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Toward a Post-Religious Urban Theology: The Missionary Movement Ethos in Secularized Contexts

Introduction

In the 21st century, the majority (55%) of the world's population lives in urban areas. That percentage is expected to increase to 68% by 2050 (almost all of that increase is projected in Asia and Africa) (UN DESA 2018). Urbanization is "the movement of people in search of social and economic well-being" (Davey 2007:419). People going through such transitions face both opportunities and challenges. Cities can be major centers of learning, innovation, and development; however, they are also characterized by many social, psychological, physical, environmental, and spiritual challenges that affect people's understanding of their identity. The urban context has become especially significant for Christian mission since it is the setting where most people live and face life's many challenges. Urban mission has considered ways to integrate evangelism and church planting with community development, social justice, and environmental concerns, as part of human transformation.

In order to better navigate the current urban context it is important to develop an urban theology that addresses those issues. "Missiological and theological training has created new awareness of how evangelism needs to be based on social analysis and the challenge to structural injustice" (Davey 2007:420), including the need to understand urban patterns of spirituality and religiosity. Urban centers are no exception for the interaction between human beings and their environment. People's ideals for humanity shape their environment. But also "cities have a vital role in shaping the human spirit for good or for ill" (Sheldrake 2014:12) Therefore, the future of the cities is more than a social and economic issue, it is a spiritual challenge.

The 20th century witnessed “a long-standing anti-urban bias characteristic of general Western scholarship” (Conn 1994:ii) that focused on the challenges of the urban setting. During the 1950s and 1960s perceptions about the city began to change even among different denominations in the United States. The next two decades saw a definite call for urban mission coming primarily from the Church Growth movement. The Seventh-day Adventist Church developed many missionary initiatives in urban contexts during the first few years of the denomination until its peak in the 1890s. After a long hiatus, only recently has the Adventist Church officially made urban mission a worldwide priority again. The release of *Ministry to the Cities* in 2012, a compilation of Ellen White writings, seems to be an important milestone in that shift. For too long the church’s traditional understanding emphasized White’s remarks about country living (Krause 2014).

Part of the explanation for the missiological anti-urban bias seems to be the “secularization theory” that was “once the dominant sociological pattern of interpretation to describe and explain religious change in the modern world” (Pollack 2013). Secularization theory focused on the decline, and eventual extinction, of religion to explain changes in society. The last two decades have witnessed the development of urban contexts that are increasingly post-religious—places where people are no longer religious and where the traditional narratives of religious faith have become less significant and binding.

Scholars have increasingly emphasized the de-privatization of the religious (José Casanova), of the return of the Gods (Friedrich Wilhelm Graf), the re-enchantment of the world (Ulrich Beck), and the de-secularization (Peter L. Berger). The focus has shifted from the decline of religion to the pluralization of religion through the simultaneity of secular and religious institutions and the coexistence of different religious worldviews in one space (Berger 2014). Post-religion, therefore, does not refer to complete secularization but an indication of diverse religious, humanist, and secularist positionalities.

This hotly debated topic in sociology of religion circles is a description of much of today’s urban mission field. The “no religion” is the world’s third-largest religious group after Christians and Muslims (Pew Research Center 2012). In Norwich, England, allegedly the most post-religious city of the UK, 42.5% of the population reported “no religion” (Keenan 2016), the majority of young people in a dozen countries in Europe do not follow a religion (Sherwood 2018), 21% have no religion in the United States (De Jong 2018), and 37% in Uruguay and 14% in Brazil have no religion (Pew Research Center 2014).

Current challenges in urban theology involve a post-religious reality. What kind of theology can become a base for understanding the urban environment in this post-religious state?

Religion in Movement: Changes in Religious Identities

Danièle Hervieu-Léger, a French sociologist specializing in the sociology of religion, has reexamined religion and its role in modern society. She believes what characterizes religiosity in modern societies is the dynamic of movement, mobility, and dispersion of beliefs (2008:10).

She has a different perspective from past predictions, suggesting that religiosity in the twenty-first century is alive and well. Religion continues to be a part of the social-political scenario almost everywhere, however, with new players, organizations, and elements. There is a paradigm change, from the loss of religion to everywhere religiosity. There is an intense resurgence of religion in the public sphere of Western societies. There is an encounter between religions from the West and East, and there are new ethno-religions, new religious movements, and post-secular religious movements (Hervieu-Léger 2008:21).

