 7, 1918), p. 1.

²⁰ W. A. Ruble, “After Influenza, What?” *Review and Herald* (Oct. 31, 1918), p. 16.

²¹ Campbell, *op. cit.*

²² Celeste Ryan Blyden, “How the Visitor Reported the 1918-1920 Pandemic,” *Columbia Union Visitor* (May 21, 2020).

²³ Mark R. Kowaleski, “Religious Constructions of the AIDS Crisis,” *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (1990), p. 91.

²⁴ Ronald L. Lawson, “Is This Our Concern? HIV/AIDS and International Seventh-day Adventism,” paper read at the meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, Pittsburgh (August 1992), posted online June 11, 2018.

²⁵ “AIDS – A Seventh-day Adventist Response,” Statement published by the AIDS Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (1990).

²⁶ Mark Hitchcock, *Corona Crisis: Plagues, Pandemics, and the Coming Apocalypse* (2020).

²⁷ N. T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath* (2020).

²⁸ “COVID-19 Vaccines: Addressing Concerns, Offering Counsel,” *Adventist Review Online* (Dec. 18, 2020).

²⁹ “Walter Veith Anti-Vax Video Removed by YouTube,” *Adventist Today Online* (Jan. 18, 2021).

³⁰ “SDA Evangelist: Vaccine & 5G Will Make You an Automaton,” *Adventist Today Online* (Dec. 10, 2020).

³¹ “COVID-19 Vaccines: Addressing Concerns, Offering Counsel,” *Adventist Review Online* (Dec. 18, 2020).

³² Gary Gibbs, “Coronavirus and the Last Days,” *AmazingFacts.org* (April 21, 2020), online at www.amazingfacts.org/news-and-features/news/item/id/24670/t/coronavirus-and-the-last-days

³³ Hans K. LaRondelle, *Light for the Last Days* (1999), p. 11.

³⁴ See Jon Paulien, *What the Bible Says About the End-Time* (1994), pp. 85-87.

The Four Seers of Hamburg

By Holger Teubert, translated by Dennis Meier

IN MARCH OF 1966, REUBEN R. FIGUHR, then president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, received a letter from Hans-Joachim Steffen, director of a “reform and language school” in Hamburg, Germany.¹ Steffen claimed that he and three of his students had received a vision during a language class. They wanted to find out if this vision had any connection to Seventh-day Adventists.

Figuhr replied, naming Ernst Denkert, then president of the West German Union, as contact person. Denkert wrote to Steffen, promising that he and Ewald Bartz, president of the Hansa Conference, would pay him a visit.

But Steffen thought his message deserved the attention of higher-ranking people, preferably someone from the General Conference. Roland R. Hegstad, head of the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department of the General Conference, was then in Germany and made an appointment to see the gentleman on April 25 in Hamburg.

At that meeting, Steffen told the Adventist church leaders that he (age 36),



Hans-Joachim Steffen

Heinrich-Andreas Benn (29), Hannelore Zörnack (28), and Sybille Ursula Rosz (19) had received a vision between 2:15 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. on March 5, 1966, during a lesson in Room 2 of the language school. The angel Gabriel had appeared and had told them that they were God’s chosen messengers. The second coming of Christ was imminent, Gabriel had said. All four had been told to keep the Ten Commandments and

God’s proper holy Sabbath. In addition, the four were to establish old people’s homes and medical institutions.

Adventist Connection

When asked if he knew the Adventist message, Steffen answered “no.” This turned out to be untrue. Steffen later admitted to a special committee of the Central European Division that in early 1966 a preacher from the Adventist Reform Movement, a splinter group with origins in Germany during World War I, had visited the language school to evangelize them. He had learned then about the Sabbath and the imminent return of Jesus.

The visionaries, later referred to as the Hamburg Seers, wanted to become members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church so they could deliver their vision messages to other Adventists. They participated in an intensive instruction of 35 Bible lessons. Initially, they wanted to be baptized in the United States, supposedly upon angelic instruction. When church leadership did not agree, they received another vision in December of 1966 telling them to be baptized in Hamburg but then to travel to the United States to find a “sick, wise man.”

The baptism took place on Dec. 10, 1966, and the four became members of the Hamburg-Grindelberg church.

Animal Welfare

On Jan. 27, 1967, Steffen and Benn reported a vision containing the following message: “The need of animals is great. Every baptized member should help and support the League of Friends of Animals.” Through an intense Adventist commitment for animal welfare, the angel purportedly told them, many animal lovers would join the Adventist Church.

Steffen, it turned out, was already familiar with the animal welfare movement, because in 1965 he had rented rooms for his school from Hans-Jürgen Weichert, chairman of the German Animal Friends Association and vice president of the World Animal Protection League.

In February of 1967, Steffen and Benn strongly criticized the leaders of the Adventist church in Germany for their refusal to publish their visionary experiences in the national church magazine, *Der Adventbote*, and to recognize the seers as messengers of God. Only a short note reporting their baptism had appeared in the February 1967 issue. The Hamburg Seers made known their intention to get in contact with the General Conference directly.

An Adventist member paid for Steffen and Benn to fly to Washington, D.C., in April of 1967 so they could meet with the leaders of the General Conference. The General Conference formed a special committee that heard the two Hamburg Seers in nine sessions between April 5 and 14, 1967.

Great Expectations

On April 8, Steffen and Benn reported another divine revelation, this time in their motel room in Silver Spring, at the exact same time Zörnack and Rosz in Hamburg allegedly had the same vision. The angel demanded that Zörnack and Rosz also be sent over at the expense of the denomination so that the four could visit a “sick, wise man,” whose advice the Adventist church was to follow. In

The visionaries, later referred to as the Hamburg Seers, wanted to become members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church so they could deliver their vision messages to other Adventists. They participated in an intensive instruction of 35 Bible lessons.

addition, the General Conference was to see to it that prior to their return to Germany, all of the then nearly 2 million Seventh-day Adventists worldwide should join the World Animal Protection League, with Weichert as vice president.

The vision ended with a threat: “The Lord will destroy all who doubt my messengers and oppose the Scriptures and my message.”

The members of the General Conference Special Committee concluded that the German church leadership had “acted properly” and deserved “praise for its handling of the situation.... It was quite appropriate to be cautious in evaluating what happened and to await future developments.” Efforts for animal welfare are justified, “but they are not a concern of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.” This could distract the church from its mission of winning people to Christ, they said. From the content of the messages of Jan. 27 and Apr. 8, 1967, it is clear “that these visions are not from God.”

Steffen then asked whether the General Conference would at least be willing to promote the “founding of medical institutions and old people’s homes” worldwide, as well as the “establishment of schools” by the four Hamburg Seers. The request was denied, as was Steffen’s demand that his language school be given the right to confer academic degrees from Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

Instead of returning to Germany, as recommended by the General Conference, and using their gifts in local mission work, Steffen and Benn traveled at the expense of Adventist believers to the western part of the United States, sharing their visions there.

In June of 1967, the four—Steffen, Benn, and Rosz in Germany and Zörnack vacationing in Spain—allegedly received another simultaneous vision. Steffen was



The four Hamburg Seers gather in the room at the language school in Hamburg-Altona, where they claimed to have had visions on March 5, 1966. From left to right are housewife Hannelore Zörnack, age 27; student Sybille Ursula Rosz, age 19; language school director and teacher Hans-Joachim Steffen, age 36; and engineer Heinrich-Andreas Benn, age 28.

told he should be sent by the Adventist church to the Nile River region to plant a church there and meet a “benevolent man.” The German church leadership refused to give him the assignment and pay for travel expenses, because there were already several Adventist churches in Egypt. Since Steffen was not willing to go to the Nile at his own expense and none of his sponsors would help financially, the project failed.

