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# [Book Review of] Adventism and Ellen White: A Phenomenon of Religious Materialism, by Thomas McElwain

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Malphurs is an excellent guide to help you in this process. An additional strength of the book is the numerous resources available as appendices.

Although Malphurs enunciates his desire to share principles that are relevant for all models of planting, there is a clear preference toward megachurches. This is evidenced in the examples that are highlighted, including the megachurch where he is a member. A formula is presented for adding paid staff based on numbers attending church. This is known as “staffing for growth” and is a popular strategy in evangelical church growth. The entire structure of planting is based around staffing key areas of ministry with full-time paid professionals. Fund raising to cover salaries (which is 50 percent plus the budget) is given significant focus. Obviously, this method is entirely outside the scope and structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Facility recommendations for a new plant group of theaters and schools are unrealistic in the Adventist context due to the high usage of these facilities on Saturday mornings. There are numerous areas throughout the book that need to be wisely contextualized for the Adventist culture. Finally, the book ends abruptly. There is no summary that ties everything together and provides inspiration to launch into church planting.

For those looking for “Nuts and Bolts” when it comes to church planting, I would recommend Malphurs’s *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century*. It should retain its position as the “gold standard.” For something more current, *Planting Missional Churches* by Ed Stetzer is an excellent resource.

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McElwain, Thomas. *Adventism and Ellen White: A Phenomenon of Religious Materialism*. Studies on Inter-Religious Relations, Vol. 48. Uppsala: Swedish Science Press, 2010. 287 pp. Paper, SEK 196.00.

Thomas McElwain is Associate Professor of Comparative Religion at the University of Stockholm, Sweden, specializing in Native American religion, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. *Adventism and Ellen White* is a privately sponsored study that attempts to evaluate the alleged Arianism of early Adventism and the role of Ellen White in Adventism’s shift toward the doctrine of the Trinity (11, 23).

Chapter 1 describes the problem, explains the phenomenological methodology, and briefly reviews past research on the topic.

Chapter 2 shows that while until 1890 Adventists considered their doctrine as theological “materialism,” their usage of the term gradually changed already after 1870. They refrained from using the term altogether after 1890, but it was not until 1906 that the consolidation of a nonmaterialist theological vocabulary began.

Chapter 3 explains that between 1854 and 1931 Adventists referred to historical Arianism in neutral terms without seeing any similarities to their own beliefs. Yet, after 1896 some authors labeled Arians as heretical and after 1929 a few authors made direct attacks on Arians.

Chapter 4 shows that the nondoctrinal usage of the term “Trinity” was clearly pejorative before 1897 and almost always positive after 1916, with a mixed usage between these years.

Chapter 5 suggests that at least until 1864 the Trinitarian dogma was seen as part of “the pagan, persecuting package of vestiges in Protestantism,” keeping it from being the true church of God. When Adventists developed a broader view of missions, their perception of the Trinity began to change, yet the perception of the remainder of this doctrinal package (Sunday, infant “baptism,” and the natural immortality of the soul) remained the same.

Chapter 6 describes early Adventist perceptions of weak sources for the Trinity doctrine. McElwain shows that their perception of the doctrine as irrational, unscriptural, and pagan was founded upon materialist, literalist assumptions.

Chapter 7 points out early Adventist perceptions of destructive features in the doctrine of the Trinity, showing that they believed it destroys the divine personality and is a factor in Christian apostasy.

Chapter 8 outlines the doctrinal implications of the Trinity doctrine as perceived by early Adventists: its diminishment of the atonement was criticized only sporadically and the last time in 1880 (158); and its blurring of the distinction between the Father and the Son formed part of the discussion until at least 1891 (142).

In chapter 9, the author describes and compares the contributions of three writers: D. W. Hull, H. C. Blanchard, and D. M. Canright. Accordingly, Hull’s doctrine of God was rather “a corollary of an assumed soteriology,” which, in turn, was really a corollary of the doctrine of the sanctuary (173-174). Blanchard’s theology was set in the context of the validity of the Decalogue, yet unlike Hull he did not emphasize the materialist basis, Christ’s subordination, or his noneternity in the past (177). Canright differed from other writers in both his strong emphasis of Christ having “derived” his existence and properties from the Father, and his concern of creating a consistent, systematic theology of the doctrine of God (187).