Instead of considering a linear model of secularization, sociological studies and Hervieu-Léger point out the relation between religion and modernity through two aspects: dispersion of beliefs and behaviors, and institutional deregulation of religiosity (2008:22). Religions offer meaning to the subjective experience of people and are expressed through practices, languages, gestures, etc. Hervieu-Léger uses the term “bricolage” — something constructed or created from a diverse range of available things—to explain the new scenario.

Hervieu-Léger believes that religious modernity is individualism. There is a crisis in the transmission of values that lead to the individual construction of identity. That is why there is a possibility of believing without belonging. “The communal realization of any sort of lineage of believers that is based upon a continuity with a tradition which produces the very substance of religious bond, tends to disappear” (2001:166).

That creates tension with the typical figure of a religious person in their practicing condition. Two other figures replace that emblematic one: the pilgrim and the convert (Hervieu-Léger 2008:10). While for typical religious people their practice is mandatory, ruled by the institution, fixed, communal, territorialized (stable), and repeated (ordinary); for pilgrims their religious practice is voluntary, autonomous, variable, individual, mobile, and exceptional (extraordinary). The major difference between the two is the degree of institutional control (Hervieu-Léger 2008:98). While the pilgrim illustrates the mobility of modernity, the convert illustrates

the formation of religious identities. The convert highlights the religious conversions in modernity in three aspects: (1) there is a change in religion; (2) there is adoption of a religion; and (3) there is a reconversion.

Especially relevant are Hervieu-Léger's discussions about the role of religious institutions in the contemporary scene in the face of the pulverization of religious identities. Although all social institutions must face new scenarios, religious institutions are especially affected since the changes occurring relates to their purpose: the continuity of their collective memory. "Institutional religions, in principle, make good an institutional regime based on the validation of faith, making use of secure precedents according to the authoritative organizations proper to each tradition, in continuity with the faith lineage" (2001:168).

The collapse of regular observances, the development of an à la carte religion, the affirmation of the personal autonomy of believers, the diversification of trajectories of religious identification, religious "nomadism": all of these phenomena are indicators of a general tendency towards the erosion of institutional regimes of the validation of religious faith. (Hervieu-Léger 2001:172, 173)

Religious faith is not validated by those regimes (or by their "least common denominator of faith") anymore but often, by small-scale communal experiences. The privatization of religious identities does not result in the weakening or disappearing of all forms of communal religious life. To the contrary, "the rise of religious individualism has reinforced the pluralistic affirmation of communal regimes of faith, which contractually bind the individuals involved in the same fashion in their religious life, over against institutional definitions of formal faith shared by a congregation of believers" (Hervieu-Léger 2001:168). This leads to the importance of interreligious dialogue and cultural sensitivity.

There are two movements. One is related to "the culture of the individual which dominates in all areas, tends to relativize the norms of belief and church practices fixed by religious institutions." The other, "solidarity is collectively proven by small-scale universes of certitude which efficiently assure the ordering of the experience of individuals. The community concretizes, then, the homogeneity of truths shared by the group; and the acceptance of this code of communal faith, which embraces beliefs and practices, in turn fixes the boundaries of the group" (Hervieu-Léger 2001:174). An important question to ask is, What does it mean to have a religious identity in this post-religious context?

Ethos as an Important Concept to Study Religious Identities

As missiologists approach a post-religious reality, new concepts and categories might prove more useful for research, study, and praxis. One of them is *ethos*, a pivotal concept for sociology of religion and of social identity that offers a way to understand the dynamic underlying collective values of a religious group through an analysis of attitudinal factors—the interaction between the cognitive and conative moments.

Ethos is often connected with and defined in relation to the concept of worldview. Majken Schultz's description of the relation between worldview and ethos is helpful in defining these concepts. One should "distinguish between the cognitive world view that contains the . . . mental image of reality, and the ethos, which comprises the . . . aesthetic and moral view of . . . life in general" (1995:89). Religion, in this case, provides the specific content of that reality, "with the things in the people's model of the universe and with relationships between these things" (Hiebert 1976:371).