On Aug. 20, 1967, Karl Jentsch, businessman and a lay leader of the Adventist church in Mölln, about 50 kilometers east of Hamburg, founded

the private Christlicher Tierschutz- und Lebensschutz e.V. (Christian Animal Welfare and Protection of Life Association) in Germany, in which only Seventh-day Adventists could become members. Chairman of the association was Jentsch himself, vice president was Steffen, treasurer Benn. Few Adventists, however, joined the association.

Jentsch arranged to have the visions of the four printed and distributed as “collective faith experiences” at his own expense. Even though the contract financially covered the publication of their messages, Steffen and Benn accepted additional donations from Adventists, ignoring a request of the Central European Division to have the donations administered by the responsible conference.

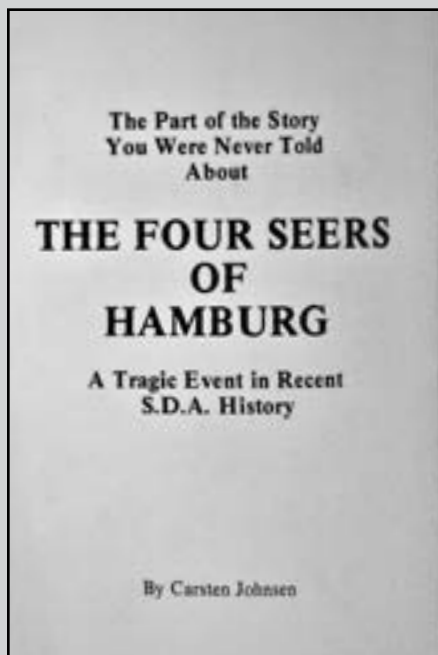
Expulsion and Resignation

Although the four were baptized, they did not seem to be particularly interested in an Adventist life. The pastors of the

Hamburg-Grindelberg church who were in charge of their pastoral care—Ernst Bauermann, Walter Cremer, Ewald Bartz, and Rudolf Seel—had noted concerns about their lifestyle and admonished them to regularly attend church, return tithe, avoid alcohol and tobacco, observe the biblical dietary laws, and lead an orderly life.

Yet contradictions in the messengers and their alleged messages were raising doubts about the divine origin of the visions. On June 15, 1968, a church business meeting was called for the Hamburg-Grindelberg church to discuss the visions with three of the Hamburg Seers. (Hannelore Zörnack did not attend the meeting; she was again in Spain.)

Possibly fearing exposure, Steffen employed a diversionary tactic. Before the congregation began to discuss the



visions, Steffen rose and asked the pastor, Walter Cremer, to confirm that he had received about 6000 Deutsche Marks in tithes from Steffen. Cremer declared before God and the congregation that he had never seen as much as a penny from Steffen. Steffen's implication was that Cremer had kept the money for himself.

This and other evidence led those in attendance to see the true character of the so-called visionaries. Steffen and Benn made contradictory statements about the amount of their alleged tithe payments. They claimed witnesses saw them handing over the money but refused to give names so that the witnesses could be questioned. Their support among the attendees dwindled. (The conference executive committee later acquitted Pastor Cremer of the charge of having embezzled tithe money.)

The situation began to trouble Sybille Rosz and Hannelore Zörnack when they found newspaper articles about Hans-Joachim Steffen's criminal past. In 1950, the Lower-Saxonian *Nordwest-Zeitung* newspaper reported that Steffen had met a prisoner with multiple convictions in the juvenile prison in Vechta, where he had served time for aggravated robbery.² After their release, the two committed a crime together. On Nov. 28, 1950, the court in Oldenburg had sentenced Steffen, then 21 years old, to eight years in prison for joint robbery and aggravated robbery, as well as for violating the Weapons Act, and at the same time deprived him of his civil rights for five years.

On Aug. 29, 1968, Rosz and Zörnack resigned their membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church "irrevocably and with immediate effect," without explanation. Steffen and Benn were ordered either to prove their accusations against Walter Cremer or to recant them. When they did neither, they were disfellowshipped on Oct. 16, 1968, at the business meeting of the Hamburg-Grindelberg Adventist church, with 169 votes in favor, 7 against, and 14 abstentions.

Sybille Rosz asked Hansa Conference President Ewald Bartz to tell the congregation that she felt sorry for having wronged Cremer with false accusations.

Continuation in Rendsburg

This did not end the activities of Steffen and Benn, however. They said that they had been told in a vision to "Go to the praying community of Rendsburg," about 100 kilometers north of Hamburg, where a small number of believers were still loyal to the Hamburg Seers, including the pastor

of the Rendsburg church, Kurt Hitzke, and his wife, Walgrid.

Sensing potential problems, the Hansa Conference decided to transfer Pastor Hitzke to another district. However, as early as June 7, 1969, Steffen, Benn, and Rosz (who had again rejoined her colleagues) allegedly received another vision in which an angel announced that the members of the Rendsburg Adventist church should "not let Hitzke go.... The godly church shepherd shall continue to lead the church. Great blessings will then come." With what he believed to be divine affirmation, Kurt Hitzke refused to accept the transfer, so the Hansa conference terminated his employment as pastor on short notice. In Rendsburg, Steffen and Benn said they were raising money for a children's home and an old people's home, but these projects were never realized.

On Dec. 19, 1968, a short article appeared in the *Review and Herald* with the headline "'Visions' of New Members Recognized as Fraudulent."³ The result was a collapse in donations from Adventists in the United States to the Four Seers of Hamburg.

On the basis of this article, Steffen and Benn retained Hamburg attorney H. Peter Kehrberger to write a letter to the General Conference on Apr. 25, 1969, demanding \$50,000 in damages for "loss of reputation." The General Conference, through its legal office Boardman Noland, rejected the damages claim, and although Steffen and Benn threatened

a lawsuit if the General Conference did not pay the \$50,000, the two men did not follow through.

Exposure

On Dec. 14, 1969, Steffen received a vision instructing all four to travel to the “land beyond the ocean” to be baptized once again. When Sybille Rosz heard about it, she was again ready to come along.

Even after all of that had happened, Adventists were found to finance the trip for the remaining three. Former Rendsburg pastor Kurt Hitzke rebaptized them, following instructions the angel had supposedly given. The trip to the United States took place in February and March of 1970. Steffen, Benn, and Rosz stayed for a while in Mentone, California, in the house of Leah Schmitke, who was still convinced of their divine mission.

Schmitke soon saw, to her astonishment, that the Hamburg Seers were still heavy smokers, went to unacceptable amusements in the evening, came back rather late, and that Sybille Rosz did not spend all nights in her own bed. This led to the disenchantment of the few remaining loyal supporters in the United States.

Zörnack's Evidence

Hannelore Zörnack did not join her colleagues on the trip to the United States. Zörnack would later admit that she hadn't even been present at the alleged first vision: she didn't register at Steffen's language school until March 25,

1966, 20 days after the alleged visions. She got to know Sybille Rosz and Heinrich Benn only in April, so the four could not have had a common vision on March 5. Zörnack would admit that this experience, as well as the subsequent messages, were made up.

Zörnack had kept documentation on the seers' activities. In addition to the correspondence Zörnack had had with

Because people in the early Adventist church had been led by dreams and visions, Adventists who heard about the Four Seers of Hamburg were inclined to see in them the work of God.

the other “prophets,” she had black-and-white photos taken in May of 1968, 18 months after their baptism. One shows Steffen in a pensive pose smoking a cigarette. Others show Steffen, Benn, Rosz, Zörnack, and other friends lying in bed together on a large mattress at the language school, dressed in underwear or pajamas. Zörnack also set up a tape recorder at the company where she was employed, and when Steffen called her there, she had recorded him inventing the alleged visions.

