

Discussed: Made in America Adventism, common sense realism, democratization of theology, strange obsession with separation of church and state, the inevitable altar call, taxonomy of doctrine, theology of change



Culture and Adventism: Europe and the United States as a Case Study

By Reinder Bruinsma

Culture is usually defined as a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another. These are transmitted from generation to generation through learning.

Even if we were to allow for the totally unjustified presupposition that a person enters this world as a *tabula rasa* (blank slate), we would need to agree that she would soon be subject to the forces of culture. She would shape her personality, acquire her worldview and belief system, norms, and behavior in constant, partly subconscious interaction with the dominant culture and the subculture(s) in which she participates.

Adventists are not immune to these influences. Adventism around the world has in varying degrees inherited a strong dose of American culture. Like it or not, Adventism was “made in America.” It started in a nineteenth-century American frontier setting, and there it acquired a definite flavor that remained a prominent feature as it traveled across the Midwest to California and into the South.¹

It is impossible to provide a comprehensive overview of all important aspects of this

Americanness of Adventism. But I would like to discuss a few aspects that I consider most significant from a European perspective.

Adventism's American Roots

It seems to me that much of Adventism's pragmatic and almost entrepreneurial spirit is closely linked to the philosophical outlook that has long dominated in the United States. Although America has experienced a variety of schools of philosophy that passed through the Western world, (Scottish) common sense realism pervaded the world of the Adventist pioneers, and no current of thought has been so consistently central in the United States as utilitarianism and other forms of pragmatism.²

The democratization of theology and church life in America is at least as important.³ The idea that the layperson and the theologian are equally qualified to understand and interpret the Bible



goes a long way toward explaining the hearing that uneducated people like William Miller, other Millerite leaders, and the Adventist pioneers received from so many people.

Furthermore, early Adventism was strongly influenced by a number of religious currents that were successful on the frontier, such as “primitive” forms of Protestantism like the Christian Connection and the American version of Methodism.⁴ Naturally, the strong Puritan hold on much of America’s early religious development also left its imprint on Adventism.

In addition, Adventism eagerly embraced the ideals of a number of reform movements promoted by other Christians in nineteenth-century America. Many early Adventists were involved with antislavery initiative, and they were deeply interested in the temperance movement and various aspects of health reform.⁵

Adventism did not develop its theology in a vacuum. The shadow of anti-Trinitarian thinking, which some of the pioneers inherited from their religious roots, continued to hover for decades over the new movement.⁶ Adventist theology also shows the marks of what has often been called “America’s obsession with the millennium.”⁷

Moreover, from the last decades of the nineteenth century onward, Seventh-day Adventism shared a strong anti-Catholic attitude with the majority of other Protestant Christians.⁸ A clear parallel can also be observed between waves of strong fundamentalist thinking in the Adventist Church and in American Protestantism in general.⁹

In administrative matters, the organizational patterns and terminology adopted by the Adventist Church were clearly inspired by ecclesiastical models current in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America and by American political structures.¹⁰ The fact that the Adventist Church has adopted a presidential system is clearly linked to this heritage.

Likewise, important institutions in Adventism were borrowed and adapted from other American denominations. The Sabbath School—for adults and children—was clearly modeled after the evangelical Sunday School that originated late in the eighteenth century and was consolidated by 1870.¹¹

European Adventism and American Adventism

Some Seventh-day Adventist historians have eagerly searched for Adventism’s European roots. Possible connections with the Reformation, and, in particular,

with certain strands of the Anabaptist movement (baptism and the Sabbath, for example) have been a prominent theme.¹² However interesting such searches may be, the fact remains that the Seventh-day Adventist Church was—more than anything else—an American church imported into Europe from the United States.¹³

Some of the first Adventist preachers and leaders in Europe were Americans born in Europe, or they were second-generation Americans. John Matteson and Louis R. Conradi are prime examples.¹⁴ Others, like James Erzberger, converted to Adventism in Europe, but almost immediately left for the United States for further training.¹⁵

Since then, European Adventism has retained many features that originated in the American cultural context. But interaction with other cultures has also influenced it, as can be seen among thousands of members who have migrated from the Caribbean region to Western Europe.¹⁶

The movement of members within Europe has complicated the picture, as, notably, members from Romania and other Central European countries have migrated westward. If anything, their arrival in Western Europe has underlined the fact that European Adventism comes in several distinct varieties. In addition, there are marked differences between the Adventist subcultures of Southern Europe and Northern Europe.