This is the same path taken by Clifford Geertz in developing a connection between anthropology and theology in the 20th century and one of the influences in Hiebert's studies (Hiebert 2008:25). Geertz identifies ethos with the moral (and aesthetic) aspects and the evaluative elements of a culture, and worldview with the cognitive and existential ones. His formal definition of ethos is "the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects." Worldview defined by Geertz is a "picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order" (1973:127).

Furthermore, Geertz describes the interaction between what he calls worldview and ethos to be a meaningful interaction between a people's values and the general order of existence—something found in all religions. Religious belief and ritual confront and mutually confirm one another. The ethos is made intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life implied by the actual state of affairs, which the worldview describes. Worldview is made emotionally acceptable by being presented as an image of the actual state of affairs of which such a way of life is an authentic expression (Geertz 1973:127).

Since religious institutions in post-religious settings do not define religious identities, the concept of ethos that examines the identity as a way of life seems to be especially relevant. Definitions are not based primarily on a set of doctrines, rituals, and behaviors, but are based on presuppositions about the way of life. What are the characteristics of a Christian identity in a post-religious society?

Elements of a Christian Missionary Movement Ethos

In my recent doctoral research, after conducting a biblico-historical overview of the character of Christian movements, considering definitions of socio-religious movements, their major elements, and their stages of development, I discussed a model that conceptualizes the identity of Christian movements from the point of view of their ethos. I have also applied that model to the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in Brazil in order to analyze its various aspects.

After considering different models for the identity of Christian movements, I decided to work with one by Alan Hirsch who has received much attention for his proposal in *The Forgotten Ways* where he suggests a paradigm of “absolutely irreducible components” that are interrelated and form the principles of what he calls missional DNA, mDNA, and apostolic genius. Hirsch’s model can be pictured as a pentagram around a central element. These are the elements: (1) Confession that Jesus Is Lord, (2) Disciple Making, (3) Missional-Incarnational Impulse, (4) Apostolic Environment, (5) Organic Systems, and (6) *Communitas*, Not Community (see figure 1).

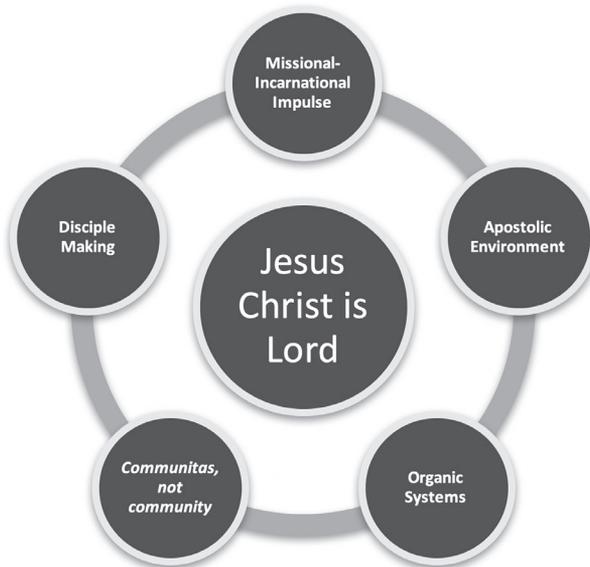


Figure 1. Hirsch’s model of a Christian movement ethos. Taken from Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 25.

At the center, there is a confession about God. Hirsch realizes the simplification of this element and does not think that one should engage in theological reductionism. However, the “definite central core” of remarkable Jesus movements, he identifies as being the confession that Jesus is Lord. This is the *narrative* that underlies the movement.

The two defining characteristics of a missional-incarnational impulse, one of the more clearly identifiable elements in Christian movements, are a dynamic outward thrust and a related deepening impulse. This element defines the *motivation* of the movement in relation to those who do not belong to it. The practical implications of this element are identified by Hirsch as, (1) being antidotes for colonization tendencies that alienate local Christians since they shape practices that embed and deepen the gospel in a people group in order to become God’s people, (2) developing reproductive capacities by the church, and (3) making it organically embedded in the fabric of the host community.