Chapter 10 shows the change to the belief in a Trinity consisting of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit after 1891 and to the belief in a Trinity consisting of the Father, the Son with a twofold divine-human nature of the same nature and essence as the Father, and the Holy Spirit sometime in 1919-1920.

Chapter 11 shows White’s materialist view of God and other Bible doctrines, opposing any spiritualizing away of the materialness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and of the bodily materiality of the Father and the Son.

Chapter 12 describes White's reference to the phrase "the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit" in the context of baptism, showing her emphasis on the covenant relation, the transformation of the believer, the invisible real presence of the divine persons, and the divine influence in the life of the believer. McElwain points out that her varying reference to the three persons is ambiguous and not in harmony with classical Trinitarianism.

Chapter 13 analyzes White's nonbaptismal passages that use the above phrase, concluding that they all explicitly or implicitly stand in the context of her covenant theology. He concludes that she neglected "the central concerns of both Trinitarian and non-Trinitarian theology" and focused rather on theological and practical aspects of soteriology (279).

There are two vital weaknesses in McElwain's phenomenological approach:

1. The evaluation of the writings of Adventist writers other than White is based solely on keyword searches in the *Review and Herald* (11, 282). Yet, the fact that White lived in Australia (1891-1900) during the time when she made her first Trinitarian statements (1896-1898) highlights the need to take Australian sources into account. Failure to do so results necessarily in a distortion of the final conclusions.

2. Keyword searches in the electronic database of White's writings did not include her most significant statements regarding the three persons of the Godhead (e.g., "third person of the Godhead;" "three persons in the divine trio"), which will necessarily produce unrepresentative and distorted results. Failing to analyze how these phrases were used by other contemporary Adventist writers has led the author to the mistaken conclusion that White had no influence whatsoever on the Adventist move toward Trinitarianism (191, 27, 222. For an alternative study, see D. Kaiser, "The Reception of Ellen White's Trinitarian Statements by Her Contemporaries [1897-1915]," *AUSS* 50 [2012]: 25-38). Every sampling is influenced by the set of keywords chosen by the researcher. Also, keyword searches produce only results with explicit occurrences of the respective keywords; they do not capture statements that express the concept without using the specific terminology. That is also the cause for McElwain's mistaken suggestion that the first person to quote White in regard to the Trinity was F. M. Wilcox in 1913 (198). Yet, numerous other writers began quoting her in that regard already as early as 1898, as may be seen in my article mentioned above.

A few remarks should be made regarding the author's final two conclusions:

1. He repeatedly suggests that modern scholars refer to early Adventists as Arians, a view that he disputes because early Adventists understood the features of historic Arianism well, but did not identify themselves with Arianism (219, 281, 286). His evaluation of Adventist scholarship surprises, however, for most of them do not describe early Adventists as Arians, but

as Antitrinitarians or Semi-Arians (see, e.g., J. Moon, "The Adventist Trinity Debate, Part 1: Historical Overview," *AUSS* 41 [2003]: 113-129).

2. The author declares that White was not a Trinitarian since she did not claim to be one and never used the term itself (281). Yet, since he himself states that she believed in a unity in mind, purpose, and action of three divine figures (286), one may wonder if, in his understanding, only the traditional view of the Trinity qualifies for Trinitarianism.

Throughout the book there are numerous inaccuracies, a few of which may be pointed out here:

1. It was not M. C. Wilcox who "formulated the Seventh-day Adventist doctrine of the Trinity in its earliest form" (66), but his brother F. M. Wilcox (see F. M. Wilcox, "The Message for Today," *Review and Herald*, 9 October 1913, 21). In contrast, M. C. Wilcox believed in "three great manifestations of Deity," a possible allusion to modalism (see M. C. Wilcox, "The Personality of the Spirit," *Signs of the Times*, 24 November 1914, 730-731).