In 1970, while the others were in the United States, Zörnack asked Karl Jentsch, who was still convinced of the divine mission of the Hamburg Seers, to meet her in the waiting room of the Hamburg main railway station. She played him the recordings and gave him the correspondence and photographs, as well as other written documents about the Hamburg Seers.

Jentsch was shocked. He summoned the few remaining followers, who after studying the evidence recognized that they'd been defrauded. When the three remaining Hamburg Seers returned to Germany, they no longer had any followers.

In March of 1972, Steffen and Benn were expelled from the Animal Protection Association, which Jentsch later dissolved, declaring: “It is stated that Mr. Steffen and Mr. Benn ... have in no way supported the interests of the association.” Just as the two were not concerned with a genuine Christian life, they also had no genuine interest in animal protection. They'd had only material interests.

Divine Messages?

Because people in the early Adventist church had been led by dreams and visions, Adventists who heard about the Four Seers of Hamburg were inclined to see in them the work of God. Ewald Bartz, president of the Hansa Conference, was initially convinced that the four were genuine messengers of God. He documented the 13 visions they'd recounted between March 1966 and February 1968 and sent them to the

West German Union and the Central European Division.

That the Hamburg Seers claimed to have had visions with identical content, at the same time while being in different places, was seen as authenticating their experiences. Reference tools such as the Internet, personal computers, and smartphones did not exist back then, of course.

When the General Conference in April 1967 declared that the visions about animal welfare were not from God, many Adventists began to doubt the Hamburg Seers. After the resignation of the two women in August 1968 and the expulsion of Steffen and Benn in October 1968, few Adventists were still firmly convinced that they were dealing with genuine divine messages. Some adherents, including a few doctors and businessmen such as Jentsch, remained. Only the eventual confession by Hannelore Zörnack convinced them that they had been deceived.

True Believers

Carsten Johnsen, a Norwegian theologian who taught at Andrews University Theological Seminary, refused to believe—despite all of the evidence—that the Hamburg Seers were impostors. He had visited them several times in Hamburg and had also spoken with the remaining three while they were in the United States in March of 1970. Johnsen was convinced

that they'd had supernatural visions. He had requested that the Hamburg Seers ask the angel directly whether the angel in the visions was sent by God or by Satan. On Apr. 7, 1968, the four reported a shared vision in which the angel told them, "I am Christ, and this is my messenger." This so convinced Johnsen that the messengers and their visions were genuine that he put his convictions in print in a booklet that appeared in 1971.⁴

As for Kurt and Walgrid Hitzke, they admitted to their former conference president Ewald Bartz that "Based on our observations and experiences, we must now assume that the stories [of the four seers] are fabricated." Yet the Hitzkes weren't done with their search for divine messages. In 1985, when Frenchwoman Jeanine Sautron claimed to be a prophet and successor to Ellen G. White and prophesied that Christ would return in 2005,⁵ the Hitzkes were convinced that Sautron was a true prophetess sent by God. They founded an Evangelism Center for Dreams and Visions and distributed Sautron's French-language messages in a German translation.

The Adventist church of St. Julien, France, to which Sautron belonged, disfellowshipped her on May 21, 1987, after a thorough examination of her claims. The Hitzkes had again been deceived by false prophecies. On July 2, 1993, the couple dropped their membership from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. **AT**

¹ All information in this article is from letters and documents in the files of the Hansa Conference in northern Germany and the Historical Archive of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Europe (situated at Friedensau University, Germany), which also provided the pictures. The article is updated from Holger Teubert, "Die Hamburger 'Visionäre': Propheten oder Betrüger?" *Glauben Heute* (2000), pp. 35-45.

² In November of 1950, the *Nordwest-Zeitung* newspaper of Lower Saxony reported on a trial of attempted extortion that ended in a police pursuit under gunfire carried out by Hans-Joachim Steffen, which earned him an eight-year prison sentence. Steffen's behavior in the trial was described as "utterly peculiar" and likened to a "cheap comedian," trying to exonerate himself while still claiming credit for being the logistical genius behind it. The judge described him as "as a brilliant orator, operating cold-bloodedly and recklessly from behind the scenes; a person of extraordinary intelligence, though incapable for productive work or achievement, in whose hands the accused Lakeberg had been nothing but moldable wax."

³ *Review and Herald*, Vol. 145, No. 51 (Dec. 19, 1968), p. 32.

⁴ Carsten Johnsen, *The Part of the Story You Were Never Told About the Four Seers of Hamburg: A Tragic Event in Recent S.D.A. History* (1982).

⁵ Jeanine Sautron's *Dreams and Visions* (1990).

Mark 8:33:

“Get Behind Me, Satan!”

BY OLIVE J. HEMMINGS

“BUT TURNING AND LOOKING AT HIS disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things’” (Mark 8:33, NRSV¹).

When Jesus told his disciples that he was going to suffer at the hands of the religious leaders in Jerusalem (Mark 8:31; Matt. 16:21), Peter strongly resisted the idea. Mark just says that Peter rebukes Jesus (8:32), but Matthew quotes Peter as saying: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you” (16:22).

In one of Jesus’ harshest reprimands, he replies to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” That Jesus calls one of his most devout followers “Satan” suggests that Satan may be more real and present among and within ecclesiastical establishments than we normally assume.

The text tells us why Jesus chastises Peter: “For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things” (Matt. 16:23). To Peter’s resistance, Jesus says: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and

take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will

That Jesus calls one of his most devout followers “Satan” suggests that Satan may be more real and present among and within ecclesiastical establishments than we normally assume.

save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” (Mark 8:34-37; cf. Matt. 16:23-26).

The Greek words for “deny” and “take up” in both accounts appear in

the imperative mood—the mood of command: to deny self and take up the cross (i.e., to suffer for the sake of the gospel) is inevitable. Matthew adds a clause not present in Mark: “You are a stumbling block to me,” saying that without self-sacrifice and the possibility of suffering, those who claim to proclaim the gospel become a hindrance to the gospel and, thereby, personify Satan.

The Audience

That Jesus makes this rebuke to Peter in the presence of the disciples—and addresses the consequent statement to them—says that the target audience of this admonishment is the early church itself, not Gentiles (or, as we’d say today, secular people).

The seriousness of Peter’s resistance to suffering for preaching the gospel must be understood in light of what the early church was up against. All four gospels show conflict between the Jesus movement and the Judaic establishment that eventually expelled Jesus’ followers from the synagogue because of their radical egalitarianism and inclusiveness.

This expulsion brought even greater suffering upon the church when their preaching and practice of justice defied the hierarchical system of the

Roman empire, which contradicted the traditional power hierarchy based on class and gender.² It was tempting to compromise the gospel of God's justice³ (Luke 4:18-19; cf. Isaiah 61:1ff.) and comply instead with the religious establishment. The story of Jesus' rebuke of Peter functions as a message to the early church to resist exchanging the gospel for the comfort, power, and material things of this world, "For what will it profit them if they gain the world but forfeit their life?"

To place the story in context, one must be unwilling to sell the conscience for worldly comfort or to compromise a just theology in exchange for generous donations or in order to secure positions of power. Peter's resistance brings to mind Satan's final attempt to distract Jesus from his mission on Earth by dazzling him with worldly power and possession—"human things."

The Lesson

Jesus' reproof worked: Peter went on to proclaim the gospel as he healed the sick and raised the dead, even though he suffered persecution from both his religious establishment (Acts 5:41) and the Roman state (Acts 12:3-19).