But even when we factor in these differences in the way Adventism manifests itself in Europe, there is every justification to distinguish between American and European Adventism.

Listed below are a number of significant differences I have observed while traveling widely in Europe and the United States. In many ways, the differences are more pronounced in Western Europe, but Central and Eastern European societies are changing at a breathtaking rate and, with them, the Adventist Church in this region. As a result, differences between Western and Central Europe are no longer as significant as they once were.

1 Both Europe and the United States are highly secular societies. Yet, there are major differences. Whereas a large percentage of Americans continues to attend church and support organized religion, a much smaller percentage of citizens in Europe do so.¹⁷ This pattern can also be seen in the Adventist Church, particularly on its fringes.

2 Europeans differ from Americans in their view of the church. Traditionally, many European countries have had a state church, or established church.¹⁸ Those who did not belong to these churches might attend “free” churches, but

they had fewer rights and less social prestige. Seventh-day Adventism has often been considered a sect in Europe, and it has long had a dubious reputation. This situation has changed considerably in recent decades, making Adventism more socially acceptable.

In contrast, the United States turned its back on the idea of an established church soon after its founding and opted instead for a pattern of voluntarism known as denominationalism. Although a pecking order still exists among denominations in terms of social prestige, Adventists in the United States have traditionally tended to place themselves on a higher social level than have their brothers and sisters in Europe.¹⁹

3 I believe that American Adventists tend to be more optimistic than European (certainly Western European) Adventists. Although Calvinism historically had a strong influence on American religion and Arminian tendencies have largely replaced the original widespread predestinarian beliefs, the stress on human free will carried inherent optimism. As a result, American religion became preeminently practical and individualistic.²⁰

As a result, it produced evangelists rather than theologians. American historian Henry Steele Commager once observed: "It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that during the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, religion prospered while theology went slowly bankrupt."²¹ The Adventist Church in Europe imported its evangelists from the United States, but it exported many of its theologians to America.²²

The pragmatic outlook of American Adventism can also be seen in a superabundance of independent ministries. No one knows how many there are. They vary in size from one-man, low budget operations to organizations with multimillion dollar budgets and hundreds of employees.²³

4 Periodic waves of extreme fundamentalism and Protestant right-wing ideas (abortion, capitalism, anti-socialism, and so forth) have probably influenced American Adventism to a greater extent than European Adventism.²⁴

5 In the eyes of many Europeans, American Adventists not only have a strange obsession with separation of church and state, but they also appear to be quite inconsistent. Prayer in public schools and at public events is deemed unacceptable, but there seems to be no problem with flying the American flag in church. This never ceases to amaze Europeans.

Europeans also note with interest that the Adventist Church in the United States has traditionally refused subsidies (for instance, with its educational system), whereas in many cases European Adventist leaders have actively sought them.²⁵

6 Most Adventists in North America have apparently abandoned the ideal of military noncombatancy. Adventist servicemen and women who return from active duty in the United States are not criticized for choosing military careers but tend to be applauded because of their patriotism. In Europe, by contrast, Adventists by and large continue to uphold the ideal of noncombatancy.

In European countries that until recently had a conscription system, many Adventists not only refused to bear arms, they also opted whenever possible for alternative (preferably humanitarian) service outside the military. It may well be that the bitter controversy about military service around World War I—which constituted one of the main issues in the schism between the Adventist Church and the Reformed Adventists—is still not fully forgotten.²⁶

In addition, it should be noted that European Adventists have tended to be less critical of labor union membership than have their American brethren.

7 Other notable differences also exist in the way American and Western European Adventists apply certain "Adventist" standards. European Adventists may be stricter in their Sabbath keeping. Eating out in restaurants on Sabbath and spending money on Sabbath (for example, buying fuel) are activities still largely taboo among Adventists in Europe. However, Europeans have always been more relaxed about wedding rings, and today are considerably more comfortable with modest amounts of jewelry.

In addition, large numbers of European Adventists have long objected to Christmas trees, and this attitude still lingers in some quarters, whereas American Adventists are more tolerant of them. For a long time, the American church also appeared more relaxed than its European counterpart in dealing with divorce and remarriage, but today those differences may be small. Furthermore, the European Church may now be more "understanding" with regard to cohabitation than is the Church in the United States.