2. McElwain refers to J. H. Kellogg as a Trinitarian (9, 65, 194, 227) without providing any source references. It should be noted, however, that Kellogg, in response to criticism, only tried to conceal his panentheistic views by seeking refuge in White's statements on the Holy Spirit's personhood and her emphasis on God's presence (see Kaiser, 36-38).

3. It is suggested that "C. S." Longacre joined in the anti-Arian attitude (65, 66), but the author overlooks that Longacre actually resisted the Adventist move toward the Trinity, remaining a renowned antitrinitarianism until the end of his life.

4. White's 1846 statement on the bodily materiality of the Father and the Son is interpreted as a response to the immaterialism of the classic Methodist doctrine of the Trinity (225-226, 229-230). It seems, however, more reasonable to interpret the statement in the context of spiritualizing Bridegroom Adventism from mid-1845 to mid-1846 rather than in the context of the theological intricacies of the denomination she had left two and a half years earlier. During that time, she was concerned with saving people from the rampant "Spiritualizers" who spiritualized away the tangible reality of divine persons, divine institutions, and prophetic events in an effort to explain the 1844 disappointment (see E. G. Harmon to E. Jacobs, 15 February 1846, published in "Letter from Sister Harmon," *Day-Star*, 14 March 1846, 7; M. D. Burt, "The Historical Background, Interconnected Development, and Integration of the Doctrines of the Sanctuary, the Sabbath, and Ellen G. White's Role in Sabbatarian Adventism from 1844 to 1849" [Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 2002], 210-225).

5. The author surprisingly claims that L. E. Froom's four-volume work, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, "confirmed Ellen White as a prophet and infallible among twentieth-century Adventists" (19), although that series is

not concerned with her, but focuses on interpreters of biblical prophecy throughout the Christian era.

6. McElwain occasionally interprets statements as having spiritualistic tendencies (e.g., 49-51), although these statements merely use terms such as “spiritual,” “spiritual truth.” Such words and phrases were even employed by White, who was considered a full materialist by him. Thus it may be difficult to put some people either in one category or in the other category.

7. Thus White suggested, for example, that Christ had “two natures” that “were mysteriously blended in one person” (e.g., E. G. White to Ministers, Physicians, and Teachers, 3 September 1904 [Letter 280, 1904]), a concept that the author identifies as a Trinitarian view (96, 203) that she supposedly did not hold.

8. He further argues that most early Adventists opted for an “equality between the Father and the Son, rather than subordination” (138, cf. 151-152), a claim that is not supported by previous studies. The first statements that promote their equality appeared in the 1870s.

9. Also, his suggestion that between the 1890s and the 1920s Adventists used the term “Trinity” as a new name for their historic belief (195, 199-200) is highly questionable, although it might be admitted that some held to a subordinationist Trinitarianism and most did not hold to the traditional Trinitarian doctrine. He further suggests that even the early Adventists could be termed “Trinitarian” if one takes only the basic acknowledgement of all three persons into account (200, 216, 220). His definition of “Trinitarian” and “Trinity” is not always clear, especially in the latter part of the book, but Adventist writers admittedly were not always successful in clearly distinguishing between traditional Trinitarianism and their diverging concept of the Trinity.

McElwain may be commended for his interesting analysis of White’s references to “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” showing that these always appear in a covenantal context with one or more of the following features explicitly stated: “the reality of the divine personalities”; “the reality of the heavenly sanctuary”; “the eternal plan of redemption”; “the presence of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit at baptism”; “the effective action of the three with the believer”; “the condition of faithfulness to baptismal vows, that is obedience, itself achieved by divine grace”; “the work of the believer in bringing the gospel to others” (286). Another contribution is the discovery that early Adventists argued from a strictly materialist perspective and that White viewed the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as real, literal, and material persons with the first two having material bodies (286). The study is a valuable and useful contribution to the previous research on the topic; yet readers should be aware of the limitations of the methodology as applied by the author and his sometimes debatable interpretations of the source material.