It's a message that appears to have been forgotten by some American churches and leaders today. We see precisely what Jesus feared; as they have become the political mainstream, they have become a stumbling block⁴ to the gospel of Jesus the Christ, exchanging it for a distorted gospel built on white supremacy, male domination, and overflowing coffers tied to the Dow, all maintained by a militant fundamentalist culture war that it fights through the political system.

Has the church given over its soul to Satan in exchange for all of these "human things"? Does it now stand as a satanic impersonation? How many of us members of the body have followed along?

Right now, it sometimes feels as if Satan stands head to head with God, in polar opposition. This modern church claims to belong to a conservative Jesus while embracing all that is destructive and life-denying—in contrast to Jesus' own life and example as not only the life giver,

This modern church claims to belong to a conservative Jesus while embracing all that is destructive and life-denying—in contrast to Jesus' own life and example, where he represents not only the life giver, but the personified projection of human ideals.

but the personified projection of human ideals. In Matthew's record (7:13-14), Jesus calls his followers to take the narrow

and hard road that leads to life, which few people find, and avoid the wide and easy road that leads to destruction. To seek after the latter and call others to follow that wide, popular road is indeed to personify Satan.

The story suggests that we may not even be conscious of such satanic impersonation unless, by the grace of God, we deny ourselves and take up the cross and follow him, which means being like Jesus and advancing goodness and justice for the world, rather than popularity in the political realm. **AT**

¹ This version of the Bible appears throughout the article.

² See Margaret Y. McDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion: The Power of the Hysterical Woman* (1996), pp. 120-126.

³ In Matthew 6:33, Jesus defines God's kingdom as God's *justice* (the actual meaning of the word translated "righteousness").

⁴ See Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (2020).

HOW SATAN HELPS US ADDRESS SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES

By Maury Jackson

I RECALL ONE PROFESSOR, DURING MY SEMINARY STUDIES, MAKING the assertion that the famous social gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbusch was a liberal. Because of this, it was implied, we should not take his ideas too seriously.

At the time, I hadn't analyzed the "liberal" label enough to be able to ask the question, "Is he politically liberal, biblically liberal, or theologically liberal?" Moreover, I failed to parse the term "conservative" sufficiently to ask of those thus identified, "What is he or she trying to conserve?"

Since seminary days, I've come to recognize that individuals who concern themselves with conserving one matter may prove liberal in another. Biblical conservatives can be theological liberals. Conservative theologians may be liberal in their treatment of Scripture. Some European evangelicals' politics are liberal, while some politically liberal Americans are conservative evangelicals.

Nonetheless, Rauschenbusch's assertion on the topic of Satan and demonic entities could not have positioned his case with my former professor any better. Rauschenbusch writes: "No positive proof can be furnished that our universe contains no such spiritual beings as Satan and his angels... [yet] The problem of evil is simplified if all is reduced to this source. But the fact confronts us—and I think it can not be denied—that Satan and his angels are a fading religious entity, and that a vital belief in demon powers is not forthcoming in modern life."¹

The varied notions regarding satanic powers illustrate that when people conserve one concept, the inverse is also true: they may show liberality in others. In the present case, by conserving one of the many traditional roles for Satan and making it the primary demonic characteristic, they may liberally discard or diminish other important roles as though they've faded in religious relevance.

Satan and Folk Religion

Folk religion's treatment of Satan seems to simplify the problem of evil. It employs eclectic or syncretistic methods in order to support these opinions.

An email I received from a first-year student exemplifies this approach. Recognizing that the Bible depicts Satan in assorted ways, he theorized that it pictures Satan as God's "left hand." (Apparently God is not a southpaw). The student believed that 1 Chronicles 21:1, where Satan is said to tempt David to do what is attributed to God in the same story in 2 Samuel 24:1, showed Satan as a disgruntled servant of God. He interpreted Genesis 1 as support for his idea: the "two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars" include God's creation of the "Morning Star," a.k.a. Lucifer/Satan.

This communication displays folk religion—in his case, knowing just enough about a topic to be deeply misguided.

The biggest problem in our folk-religion understanding of Satan has to do with anthropomorphic thinking.² Our convictions about demons aren't usually formed by personal encounters with the spiritual realm; the notion that Satan is a personal entity, roaming around with imps helping to advance his kingdom of evil, derives from anthropomorphic projections.

This kind of thinking creates a theological analysis of evil of so low a level that contemporary critical minds find no use for it. Any analysis of evil that does not take seriously those real, concrete, personal agents that pose objectifiable obstacles to individual freedoms is worthless. Adding invisible entities that explain away, rather than explain, the real forces against evil only compounds evil. Whenever we conjecture agents that are abstract, non-objectifiable, and so-called "personal spiritual entities" to explain why evil is occurring, we've moved beyond the serious or real into the ridiculous and unhelpful.

This is not to assert that abstract forces cannot present real obstacles to our individual liberties. Christian thought uses theology as a tool of (and for) social analysis, and one of the uses is to understand abstract forces that oppress and enslave human beings. Yet when Christian theological thinking merely hovers at the level of Christian folk religion, the analysis of personal and social evil proves ineffective. It reduces our accountability ultimately to “the devil made me do it” ridicule.

Such composite notions of demonic and satanic evil found in Christian folk religion are conservative in that they conserve a person’s commitment to narratives developed through eclectic or syncretistic methods that simplify the problem of evil. In the end, however, they explain away the problem of evil rather than offer any way to get rid of it.

Satan and the Bible

While my first-year student represents the ways in which folk religion conserves schemes to reduce to bare bones the problem of evil, religious historian Elaine Pagels represents the ways in which textual scholars conserve the biblical witness about the Satan character of biblical literature. While this is an improvement, in the end it is only preparatory work for theologians interested in conceptualizing, analyzing, and naming abstract evil forces in theological terms. In her work *The Origin of Satan*, Pagels gathers the many leftover bits and pieces scattered throughout the Bible that image the author of evil to bestow on us a portrait of Satan.

Pagels notes how Jewish writers, on the one hand, draw from mythological beasts (i.e., Leviathan, Dragon, Lion, Bear, Leopard) whenever they attack their non-Jewish enemies. Whenever they embroil themselves in an intra-Jewish dispute with intimate adversaries, on the other hand, they identify their fellow Jewish adversaries with the evil angelic being known as Satan.³

If Pagels’ analysis is correct, biblical authors do not possess a unified image of Satan—something which even my first-year student recognized. In Pagels’ attempt to conserve the various pictures of Satan that different books of the Bible paint, she also uncovers much that problematizes doctrinal statements that personify Satan. She begins with the story of Balaam (Numbers 22) and points out that the adversary (verse 22) stands for a role that any “angel of the Lord” could fulfill. Pagels notes, “As he first appears in the Hebrew Bible, Satan is not necessarily evil, much less opposed to God.”⁴ In Numbers and Job, she says, Satan obeys God. But after the exile to Babylon, his character develops to the point that in the New Testament, Satan establishes a rival kingdom against God. Noteworthy in Pagels’

approach to uncover the biblical images of Satan is that by conserving individual biblical authors, she forces close readers of Scripture to make choices.

Pagels leaves us with a scrapbook, a plethora of tools to choose from when we attempt to offer analyses of the problem of evil. Her conservative approach to the individual authors lets readers draw liberally from the Bible’s resources of satanic images—no longer cluttered, but now arranged and displayed. She gives theologians, in the text of sacred Scripture, a new resource in understanding Satan as a tool for analyzing and mobilizing a Christian communal witness against evil. Her work provides the necessary conditions for the task. However, by itself it fails to offer sufficient conditions for theological reflection.

COMPOSITE NOTIONS OF DEMONIC AND SATANIC EVIL FOUND IN CHRISTIAN FOLK RELIGION ... EXPLAIN AWAY THE PROBLEM OF EVIL RATHER THAN OFFER ANY WAY TO GET RID OF IT.