The apostolic environment element of Hirsch’s model is a combination of apostolic influence and a fertile environment. Apostolic influence, “a powerful form of catalytic influence,” is modeled after the biblical concept of apostolic leadership. This element defines the concept of *leadership* within the movement.

The structure of the movement is defined by organic systems. Hirsch draws on biblical images like body, field, yeast, seeds, trees, living temples, vines, and animals, which he considers “not just verbal metaphors that help us describe the theological nature of God’s people but actually go to issues of essence,” in order to structure the life of an organization (living systems approach).

The concept of *communitas* depicts the experience of people driven to each other through a common experience characterized by ordeal, humbling, transition, and marginalization. Hirsch uses this term to imply the most vigorous kinds of community, which takes many forms and describes the typical “communality” and “comradeship” of Christian movements. He believes that rather than a temporary experience, this is “the normative situation and condition of the pilgrim people of God” (Hirsch 2006:218, 221, 222).

Disciple making, the last element of this model, is considered by Hirsch the “most critical” and “strategic” one since this is the “essential” and “irreplaceable” task of the church. Hirsch calls the capacity to generate authentic followers of Jesus “the single most crucial factor” that affects all other elements of the Christian ethos.

Hirsch’s proposal of core principles as described is based on four assumptions. *First*, any true group of God’s people has everything needed to adapt, witness, and develop in any setting. This view is derived from

the understanding that God's people have received the gospel and the Holy Spirit, and they are sufficient and powerful enough to reach and transform people of any culture. *Second*, recovering a genuine movement ethos is essential to restoring the dynamism of important Christian movements. Hirsch's restorationist view is founded on the assumption that what Jesus began should yield dynamic missionary movements. If that is not the case among Christian movements today, it is at least in part because they have missed some essential aspects of Christianity. *Third*, organic systems should inform the structure of Christian movements. Hirsch clarifies his position in the introduction of *The Forgotten Ways* pointing out that "structures are absolutely necessary for cooperative human action as well as for maintaining some form of coherent social patterns." Along those lines, it is clear throughout his work that he holds a fierce criticism of over-institutionalization. Hirsch emphasizes that "there needs to be a clear distinction between necessary organizational structure and institutionalism," which he has come to see as a hindering obstacle to the engagement of God's people in mission. *Fourth*, intercultural mission methodology should be followed in every context. Hirsch does not make a distinction between mission contexts in the West or in other places. His assumption is that the Christendom mode of mission is not adequate to the challenges today, since even the West demands more of a "cross-cultural missionary methodology." That is exactly the need for sensitiveness in today's post-religious context.

In order to apply Hirsch's model to the Adventist church, it is important to consider the nuanced biblical narrative with major themes in Adventist theology and its implication for mission, including Jesus' priestly ministry, the Great Controversy, the imminent second coming of Jesus, the remnant (including the Sabbath and the spirit of prophecy), and the three angels' messages. Therefore, a model for a Seventh-day Adventist movement ethos would include the following six elements: confession of Jesus as Savior, Lord, and Priest; a missional-incarnational impulse of the soon coming of Jesus; an apostolic movement as part of the Great Controversy; *communitas* as a reflection of the will of God for relationships as described in God's commandments; organic systems according to spiritual gifts; and disciple making in preparation for eternity (see figure 2).

These six elements seem to be part of the essence of the ethos of any Seventh-day Adventist movement. Just as all elements of Hirsch's model of the ethos of missionary movements are interrelated, these Adventist elements are part of a whole, which could include other elements for specific emphasis. The application of Adventist beliefs has broadened and deepened the understanding of the elements of Hirsch's model and, at the same time, grounded the definitions in the Bible. One of these implications

is the fact that Adventist mission happens in the end times in preparation for the second coming of Christ and God's final judgment and, therefore, the ethos characteristics of an Adventist missionary movement should reflect that specific context. That prophetic understanding of Adventist mission, integrated with their doctrines within the framework of the three angels' messages, provided the Sabbatarians with the motive and power to sacrifice in order to spread their message far and wide.