As George R. Knight points out, Adventists have

never had a systematic procedure for the formation of standards and have still not moved beyond the ad hoc procedures of their forebears.²⁷

8 The status attributed to Ellen G. White probably differs among Adventists in Europe and the United States.

A number of factors may account for this. In some parts of Europe, Louis Conradi's reluctance—and subsequent unwillingness—to accept her as a prophet from God has lingered.²⁸

Also, the facts that not many Europeans in the past could read English and that few of Ellen White's books were available in their own languages also meant that they had limited access to her writings. In addition, many Europeans were probably reluctant to elevate her lest they be linked to what many perceived as an American sect—which, like Mormonism, had its own prophet.

9 I am not aware of any studies that compare differences in apocalyptic perceptions between American and European Adventists. On both continents, we currently see a wide spectrum of opinions. Adventists can be found on both who adamantly assert that traditional prophetic interpretations are still valid, whereas others insist just as forcefully that the Church should distance itself from its historicist approach to apocalyptic prophecy.²⁹

However, there is reason to think that America's alleged role in the end-time scenario has usually received less attention in Europe than in the United States. Also, American Adventists have traditionally manifested more concern about the danger of repressive Sunday laws than have their European counterparts.³⁰

10 Finally, there are distinct differences in the way European and American Adventists have traditionally conducted evangelism. Many in Europe have feared the inevitable altar call that comes with visits of American speakers!

Facing Diversity Constructively

Diversity within worldwide Adventism far exceeds differences between its American and European members. One must also remember that there are differences *within* American Adventism and *within* European Adventism, both theologically and culturally. But today, the greatest divide within the Church may not be rooted in national or regional cultures, or conservative, evangelical, or liberal theological orientations.

I am more and more convinced that another, ever-

widening abyss threatens the unity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The Church is still in many parts of the world very modern in its thinking and operations, especially its bureaucratic structure. However, slowly but surely, it has a growing postmodern element in many parts of the Western World that has an entirely new way of relating to the Adventist metanarrative. Whether it will successfully meet this unprecedented challenge remains to be seen.³¹

I t is not easy to answer the question, How much diversity can be tolerated? When it comes to cultural diversity, it would seem that at least in theory the degree of diversity that can be handled is related more to practical issues than theological and philosophical concerns.

Theological diversity is a different matter. I believe that a fair degree of diversity in theological views is both inevitable and desirable. It is inevitable, because of differences in cultural and educational backgrounds and because we have received the priceless gift of independent thought.

It is desirable because without dialogue—and without a continuous search for a better understanding of what it believes—the Church will soon cease to be a living body and will serve only as a museum for a particular nineteenth-century current of religious thought.

The issue is not whether diversity—particularly theological diversity—can be tolerated, but how much of it can exist without endangering the unity of the Church. This raises the question how much of Adventist theology must be shared by all, and how much can be considered optional without risking a schism or dangerous fragmentation.

Must all twenty-eight Fundamental Beliefs be upheld for a person to be considered an Adventist in good standing? What about other traditional Adventist views not listed among the Fundamental Beliefs, but nevertheless considered essential “pillars of the faith” by segments of the Church? Although some would hesitate to agree, in actual practice the Church seems to operate on the principle that not all of its doctrines are equally important.

Space does not permit an in-depth discussion in this article of a curious taxonomy of beliefs that can be detected at times. For instance, a person who denies the doctrine of the Trinity or has unorthodox views on the pre-existence of Christ or the doctrine of the atonement usually faces far fewer problems than someone who confesses to flexibility on the meaning of 1844.

Determining what parts of Adventist teaching are absolutely essential for maintaining an Adventist identity

is admittedly a highly subjective matter. I wonder whether a proposed taxonomy of doctrine by George Lindbeck, a distinguished historical theologian, might offer a profitable point of departure.³²

Following Lindbeck's lead, I would suggest that doctrines might be divided into three distinct categories: (1) doctrines universally held in Christianity; (2) doctrines unique to one church or several ecclesiastical bodies that largely determine the theological identity of that church or body; and (3) other doctrines and views generally held by members of a particular ecclesiastical body but that have varying degrees of support.

If the Fundamental Beliefs and other important views and practices of the Adventist Church were categorized along these lines, one might argue that the main substance of doctrines in categories one and two must be shared by all who want to be called Seventh-day Adventists, whereas considerable diversity might be tolerated with regard to category three.

I realize that consensus in this matter would not come easily. Some would welcome a reassessment of relative weights among various Fundamental Beliefs and would be prepared to classify some as less essential than others. Others would protest and suggest that any such attempts to classify doctrines would set the Church off on a slippery slope toward utter relativism.

