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Desmond Hartwell Murray

Can Research Be Sacred Ministry?



Before sin entered our world and our human consciousness, before the cherubim and flaming sword, when God saw that everything was good, Genesis recounts Adam discovering and naming God's creation. I imagine Adam and Eve walking about Eden, in awe and wonder, amongst a perfect creation of light and sky, air and water, plants and animals. There was no recorded Word of God then; their knowledge of God came partly from His works. As they went about seeking and contemplating the works of God, I imagine the process was deeply spiritual and profoundly relational, as it would have revealed the power, providence, majesty, and might of the Creator, to whom they owed their first and every breath.

As a practicing scientist, this resonates deeply with me. For here, at the very beginning of our human sojourn, a sense of wonder and reverence is embedded regarding the living presence and testimony of God's works. Without God, neither the works nor our human observation of them is possible. Indeed, "in him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28, KJV). So, from my perspective, research is an intensely sacred calling that combines inspiration, revelation, and imagination. Research is fundamentally a journey of discovery, including self-discovery, as implied by the Middle French root word *recherche*, which means "to go about seeking."¹

Seeker is our earliest human archetype. Our innate curiosity, the foundation of all learning, is embedded in our God-given genes and neurotransmitters.² Curiosity helps us to be conscious of and to participate in the sentience of the universe. From the very foundations of the Earth, humans have been explorers and

seekers. Indeed, as children, before we read, write, and count, we "go about seeking." Research is foundational; it is the fourth and motivating "R" (the three R's refer to basic literacy skills: reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic). We search inward to discover and create methods of communication, art, and music. We explore the heavens for life and meaning and the Earth for elements and atoms.

"To go about seeking" is a universal drive not limited by educational level, gender, age, ethnicity, or field of study; it is not limited to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Seeking encompasses all areas of human inquiry, activity, creativity, and curiosity; it is expansive and not exclusive. It is our human legacy, our God-given birthright, and our inheritance.³

Research Is Sacred, Too

How, then, has research ("seeking") become mislabeled and narrowly defined as a solely secular, mechanistic activity rather than being regarded as sacred and spiritual? Why do so many automatically view research in a negative light? Why, for some, is research regarded as antithetical to and incompatible with belief?

Often, we lose sight of the perspective that embedded in research is the potential for both good and evil. Our labels of sacred and secular are often reflexively and mistakenly applied to research based on traditional constructs of the ecclesiastical and scientific communities. Whatever the reason, I believe it is time to redefine the popular perceptions and understandings of research as a primarily secular enterprise. Thus, this article's underlying intent and motivation is to provide a full, forthright, and courageous enun-

ciation of why research can be a sacred endeavor (see Sidebar 1). I believe God has set before us open doors into His works, and no one should be allowed to shut them or define them. I believe research is sacred for the following 10 reasons:

1. Research is a calling from God to ask, seek, and knock (Matthew 7:7, 8).

For me, this is the Researcher's Creed, the Seeker's Motto. Indeed, God placed within us the capacity to do these very things. He created us at the psychological, physiological, and molecular levels with the capacity "to go about seeking." This constitutes a *de facto* invitation for us to be curious and observant and to research and know the works of God. This invitation says, in part, "Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it?" (Isaiah 43:19, KJV). Washington Adventist University Professor Olive J. Hemmings explains, "This word *behold* comes from the Greek word *βλέπω*—'I see.' The word from *βλέπω*—as it appears in the text means to see in the deepest sense. It means discover or perceive or take careful notice—as though you had not seen it before. Look beyond the 'obvious' and superficial."⁴ The word *behold* appears well over 1,000 times in the Bible. God must want to get our attention. He calls us to go deep beyond appearances, cursory glances, and hasty speculations. His is a repeated and insistent call for deep beholding, for deep research. Behold, behold, behold! Herein lies the essence of seeking, of research: It is beholding "in the deepest sense" the Word and the works of God. In and through this process, we will be changed.

2. Research is a sacred struggle with God, His Word, and His works that brings forth the blessings of revelation.

Research is akin to the archetypal struggle of Jacob with God. Furthermore, this sacred struggle is continuous and lifelong. We all stand humbled and in eternal ignorance in God's presence and blistering inquisition, as recorded and demonstrated in Job chapters 38 to 41 (KJV). We fall short in our knowledge of God's works and are forever in a sacred struggle as we seek and pursue knowledge and revelation. We are essentially only eavesdroppers into the secret councils of the Trinity and the deep mysteries and unfathomable wisdom of our eternal God. To me, this mystery is best illustrated by the enigmatic electron. Much of our technological civilization relies on the electron, its behavior, function, and manipulation. Yet the electron defies complete definition, visualization, and a simple answer to the question, What is an electron really?⁵

3. "Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose."⁶

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), an African American novelist and anthropologist, wrote this statement that succinctly sums up the relationship between research and curiosity. I believe that our God-given curiosity is as fundamentally a human need as hunger and thirst, a higher-order need not satisfied by food, water, and biology but by knowledge. In a world filled with stimuli, some of which are harmful and threatening to our survival, knowledge is needed to make intelligent responses, and curiosity is the survival mechanism that

seeks and searches for that knowledge. I believe we are divinely wired this way in our higher-level processes and our genes and neurotransmitters. For example, it has been investigated and established that dopamine, the brain's reward chemical, is intricately linked to the brain's state of curiosity and happiness.⁷ Curiosity, seeking after knowledge through revelation and research, can help keep us alive and happy!