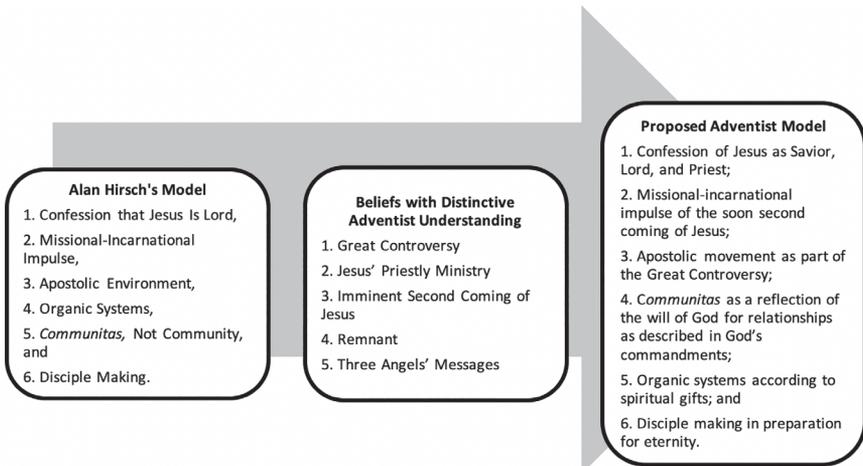


Figure 2. Toward a model of Seventh-day Adventist missionary movement ethos.

When the six principles of the model are the foundation for mission methods, important understandings become part of such strategies. "Seventh-day Adventists celebrate God's actions past, present and future; that they have a thoroughly biblical eschatology that justifies their intense and sustained effort here and now to demonstrate the character of the Kingdom of God" (Plantak 1998:180). The development of mission methods should begin with deep, thorough Bible exploration to foster a Christocentric approach for every teaching where Jesus remains the center to distinctive SDA beliefs. It should offer a real relationship to each believer, and the church should continue the preaching, teaching, and healing of Jesus.

The Adventist prophetic understanding must be translated into more than cluttered and complicated theologies that become obstacles to those who approach the church and that sometimes give members a vague sense of identity disconnected from their everyday lives. The comprehension about God's priestly ministry in heaven during the time of the

end should foster a relationship of fear, trust, and joy for Adventists. The Great Controversy belief should also give a strong basis for a non-dualistic spirituality that develops an all-of-life perspective to faith, and that fosters an ethos that takes into consideration the interaction between God, the church, and the world. It seems that sometimes the Adventist heavy emphasis on keeping the Sabbath results in a dualistic spirituality, which leads to a practical polytheism. People have one identity on Sabbath and a different one during the rest of the week. All the following aspects of the ethos depend on this biblical understanding about God.

In order to rekindle the motivation that comes from the assurance of the imminent return of Jesus, the blessed hope of the church, and the grand climax of the gospel, it is important to foster a way of being in this world that is characterized by continual expectancy, urgency, and watchfulness. There is need of a readiness that is not passive but rather responsibly active. Adventist pastors should be equipped to be intentional in the contextualization of their strategies. Because Adventists understand the earth is in the last days, in the time of God's judgment and Jesus' imminent return, they have a special message for this time, the "time of the end." "Since the Adventist objective is a certain quality of faith exhibited in all people groups so that the issues in the Great Controversy over the character and government of God are demonstrated and proclaimed accurately to all people, it is even more imperative that this faith development take place in context" (Whitehouse 2014:390). This places a heavy emphasis on being dedicated to learning the local context and the people's worldviews as part of the process of preparation for mission and the transmission of the gospel.

The realization that people are increasingly resistant and repulsed by organized religion should be a warning that the church's dependence on methods and strategies focused on attracting people to the church will limit the possibilities of evangelization. As the missional ethos of the movement is rekindled, there is a need to have leaders that are mission-minded, have an apostolic passion, and are able to pass on that passion to church members. Such leadership is less based on personality and charisma, and more based on faithfulness to the biblical vision, engagement with the stewardship of God's mission, and the mobilization of God's people. Such leaders are especially interested in the formation of new leaders found both in the denominational ranks and in the local congregations. Missional leadership would also be a spiritual-gifted leadership that recognizes every believer's empowerment for witnessing and the role of basic spiritual gifts (Eph 4:7-11: apostles, evangelists, prophets, and pastor-teachers).