Satan and Social Analysis⁵

Adventist Christianity’s theological vision may be a reincarnation of the first-century Essene sect that placed “at the center of their religious understanding the cosmic war between God and his allies, both angelic and human, against Satan, or Beliar, along with his demonic and human allies.”⁶ But not even the cosmic conflict metaphor provides a robust enough theological vision for analyzing evil in our era. Taking the folk-religion model to a cosmic scale bypasses the usefulness that theology should serve for our modern terrestrial social analysis.

I started out citing Rauschenbusch about Satan’s role in social justice. Pagels (probably unintentionally) joins him somewhat when she writes, “what interests me instead are specifically social implications of the figure of Satan: how he is invoked to express human conflict and to characterize human enemies.”⁷

Even after my professor's attempt to pigeonhole Rauschenbusch in the liberal camp, he proves his conservative values in that he conserves a Christian theological vision robust enough to analyze the structural, social, and yes, super-personal forces of evil.

Rauschenbusch writes, "Beyond the feeble and short-lived individual towers the social group as a super-personal entity, dominating the individual, assimilating him to its moral standards, and enforcing them by the social sanctions of approval or disapproval."⁸ That is, the social group functions as a super-personal entity, a kind of corporate person.

NAMING THE SATANIC ALLOWS CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES TO RESIST SOCIAL EVILS THAT HAVE A LIFE OF THEIR OWN AS WELL AS A SPIRITUAL DIMENSION: THE LYING SPIRIT.

Rauschenbusch refuses to relinquish the demonic as a tool for social analysis. According to him, the oppressive evil of advanced capitalistic economies will not be adequately understood unless and until we identify and name it as the satanic/demonic. This provides a shorthand way to be able to both attend to the evil and to form social movements to overthrow it. We cannot attend to and mobilize against the oppressive evil of totalitarian national politics until we identify and name it as the satanic/demonic. Similarly, the oppressive evil of ecclesiastical authoritarian religion will fail to be adequately understood unless and until we identify and name it as the satanic/demonic.

While it is true that biblical writers often equivocated about how to name corporate evil—it may be gods of other lands, thrones, dominions, principalities, powers—they nevertheless recognized a reality to evil that remained beyond any individual person's ability to conquer. Robert Linthicum notes: "Behind the seduction of a city's systems and structures, behind the principalities and powers that form the spiritual essence of

those systems, behind the often dark and destructive angel who broods over the city seeking to possess it—behind these stands the shadowy figure of the one known as Satan. It is the 'father of lies' who is at both the heart and the head..."⁹

The "father of lies." Recognizing—indeed re-cognizing—Satan can move our theological resources from paralyzing to mobilizing tools. Reconceptualizing Satan (not in individualistic terms, but as a necessary way to name the deceiving narratives that reside at the level of corporate evil) prevents us from anemic individual attempts to confront a super-personal evil too big to be defeated by prayer alone.

Perhaps we can think of Satan or the satanic as a name for unfettered capitalism, crushing totalitarianism, and religious authoritarianism—satanic evils that call for more action than simple prayers for exorcism. Naming the satanic allows Christian communities to resist social evils that have a life of their own as well as a spiritual dimension: the lying spirit.

The notion of the satanic may, after all, help the church discover a new vocation: to expose the evils of economic, political, and religious structures. By naming these objective yet invisible social forces of evil, the Christian witness to a kingdom of righteousness can open the eyes of those blinded by the dazzling idols of free market capitalism, nationalism, and slavish obedience to authoritarian religious leaders.

Satan, the satanic, or the demonic ought not to be trivialized by beastly figures of folk religion. Nor should Satan be left scattered in the unarranged scrapbook of Scripture. The Christian theological vision can still find a use for Satan: it is the name we call when we must analyze super-personal evils and mobilize a social witness against them in the name of the kingdom of heaven. **AT**

¹ Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917, 2010 ed.), p. 86.

² Rauschenbusch never could have anticipated that his grandson, Richard Rorty, would help birth postmodernism, where demonic powers resurge in micronarratives.

³ Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan: How Christians Demonized Jews, Pagans, and Heretics* (1996), p. 39.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ For a contemporary classical treatment of theology as a tool for social analysis, see John Milbank, *Theology & Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (1993).

⁶ Pagels, p. 58.

⁷ Pagels, p. xviii. She later writes, "In this book I add to the discussion something I have not found elsewhere—what I call the social history of Satan; that is, I show how the events told in the gospels about Jesus, his advocates, and his enemies correlate with the supernatural drama the writers use to interpret that story—the struggle between God's spirit and Satan" (pp. xxii-xxiii).

⁸ Rauschenbusch, p. 110.

⁹ Robert C. Linthicum, *City of God, City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban Church* (1991), p. 77.

Mapping Africa's Spiritual Universe:

SPIRITISM, ANCESTORS, AND THE CHARACTER OF GOD

BY ADMIRAL NCUBE

ADVENTISM IN AFRICA IS LARGE AND growing. It is also largely conservative. Members and leaders here consider themselves “the real deal,” a bulwark against the onslaught of Western liberalism.

However, despite its conservative texture, it is not without contradictions. One of those has to do with African traditional beliefs and practices. Although Adventism has a Eurocentric expression, liturgy, and polity, Adventism on the continent continues to struggle with dualism: the weaving in of practices and attitudes borrowed from African traditional religion. These include rituals and traditional beliefs around childbirth and death, but most notably success and misfortune.

This article looks at some unresolved dilemmas that Adventism faces in Africa.

The Potency of Religion

That Africans are notoriously religious is explained by what renowned British historian Andrew F. Walls refers to as the

**In secular cultures,
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traditional African map of the universe that defines the transcendent to include not only a Supreme Being, but also lesser gods or divinities, ancestors, and objects of power.¹

In secular cultures, religion may be distanced from the socio-economic and political spheres. For an African, life cannot be compartmentalized, nor religion divorced from daily life. Here, the influence of religion is pervasive, shaping values, identity, and outlook.² African Adventist theologian Gilbert Wari has written that whenever there is a crisis

or calamity or any other problem, the traditional African's first response is not to do a real-world causative analysis of the situation, “but a spiritual diagnosis of the spirit powers that have been offended. Conversely, success in any endeavor is not attributed to a person's acumen but [to] the special favor of the ancestors or spirit powers.”³

The importance of these other powers varies across cultures, but throughout Africa, religion is a potent force. Writes Kenyan philosopher and Anglican priest John Mbiti in his book *African Religions and Philosophy*, “African people are notoriously religious (and) religion permeates into all the departments of life so that it is not easy or possible to isolate it.”⁴

Behavior-Based Religion

Furthermore, faith is for Africans organized and practiced in a community, not as an individual or personal affair, as it often is for Western Christians. Religion contains rules about conduct that guide life within a social group. There

is little distinction between the sacred and the secular. Put simply, while those from a Western worldview see the world in naturalistic terms with emphasis on the empirical, an African sees spirits, ancestors, or a supreme being with strong influence in daily life, such that not being in harmony with these hidden forces can spell doom for an individual.⁵

Adventism on the continent is not insulated from the influence of African traditional religion. As African Adventists accept the gospel, they often struggle to let go of notions that associate misfortune with divine displeasure, and success as evidence of divine affirmation. The problem is not in having religion permeate every aspect of life, but in transferring fears about spirit forces and ancestors to God. Such a misrepresentation of God perpetuates a behavior-based religion, where the focus is on earning his blessing and avoiding his displeasure.