However, it seems to me that the discussion cannot be avoided. Too many people have begun to wonder why previous generations of Adventist believers could remain in good and regular standing with far fewer Fundamental Beliefs than we currently have, yet they were able to deal constructively with far more diversity than many in today's Adventist Church are willing to consider.

In conclusion, let me suggest a few approaches that might help build bridges between different segments of the Adventist Church and assist leaders and members to deal more constructively and positively with diversity within it. Again, as a European Adventist, I will focus on the European situation.

1 It is important to realize that Christianity has been highly diverse from its inception, whether we think of first-century Christianity, medieval Christianity, or the church in the Reformation era.³³ Few Adventists appreciate this fact adequately.

Early Adventism was also far more diverse than many Adventists today realize. It would seem proper to stress

this diversity more prominently in our publications and preaching, because doing so would help members understand that considerable flexibility has always characterized the Church.

2 Many people fear change. This statement applies to Seventh-day Adventists as well as others. It is important to educate church members more fully about the reality of change—including doctrinal change—in the past.³⁴ Doing so will help members accept it more easily.

Our universities and colleges may need to be more intentional in providing prospective ministers with the skills to facilitate change. *Adventist Review* editor William Johnsson suggests that the Church needs a biblical view of change, possibly even a theology of change.³⁵

3 The legitimacy of contextualization needs more emphasis.³⁶ Although the Church's missiologists and better-informed leaders have gradually accepted the need for inculturation or contextualization, there is still enormous confusion at the grassroots level about the distinction between form and content. There is need for a concerted educational effort to increase awareness among members about the role of culture.

Members must be helped to appreciate the fact that biblical teaching must be deconstructed to discover the core beneath the cultural packaging in which it was delivered, and they must be helped to understand that the original message must be retranslated into current languages and repackaged in culturally relevant ways without compromising that message.

Most European Adventists at the grassroots level do not fully appreciate the extent to which Adventism has been packaged in American ways. Nor do they understand that many of these wrappings can be safely discarded and replaced with forms more appropriate to the European scene. This means that further Europeanization of Adventism is not only legitimate but also essential if the Church expects to reach its target audiences in Europe.

4 More specifically, the Adventist Church must be encouraged to deal with the realities of diversity it faces in a constructive and creative manner in sustained dialogue with various segments of local church constituencies. While remaining faithful to its core doctrines and values, Adventism must be packaged in culturally relevant ways.



The resulting diversity will be challenging at times, but refusing to allow it will create a greater danger. Present and coming generations will simply walk away from the Church if they find it does not speak to the actualities of their life situations.

5 Finally, it is important to encourage church leaders to forcefully resist the temptation to prescribe everything for the entire world through policies outlined in an ever-expanding church manual and other official documents. Church leadership at higher levels should focus on major, fundamental principles and leave the issue of how such principles might be translated into action to the church entities that know the cultures in which they operate.

Clearly, Adventist educators must play a vital role in building awareness of these issues, especially since they work in a unique environment of diversity, with teachers and students from many different backgrounds. Their goal should not be how to find ways of discouraging diversity. Instead, they must have a clear vision to creatively foster a climate in which people from all nations—regardless of cultural or ethnic background—gladly allow for a significant degree of theological diversity while standing united on a firm platform of essential truths and worshiping God in ways that are culturally satisfying.

Notes and References

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2. Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 23–25; Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America 1720–2000* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

3. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

4. Bert Haloviak, "A Heritage of Freedom: The Christian Connection Roots to Seventh-day Adventism," unpublished paper; Russell L. Staples, "Adventism," in Donald W. Dayton and Robert

K. Johnston, eds. *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991).

5. Ronald G. Walters *American Reformers—1815–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

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8. Reinder Bruinsma, *Adventist Attitudes toward Roman Catholicism 1844–1965* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1994). The main arguments of this doctoral dissertation were summarized in idem, "Adventists and Catholics: Prophetic Preview or Prejudice," *Spectrum* 27.3 (summer 1999): 45–52.

9. Reinder Bruinsma, "Adventist and Protestant Fundamentalism," *Spectrum* 30.1 (winter 2002): 24–36.

10. George R. Knight, *Organizing to Beat the Devil: The Development of the Adventist Church Structure* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2001), 48–66; 90–91; Barry David Oliver, *SDA Organizational Structure: Past, Present and Future* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1989), 46–66 and passim. Both books provide in-depth analyses of the development of the Seventh-day Adventist ecclesiastical structure.