4. Research is "power" and is "in the purpose of God."

The following statement affirming science appears in Ellen White's book *Christian Education*: "A knowledge of science of

Sidebar 1. Series Overview

This article is the first of two on the theme of research addressing underlying spiritual principles and motivations for research, when research should begin, and how research can be done across the educational spectrum. This series seeks to provide (a) theological and philosophical tenets for research as sacred ministry, (b) justifications for early research, interlevel collaborations, and specific recommendations to elevate and sustain research as a ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Part 1, entitled "Can Research Be Sacred Ministry?" makes the following assertions:

1. Research is human activity engaging the use of God-given gifts and abilities.
2. It is time to intentionally recapture the sacredness of research.
3. Research can be a sacred ministry.



all kinds is power, and it is in the purpose of God that advanced science shall be taught in our schools as a preparation for the work that is to precede the closing scenes of earth's history."⁸ Given that scientific knowledge is derived primarily by observation, experimentation, and evidence, it stands to reason that research is also "in the purpose of God." This advocacy for advanced science is tied not only to epistemology but also to eschatology, not only to knowledge but also to mission. That is, research should be done not just for its own sake but also for a broader mission and a deeper purpose. Another significant implication here is that the imminence of the Second Coming is no excuse but should provide motivation for seeking new knowledge, enlightenment, and engagement in research. Indeed, Ellen White reminds us that seeking research will continue beyond time, into eternity.⁹

5. Research can be about entering into the mind, heart, and soul of God.

Through researching and seeking after God's Word and works, our students and we are empowered to enter into the very imagination of God. God's imagination is made manifest in His Word and His works. For me, the iconography of the temple veil being ripped asunder speaks to God's willingness to let us in, even into the

"inscrutable mysteries" of His works and His Word. It is an invitation for our eyes to see, our ears to listen, and our hearts to be moved by His creation and imagination.

Research can probe and mine the riches and mysteries of God's Word and His works. It is one way our mortal eyes can behold the glory of the Lord in our own flesh. As referenced in *Education*, "The mind of man is brought in communion with the mind of God, the finite with the Infinite. The effect of such communion on body and mind and soul is beyond estimate."¹⁰ The Bible says, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5, KJV). So research can expand, elevate, deepen and ground our understanding in the consilience of knowledge of God's Word, His works, and His acts of creation and revelation. Conducting research under the gaze of God, with a consciousness of the divine—of someone and something bigger than oneself—brings purpose, humility, wonder, and mission to the practice and practitioner of research.

6. Research is an endless assignment.

Our seeking and the sought-after are unlimited and unbounded by geography and temporality. We will never come to the end of knowing God, His Word, and His works. It is a false prophet who declares and predicts there will be no more to learn, no more to know.

More than that, such an attitude and state of mind borders on blasphemy, for it presumes limitations upon God and His future words and works. God has new thoughts! He has plans for new things! (Isaiah 43:19). Indeed, each birth is evidence of this. As Emily Dickinson wrote, “This World Is Not Conclusion.”¹¹ Consequently, there is no end to the Internet, the universe, knowledge, and God, for whom there is neither beginning nor end. In 1888, Ellen White penned, “There can be no greater peril to the souls of those who profess to believe the truth, than to close their research for light and knowledge from the Scriptures.”¹² I think it is not too presumptuous to add to the end of this passage the words “and from the book of nature.”

7. Research is consistent with two facts of human existence: (a) We do not know it all and never will, for we see through “a glass darkly,”¹³ and (b) Knowledge and truth most often come to us not all at once but by rolling disclosure and from persistent pursuit.

Omniscience belongs to God; everyone else must seek. The idea of our mortal human intelligence is expressed in 1 Corinthians 8:2: “And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know” (KJV). In 1952, *Ministry* magazine published a collection of quotations from the writings of Ellen White on “Advancing Truth.”¹⁴ These included the following: “The truth is an advancing truth, and we must walk in the increasing light”¹⁵; “There are mines of truth yet to be discovered by the earnest seeker”¹⁶; and “There is no virtue in ignorance, and knowledge will not necessarily dwarf Christian growth.”¹⁷

Indeed, the phrase “mine(s) of truth” and the word *mining* are used repeatedly in Ellen White’s writings as metaphors to capture the idea of undiscovered or hidden truth that needs to be sought after. Similarly, other phrases in her writings, such as “deep research,” “careful research,” “individual research,” and “diligent research,” create a narrative in favor of and encourage the activity and process of research in the context of the Bible, health, and nature. There are no statements of disparagement toward research or hints that it is an intrinsically secular process. Her enlightened views on research¹⁸ are in very sharp contrast to the anti-re-

search statements of some of the Christian Church Fathers, such as Tertullian and Augustine.¹⁹