It is no accident, then, that in African Adventism we have created an exhausting legalistic religion that represents itself as conservative and preoccupied with “scoring spiritual points.” Success or failure in life depends on whether God is pleased or unhappy. By shifting beliefs about the ancestors to Jesus, who could be regarded as the great ancestor, prayers take the form of demands and reminders to him of the good one has done. Stewardship—returning tithes and offerings—becomes an act of appeasement.

The General Conference Meta-Analysis Report on the 2017-2018 Global Church Member Survey, which provides an overview of beliefs and practices of church members worldwide, reveals that while Seventh-day Adventists officially

By failing to appreciate the African worldview and way of life, Adventism has been guilty of dismissing what it does not understand as mere superstition, which results in syncretism, dualism, or a weaving of unbiblical beliefs and practices into Christianity.

believe that salvation is only through Christ, a majority of those surveyed (65%) believe that they must perfectly obey the law to be saved. Within the East-Central Africa Division, 64% of its 7,838 respondents agreed that the law must be obeyed perfectly.⁶

In Africa, I believe this perfectionistic attitude is partly explained by attitudes borrowed from African traditional religion.

Contending with Dualism

Another important aspect of African religion, termed *dynamism* or *power-centeredness*,⁷ is where the effectiveness of a religion is determined by how much power it makes available to its adherents. This power is needed not only for success in life, but also for protection against hostile forces. When a religious system becomes ineffective in terms of its power, it is soon abandoned for a more powerful one.

The traditional African way of looking at life is holistic, whereas Christianity offers mainly doctrinal information and little comfort and help with everyday issues and problems; therefore, some Christians look for practical answers in traditional religions.

By failing to appreciate the African worldview and way of life, Adventism has been guilty of dismissing what it does not understand as mere superstition, which results in syncretism, dualism, or a weaving of unbiblical beliefs and practices into Christianity. Adventism's struggle is summed up by scholars Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, who assert: “There is an on-going dualism in many African Christians' religious beliefs. They keep one foot in the beliefs of their African Traditional Religion and one foot in Christianity.... Most Africans tend to uphold two faiths—they maintain the Christian faith when life is gay and happy, but hold to the indigenous faith when the fundamentals of life are at stake.... Christianity remains for many Africans ‘a stranger religion,’ there being some part of their very selves and lives that stays outside the gospel. This is the source of a certain double quality in living their beliefs, holding them divided between their faith in Jesus Christ and custom's traditional practices.”⁸

It is not uncommon for members to resort to other sources of help when they feel Christianity is powerless to confront what they are contending with. This is where Adventism's Eurocentric texture falls short: it applies a Western worldview in a context where spirit forces, witchcraft, and ancestral spirits are thought to manifest themselves in inexplicable ways.

Divided allegiance—to both the God of the Bible on one hand and the powers of traditional religion on the other—retards the development of a culturally appropriate and biblically faithful Christianity. No wonder many African Adventists struggle to reconcile their doctrinal beliefs with occurrences in their communities!

The proliferation of charismatic and African independent churches should be seen as an attempt to respond to these manifestations in an African way. These more affective beliefs and practices promise spiritual answers to the misfortunes and experiences facing the African while Adventism, with its Eurocentric texture, continues to shy away from confronting these issues and, therefore, appears to be weak and irrelevant.

The Character of God

The shape of Adventism in Africa cannot be divorced from the legacy of early Christian missionaries. Adventism, like other denominations in Africa, found soft ground in our religiously inclined communities.

The missionaries thought of Africa as a dark continent, whose people were in need of enlightenment and civilization, and who considered themselves the bearers not only of a superior religion, but also a superior culture, the two being inseparably intertwined.⁹ Missionaries

failed to appreciate African religiosity as a template upon which they could have built the gospel. They not only dismissed the African concept of God as pagan,¹⁰ but also overlooked the reality and potency of spirit forces and ancestors in shaping an African's beliefs and conduct.

The fundamental issue is how we teach the character of God. Although African culture isn't monolithic, it generally portrays God as a being who responds to the good and bad that people do. Religion is about doing things for God, winning his favor through good works, appeasing him when wronged. In the absence of a theology that speaks to these issues, Africans can begin to think of Jesus as a great ancestor. He is robbed of his character of love and instead regarded as vindictive, always ready to punish us or withhold his blessings if we disobey him.

As long as we don't clearly show the right character of God, divergent views about salvation will continue to inhibit consensus on some of the contemporary issues the church is facing.

Contextualization is no longer an option for us. For our church to be relevant and responsive, we need to place greater attention on a theology and practice that responds to the perennial issues and questions faced by Africans. The challenge lies in practicing Adventism in a context where poverty remains pervasive, where social injustice prevails, and where basic healthcare and education remain a challenge.

The church needs to not only understand our tendency to dualism and syncretism, but it must go beyond doctrine to challenge social injustice and set up institutions that address material conditions. **AT**

¹ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (2002), p. 123. Referenced in Gordon R. Doss, "An Adventist Response to African Traditional Religion," *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2009), p. 82.

² Gerard Clarke and Michael Jennings, editors, *Development, Civil Society and Faith-based Organizations: Bridging the Sacred and the Secular* (2008).

³ Gilbert Wari, "Role and Function of Religion in Africa: An Adventist Response," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2009), p. 16.

⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969, 1990), p. 1.

⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (January 1982), pp. 35-47.

⁶ "2017-2018 Global Church Member Survey Concerning the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Reach the World 2015-2020 Strategic Plan: Meta-Analysis Final Report" (Oct. 2, 2018), pp. 14, 40.

⁷ Cyril C. Okorochoa, "Religious Conversion in Africa: Its Missiological Implications," *Mission Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (January 1992), p. 169.

⁸ Joseph Graham Healey and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (1997, 2002 ed.), p. 294.

⁹ C. R. Boxer, *The Church Militant and Iberian Expansion, 1440-1770* (1978).

¹⁰ T. L. Hassan, "Attitudes of Christian Missionaries Towards African Traditional Religious Beliefs in East Africa During the British Colonial Rule," *African Journal of History and Culture*, Vol. 7, No. 10 (2015), pp. 193-199.

THE PASTOR'S NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

By Debbie Hooper Cosier

THE INTERIOR OF BELMONT PRIVATE HOSPITAL WAS A SORT of sickly pink, like the inside of a womb. Far from being warm and comforting, it felt hard and cold. Mysterious sounds that I couldn't identify came from behind distant doors. I visited my father there every week for 11 months in the mid-1990s while he received psychiatric treatment.

For the first six months, he was a full-time inpatient and I'd take my brothers, ages 10 and 12, to visit him. My two adult sisters and I shared weekend and holiday care of the boys while Mum worked as a full-time nurse to support the family. When Dad was finally well enough to have weekend visits home, I would pick him up and drive him a couple of hours south of Brisbane, where he could stay until someone else returned him to the hospital.

Those days were equal parts vigilance and helplessness. One of my sisters and I share-parented our brothers between work commitments. Mum was exhausted.

Perhaps the strangest new role I took on was as a tissue-box-holder for Dad as he wept in my arms. My brothers went from a normal, stable childhood to one that was perplexing and unstable. Dad could no longer perform his roles as breadwinner, father, pastor, or decision-maker.

It was a terrible time in our lives, and perhaps that's why we'd never really discussed it until I decided to write the story. The question that had always stuck in my mind was this: *Where did Dad believe God was in all of this?* I wondered how my father, with his trusting, Job-like faith, could explain this family tragedy.

Lou Island

Before I was born, my parents took a call to a tiny dot in the Bismarck Sea called Lou Island, part of Papua New Guinea, where Dad would be a teacher and school principal while Mum, a nurse, would operate a small clinic. My sister was 16 months old, and Mum was pregnant with me.