11. An excellent history of the American Sunday School movement is provided by Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution—1790–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). Compare Richard W. Schwartz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, rev ed. (Nampa: Idaho: Pacific Press, 2000), 155–57.

12. It is no coincidence that a book about "The Story of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Europe" was titled *Heirs of the Reformation* (eds. Hugh Dunton et al.; Grantham U.K.: Stanborough Press, 1997). Bryan W. Ball, *The English Connection* (Cambridge, Eng.: James Clarke, 1981), 138–58; idem., *The Seventh-day Men: Sabbatarianism and Sabbatarianism in England and Wales, 1600–1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

13. Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 164–75.

14. In regard to John G. Matteson, see Schwartz and Greenleaf, *Light Bearers*, 87, 137, 143, 209. On Louis R. Conradi, see G. Padderatz, *Conradi und Hamburg. Die Anfänge der Deutschen Adventgemeinde (1889–1914) unter Besonderer Berücksichtigung der Organisatorische, Finanziellen und Sozialen Aspekte* (Hamburg: By the author, 1978); Daniel Heinz, *Ludwig Richard Conradi: Missionar der*

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16. For comments on the British situation, see *ibid.*, 509–13.

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18. See the section on "Adventism and the European Environment," in Daniel Heinz, *Church, State, and Religious Dissent* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993), 44–48.

19. Bruinsma, *Geloven in Amerika*, 74–76. See, in particular, the chapter "Social Sources of Denominationalism Revisited," in Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion* (New Brunswick, N.Y.: Rutgers University Press), 106–47.

20. Richard E. Wenz, *The Shaping of Religious Traditions in the United States* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1990), 97–112; Robert L. Ferm, *Piety, Purity, Plenty: Images of Protestantism in America* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1991), 44, 45; James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984); Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 7, 9; Richard Rice, *Believing, Behaving, Belonging: Finding New Love for the Church* (Roseville, Calif.: Association of Adventist Forums, 2002), 75–85; Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 142–63.

21. Commager, *American Mind*, 165.

22. It would appear to me that the significant number of Adventist theologians with European roots (their number is disproportionate to the size of the Church in Europe) who have come to teach at Adventist institutions in America in recent decades, have not "Europeanized" Adventist theology to any major degree. It may well be that they came too late to do so.

23. Reinder Bruinsma, "Supporting Ministries," in Baumgartner, *Re-Visioning Adventist Mission in Europe*, 167–70.

24. Reinder Bruinsma, "Adventist and Protestant Fundamentalism," *Spectrum*, 30.1 (winter 2002): 24–36.

25. See Eric Syne, *A History of SDA Church-State Relations in the United States* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1973).

26. Johannes Hartlapp, "Military Service: A Comparative Study Between the New Testament Teaching and the Attitude of German Adventists" (master's thesis, Andrews University, 1993), argues that decisions by German church leadership that ignited the

controversy were less informed by theology than by the fear that the Church might be banned by the authorities. A few years ago, the Adventist Reformed Movement published a rather noncritical, but comprehensive history of its movement. It is surprising to see how large the issues concerning military service have loomed in its thinking. See A. Balbach, *History of the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement* (Virginia: Reformation Herald, 1999), 29–64, 172–81, 628–33.

27. George R. Knight, *The Fat Lady and the Kingdom: Confronting the Challenges of Change and Secularization* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1995), 116, 117.

28. Daniel Heinz, *Church, State, and Religious Dissent*, 94 ff.

29. Kai Arasola, *The End of Historicism* (Ph.D. diss., University of Uppsala, 1990).

30. Warren L. Johns, *Dateline Sunday, USA* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1967).

31. Reinder Bruinsma, "Modern versus Postmodern Adventism: The Ultimate Divide," *Ministry Magazine*, June 2005, 16–21.

32. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 84–88; Rober C. Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 170–75.

33. See, for instance, Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, rev. ed. (London: SCM, 1972).

34. See Knight: *Search for Identity*; and Schwartz and Greenleaf, *Light Bearers*, 160–74; 607–47.

35. William G. Johnsson, *The Fragmenting of Adventism* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1995), 120.

36. Over time, Ellen G. White gradually became aware of the need to adapt to culture. See Børge Schantz, "Development of Seventh-day Adventist Missionary Thought: Contemporary Appraisal" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1983), 677–704; and Meredith Jones, "Ellen G. White's Attitudes to Cultural Differences as Revealed in her European Counsels" (unpublished paper, 1979).

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