Every part of a missionary movement must have a clear missionary focus. The continuous assessment of the role of every institution and the

need to study the most effective organizational structure to support a missionary movement is essential. While a non-institutional movement is not an alternative, organic systems of networks could inspire new models of structures that are better at survival, adaptation, and reproduction. These models should be simple and rely on decentralized authority, dynamic decision processes, and contextualized approaches.

The remnant-claimed identity must be demonstrated through the fostering of the values of the Kingdom of God such as a sense of justice, goodness, beauty, and truth among believers and toward those who do not belong to the faith. A way of living that truly reflects the keeping of God's commandments and the faith of Jesus would confirm that this movement's self-understanding is based on the revelation God has entrusted to the church and is not restricted to its belief statement. This would also foster unity within the movement that comes from a common mission, not just common beliefs.

The experience of Christian togetherness should not simply be for the benefit of those who are part of the Adventist community, but should seek to embrace all humanity including the public. Sabbath should be at the center of this experience as the special day to develop a kind of community based on relationships with God and with others. As Adventists live out different aspects of their doctrines, especially the Sabbath, they must also fight the bubble effect resulting from an exclusivist attitude. This would reinforce the movement's role as part of the people of God and the universal church by taking part in worldwide worship and witness that helps vindicate God's character before the universe.

Finally, at the core of the movement there has to be a disciple-making process, usually more cyclical than linear, moving people from being non-believers to disciple-makers. This disciple-making process has to begin before conversion and involve much more than baptism as one grows toward spiritual maturity.

Conclusion

The Adventist movement was born in the rural United States of the mid-19th century amid the Second Great Awakening. Embracing that legacy, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has grown into a fellowship of about 20 million members who live in over 200 countries.

However, the SDA Church displays different levels of dynamism and vitality in different parts of the world. The church is decreasing in most of Western Europe, is stagnant in North America, but still growing in parts of Latin America and Africa. More or less aligned with mainstream evangelical theology and organized as a traditional denomination, in 2016 the

SDA Church managed to increase over four percent in church membership.

Despite claims of a Christian movement ethos, 155 years after its organization, scholars have pointed out challenging signs of institutionalization and secularization. The SDA Church struggles to maintain its identity, especially as a religious institution that mediates people's spiritual experience in an increasingly urbanized, secularized, and culturally diverse context—the challenge of a post-religious urban world.

As missiologists seek to develop an urban theology for the 21st century, it is important to acknowledge and be sensitive to the post-religious conditions of much of the population in urban centers. That implies a theology that addresses a privatized, autonomous, and fluid religiosity validated by small-scale communal experiences (instead of the religious institutions). In a fluid society (highlighted by Zygmunt Bauman, Gordon Lynch, Peter Ward, and others) "personal identity has become a more disputed territory" (Ward 2005:22), which raises challenges to modernist urban ecclesiologies that fostered a concept of a solid church.

Therefore, it also seems relevant to be able to conceptualize the identity of the Adventist movement in other ways besides the doctrinal formulations of the SDA church. Revisiting the anthropological and sociological categories such as worldview and ethos would be of essential importance, as well as following the suggested model presented in this study.

An urban theology should be the center of conversation with the current post-religious context that takes into serious consideration people's search for meaning and the new spirituality in this age. Perhaps popular culture can give clues about contemporary meaning-making as well (Shannahan 2014:207-217). On the one side, history assures that an urban setting does not need to feel like a threat to the Christian faith. "Early Christianity was primarily an urban movement. The original meaning of the word pagan (*paganus*) was 'rural person,' or more colloquially 'country hick.' It came to have religious meaning because after Christianity had triumphed in the cities, most of the rural people remained unconverted" (Stark 2009:2). On the other hand, history warns that a theology irrelevant for the current context and a Christian identity disconnected from the biblical narrative should be perceived as a real threat for the transmission of the faith and mission.

What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. . . . We are moving toward a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore. Even those who honestly describe themselves as "religious" do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by "religious."

What does that mean for “Christianity”? If religion is only a garment of Christianity—and even this garment has looked very different at different times—then what is a religionless Christianity? (Bonhoeffer 1971:380)

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