Just months after their arrival in early 1966, I was born, and 13 weeks later we left in a dramatic dash for emergency medical care. I was a failure-to-thrive baby and continued to deteriorate; at 3 months old I was being force-fed with an eyedropper every hour by my mother. With only infrequent means of travel off the island and access to medical advice, my parents were afraid for me. During a three-day storm that brought down the aerial of our two-way radio, cutting off communication with the outside world, my health went into rapid decline. They began discussing places on the island where they might bury me if the worst were to happen.

In the first of what my parents saw as a series of miracles, the islanders learned that the 45-foot hospital boat, normally docked on Manus Island, was riding out the storm on the other side of Lou. We embarked that same day on a four-and-a-half-hour sea voyage to the Lombrum Naval Base hospital.

There, doctors stabilized my condition and diagnosed a heart murmur, then my parents were advised to take me posthaste to a children's hospital in Sydney. Dad returned to Lou Island to complete the school year. I still wonder how difficult that decision was, what that farewell was like, what those months alone—so far apart, across seas—were like for them.



Pastor Lance F. Hooper is pictured alone and with his family. The author of this article is second from left.

The Work

By the time Dad became a pastor a decade later, we were calling his job *The Work*. We moved wherever he was called, spending as little as 10 months or as long as three years in a church before moving to another—sometimes having to change houses, if the one we'd moved into proved unsuitable. By the time I left home at 18, I'd been in 15 homes and seven schools, including a change of cities and schools between my two last years of high school.

Like the Bible prophets, we believed that calls were of divine origin. Dad would receive the call, and my parents would put out a "fleece" according to the biblical example of Gideon. By the time Dad left *The Work*, he had accepted all but one call and requested two interstate or conference emergency transfers. The last transfer came after a series of traumatic events that we now pinpoint as significant provocations to his developing psychological and physical unwellness.

Yet always, *The Work* was the Hooper family's highest priority.

In my memories of childhood, everything—family, leisure, joy, comfort—took a back seat to *The Work*. *The Work* wasn't just what happened in the church, though; our family had to exemplify *The Work*. Our schedule at home was dominated by Bible study and bedside prayers, family worship in the morning, and of course, opening and closing Sabbath worships like holy sentinels guarding our thoughts and activities. We were always in church on Sabbath unless seriously ill enough to stay in bed. Life was not about personal happiness or fulfillment: it was about "should" and "must," words that carried the weight of the world in our family.

Perfectionism and Pressure

While Dad seemed to enjoy his work, the word "struggle" was his only concession to the toll that ministry was taking on us. Christ's life of sacrifice and suffering meant that we, too, denied ourselves, took up our crosses, and followed.

The pressures were not entirely self-imposed. Little cards handed out at ministers' meetings recorded how well each minister was fulfilling annual Bible study and baptism quotas. Harvest Ingathering tallies were scrutinized and commented upon and, on one occasion, prompted a telephone conversation from the conference president that made Dad feel like a naughty child. He was doing his best.

On rotation were two phrases that echoed in my father's sensitive heart: "God will not burden you with more than you can bear," and "We need to free ourselves of dead-wood church workers." Comments such as these inflamed his overactive conscience, driving him to try to perform at superhuman levels, working six or seven days each week and moving his family from one place to the next over holidays.

"Conference leaders had assured us in ministers' meetings that they had never seen someone in God's work suffer beyond what he was able to bear," Dad told me recently. "God would not allow it." That meant that rest was not part of the equation. Nor should you give priority to your health or your family's needs because *The Work* was urgent, important beyond all else.

Understanding the "Failure"

It now seems inevitable that Dad would become a cracked and overfilled vessel and that one day he would crumble. In 1994,

during a five-hour drive to ministerial meetings, it happened. He wept as if his broken heart resolved to wring every last teardrop from his body.

Over the course of that long weekend, the distress did not abate. “I hid in the cabins, unable to stop the crying,” he said. Finally he met with the conference president, who told him to go home and take a couple of days’ rest.

Fast-forward to Belmont Private Hospital. In my father’s impaired reasoning, his sickness and inability to persevere in God’s work was a spiritual failing. It was an agony articulated in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* by Grandfather Ames, a Congregationalist minister of the Calvinistic mold: “...no words could be bitter enough, no day could be long enough. There is just no end to it. Disappointment.”¹ Like the elder John Ames, my father “ate and drank it, woke and slept” the failure.

Consequently, the talk therapy, medication, electroconvulsive therapy, and multiple, successive cognitive behavior courses were having little effect on my father. He couldn’t accept that *this* was even happening. He wrestled with a compulsion to throw himself off a cliff.

Denying the validity of his feelings meant that my father couldn’t pinpoint the traumas that may have contributed to his psychological state, including his own father’s death when he was just 4 years old and how, as a result, he became his mother’s sounding board and missed out on much of what it meant to be a child.

Or the many, many times he followed the example of Jesus and turned the other cheek to mean-spirited people, such as when a departmental role he loved was taken from him and gifted to one of the newly appointed conference president’s friends.

Or when he was sent in to “fix” a series of dysfunctional churches and had to wrangle with toxic parishioners, who attempted to destroy his reputation and decimate the church community with their ambition for control.

Or when a series of elderly ministers (friends and mentors to Dad) died and he had to take their funerals, one by one.

Or when, because of family circumstances, his energy, attention, and support were required at home during a time he felt he should be out doing The Work.

Or when his mental acuity diminished and depression took hold after years and years of working doggedly onward, meeting the needs of others on less and less sleep.

Of course, he was not sinning, despite the implication of his bosses’ words and actions over the years, and despite what he believed he *should* be able to do. My mum recalls the last sermon he preached, stammering through the entire 40 minutes. No doubt these words were running through his mind: *Not this! This is not meant to be happening.*

Upon reflection, I can see that my sensitive, conscientious father could not forgive himself without a different biblical perspective: one that permitted him to see that his brokenness was normal—foreseeable, even—and that God looked on him with love, not judgment.

The Church’s Help

My parents were grateful that the church assisted Dad in his fight for reimbursement with the insurance company and granted him sustenance payments before he reached retirement age.

Yet these provisions gave his employers a false sense of ownership over the details of my father’s private information. Attending one of his churches one Sabbath, the conference ministerial secretary announced that “Pastor Hooper is receiving psychiatric care in a mental hospital.” My family had wanted to protect Dad from the gossip and speculation that might make it difficult for him to re-enter The Work. Ministry, we already knew, was emotionally grueling, and the last thing he would need going back into the ministry was additional scrutiny about whether or not he was holding up. While on the one hand church members want to put their pastors on pedestals, they can also be cruel and critical.

We were appalled by this conference leader’s poor judgment and told him so angrily and unequivocally—the first time I felt that I could really stand up for my family in this whole sorry saga. To this day I think that leader should have been fired for such a breach of confidence.

Later, attempting to provide a rehabilitatory role for Dad, the conference offered him projects and short contracts. But to his immense disappointment, he was never strong enough to work full time again.

Rest, Expectations, and Unkindness

Dad’s illness, in my estimation, came as a result of two things: his own problematic outlook on The Work, and the church’s dogmatic promotion of the needs of the church above all else. In real life, this translated into suffering and sacrifice. For all of us.

Some months ago, when Dad and I finally ventured onto the shaky terrain of this bit of our shared history, I was surprised that he, now 81, was willing to talk about it. I was glad. We all needed healing.

And that question—the one that was stuck in my mind and prevented me from confronting this topic before now because of my own doubts and questions: *Where was God in all of this?*—we needed to talk about it.

It’s easy to see looking back that at least some of what happened was because of the way The Work drove him. “Did I think other people should rest?” he reflected. “Yes. But for some

reason, that didn't apply to me." Not even the Sabbath, which he recommended as a rest for others, was a rest for him.

He couldn't take in Jesus' words, "Come aside and rest awhile," nor my mother's repeated warnings that he needed a break. *Everything* was so important! "Around that time," Dad says, "I was working extra hours to help set up a women's refuge, on top of my regular ministry with the congregations and communities of two churches. I ran counseling courses for the volunteers, and it was high stakes and high pressure, but people were suffering and we felt a sense of urgency."

He has since realized that Jesus' instruction to his disciples to rest awhile was not an arbitrary whim. Jesus insisted they rest even when it wasn't convenient—when there was still preaching, teaching, and ministering to the poor and sick to be done. Jesus knew, which my father learned too late, that The Work ultimately suffers when there's no time for rejuvenation.

He seems, too, to understand what God expected of him. When Jesus said: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:28-29, ESV), what did he really mean? Dad now realizes that God was trying to tell him not to load himself up with so much responsibility that he staggered under the load. Nor was he required to bear it alone.

But my father also needed to find a biblical answer for why he had suffered so much at the hands of others, even Adventist leaders. He explains it with John 15:20 (KJV): "The servant [Christian] is not greater than his lord [Jesus]. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you."

Dad says: "This is what happens when we choose to be followers of Jesus. Why let it hurt us when people treat us badly?" And while vengeance has no place in my father's thoughts, he takes comfort in Romans 12:19 (NRSV), "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord," which means that he is willing now to at least acknowledge the reality of his suffering, willing to admit the times that the church treated him badly. Dad hears God saying that he understands his hurts, sadness, unfairness, betrayal, and ordeals in life, and how sad, depressed, anxious, and traumatized that has made him feel.

A Daughter's Lesson

I struggle to accept these conclusions as readily as he does. Yes, refusing to be consumed by anger is a freedom. It puts distance between us and the hurt we suffer at the hands of others, and maybe it even allows us to experience the healing power of forgiveness.

Yet not just my father, but also my mother, sisters, brothers, and I were victims of the conference leaders' guilt-intimidation, of the endless demands placed upon my pastor father, of the


leaders' failure to appreciate and reward his efforts to do more and do it perfectly, and of betrayal by friends. I expect more from a church, and more from the Christian leaders who took advantage of his earnestness, who drove him relentlessly in The Work. Dad may forgive and move on, but those who created this situation apparently don't know the damage they did to the Hooper family. And, I'm quite certain, things like this are still happening to some pastors.

What's more, I have a hard time being as forgiving of God as my father is. No one was more devoted to The Work than my father. I don't let God off the hook so easily, but Dad never put him on it in the first place. I admire him in many ways for this.

In his own way, my father has arrived at an approach to mental health that works for him. Although he no longer works for the church in an official capacity, nonetheless I must accept that the "should" and "must" and "God instructs us to..." imperatives that contributed to his breakdown still exist.

I'm glad that he has reached an understanding about where he stands with God and how he can contribute to the lives of others. Instead of delivering sermons from the pulpit, chairing nominating committees, or running missions and safehouses, Pastor Lance F. Hooper is now the stooped, gray-haired man who's busy in the aisles, facilitating prayer groups and searching for people who exist on the outer edges of church. He places himself in the path of those who suffer, acknowledging their pain, extending care, and offering the sensitivity, encouragement, and biblical understanding that was in such short supply for him. He explains: "God says to me, 'Tell the world what I have done for you,' and he definitely has some people for me to encourage. I can show them God's graciousness and what he says about the difficulties we face in life."

I want my father to rest in the knowledge that he has been a good and faithful servant. Yet the burden of his fragile mental health still arises, and when it does, Dad now thinks of it as "God reminding me that I am dependent on him." I see his eyes sheen with tears and his chin tremble as he says this, and I feel my heart stretching, reaching out of me toward him once more.

Update: In mid-November 2020, Dad was diagnosed with early Alzheimer's. He had noticed signs of this and had already divested himself of most of The Work he'd set for himself. That soon he may no longer be able to contribute in the way he loves the most makes us all unbearably sad. 

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (2004), p. 10 (Kindle edition).



NEWS BRIEFS

BarelyAdventist (barelyadventist.com) is a satire and humor blog on Adventist culture and issues. It is written by committed Adventists who have no interest in tearing down the church but don't mind laughing at our idiosyncrasies.

Pastor's Husband Sick of Always Being Judged

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Local pastor's husband R. N. Down could not be prouder of his wife and her ministry to their congregation. And while he is trying hard to be supportive, he's sick and tired of enduring endless judgment from other church members. They seem to think it is his (unpaid) job to coordinate everything from potluck and song service to children's Sabbath School—all while looking after his own kids and wearing acceptable shirt-and-tie combos.

Down's least favorite duty as a pastor's husband is arranging flower displays. No matter what he does, the

arrangements always turn out looking lopsided and wilted. He literally hides from certain members, who have something to say each Sabbath about his latest attempt. Down has been looking for a support group of other pastors' husbands, but as they are so few and far between, he's had to console himself by going to town on \$1 Dairy Queen Tuesdays.

Expect Altar Calls to Be Longer, More Frequent

SILVER SPRING, Md. – The General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research has announced that as churches start to open up for in-person services, pastors will need to double-down on securing decisions for Jesus.

"COVID-19 precautions have caused us to lose valuable time for face-to-face exchanges and things like altar calls, which don't work well over a virtual Zoom connection," said the office in a worldwide memo.

Church leaders have instructed pastors to do whatever it takes to make up for lost time, including altar calls that are more frequent and last longer. Suggestions for extending their passionate appeals include singing every known stanza of favorite hymns (as opposed to just the first and last verses), repeatedly calling for "just one more" person to come up front, and singling out potential converts by name.

"If those methods fail to produce desired results," suggested the memo, "you could announce that the doors are locked and that you've 'got all night,' then start reading from the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* if your organist complains of hand cramps."

Adventist Cat Busted for Eating Unclean Meat

MOBILE, Ala. – An Adventist-owned cat succumbed to temptation last week when he spotted a mouse darting across the garage. Reacting instinctively, Fluffy pounced on the mouse and was busy polishing off his mid-afternoon snack when his aggressively

vegan owner stepped into the garage. Horrified at her pet's unsanctioned culinary exploration, she gave Fluffy a *Testimonies*-heavy scolding and admonished him to stick to the menu. She then uttered a stiff warning that the next time he was caught snacking on unclean meat, he would face the church disciplinary committee.

Deacon Dreads Return to In-Person Church

PORTLAND, Ore. – Brent Baker, a local Adventist deacon, has spent the last several weeks nervously monitoring his congregation's Facebook page for any signs that his church will resume in-person worship services. Baker has loved nothing more than lounging on his couch with audio-only Zoom Sabbath School and sermons in the background, not lifting a finger to do anything other than dig into a super-sized bag of nacho-flavored corn chips. Hopeful that his church will stay Zoom-only for at least a little while longer, he dreads an active return to deacon duties—especially church-cleaning rotations and foot-washing services—and having to change out of his pajamas before noon on a Saturday.

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When a teacher presents new topics as if they are indisputable facts, you trust them as far as you can verify the veracity of their claims. Your inquiring mind compels you to speak up in class, asking searching questions, and prompts you to write papers that challenge commonly held assumptions.

When your employer gives you data to do your work, you appreciate your paycheck and do everything you can to keep getting paid, but you also double-check what you're given to make sure it is accurate, fair, ethical, and truthful.

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We think our print and online resources are uniquely tailored to you. Our mission includes a respect for the Adventist community, but we are willing to investigate anything and bring it to light whenever necessary:

- Even if a fundamental belief has been held for centuries, we will seek for present truth and share it with you so that you can come to your own conclusions.
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