In a recent *Adventist Review* article, Andrews University Seminary Professor Martin Hanna wrote: “Clearly God is not intimidated by increasing knowledge; and His people should not be intimidated by it either.”²⁰ An example of the “increasing knowledge” paradigm is the development of quantum mechanics and the Standard Model, among the most successful and fundamental scientific theories ever conceived. They are answers, still incomplete, still emergent—and perhaps ultimately unknowable—to humans’ fundamental questions that have spanned millennia: What are we made of? What is the universe made of? What are its fundamental building blocks?

Indeed, our commitment to seek, search, and research is a *de facto* witness, a living testament of our intention to grow in understanding, truth, and ministry. Our commitment to research must not be just intellectual assent but also manifested in our curriculum, pedagogy, practice, and investment across our global Adventist educational system. It should not be limited to existing knowledge and understanding, but also expand to intentionally and proactively seeking new knowledge, truth, and revelation. Research should become a hallmark of Adventist education at all levels and in all dis-

Sidebar 2. Culture of Research

Building a research ministry would require us to create a global research culture or ecosystem in all our institutions: churches, schools, and hospitals. It will also require the education of clergy and laity, the pulpit and the pew, administrators and practitioners, and teachers and students. To achieve this, I propose the following:

1. Emphasize research (seeking) as a core sacred/spiritual value at all levels of all our institutions;
2. Incorporate research (seeking) as a theme in Pathfinders and Master Guide programs;
3. Use research (seeking) as a theme in our (a) Morning Watch/Devotionals and (b) Sabbath school lessons from primary to adult.

I envision that creating this global Adventist culture of research would, in generations to come, produce men and women who are practitioners of the dual modalities of God’s Word and God’s works. They will be part of the long tradition of ministers and priests, from Mendel to Polkinghorne, grounded experientially in God’s Word and works. We would produce clergy and laity, teachers, and students who approach faith and science, and revelation and research, not as antagonists, but as seekers after their consilience.

ciplines (see Sidebar 2). A commitment to research is also one to inspiring and mentoring the next generation of passionate and skilled seekers of God's Word and works.

8. Research can enlighten human ignorance and dispel darkness.

Enlightenment is an undertaking with urgent societal relevance to dispel a 21st-century noxious blend of baseless conspiracy theories and viral misinformation. The creation of light was an act of God, a preamble to the rest of His creation. It was His first "let there be." In the biblical tradition, light preceded human knowledge and was necessary for revelation. Research is itself an instrument for enlightenment that brings knowledge, revelation, discovery, and light to darkness, ignorance, myth, and conspiracy.

The field of spectroscopy literally uses light of every wavelength to probe, reveal, and help us understand our material universe. From CT scans to MRIs to security sensors and touchless digital thermometers, the entire edifice of modern diagnostics is based on this use of light. I believe research's ability to enlighten is part of the Matthew 5:15 tradition and obligation to which we are all called, to let our light shine and to share our light for the benefit of everyone. Here, too, is an implication of a calling to communicate and publish our research and knowledge freely as light to the world—not for fame, professional advancement, or personal gain but for the upliftment of others and for the greater good. Research can be the bearer of good news, including research pedagogy that engages and inspires our students "to go about seeking," shining, and sharing.

9. Humans, not robots or algorithms, conceive of research.

Research is not just a stoic straight-line, mechanistic adherence to the scientific method's principles, processes, sequences, and steps. Instead, it is impacted by all aspects of our humanity and involves the wholistic use of mind, body, and spirit. We should resist the notion that there are sharp demarcations between spirit and science. Research uses all our God-given powers, including curiosity, observation, intuition, reasoning, mental acuity, and creativity. It is also enhanced by a

While some may not regard research as a religious activity, it most assuredly is an engagement that comes from the depths of the human spirit. There are inescapable existential facts of the human spirit and human consciousness that engage in seeking.

spirit of humility, openness, reverence, exuberant curiosity, and persistence.

In personal communications with me, Andrews University senior research professor of anthropology Oystein LaBianca wrote, "What I like to emphasize is that of all God's creatures, humans were made in His image—to be creative; to discover and to come up with new creations. In other words, as we do research, we affirm that God has made us in His image. Thus, research becomes an act of worship in the sense that as we do research, we affirm being 'made in His image.'"²¹ This concept—that research is a divine derivative gifted to humans—is a powerful one that again suggests

that research can be redemptive and can facilitate the restoration of God's image in us.

10. Research is not inherently secular.

While some may not regard research as a religious activity, it most assuredly is an engagement that comes from the depths of the human spirit. There are inescapable existential facts of the human spirit and human consciousness that engage in seeking. Our full humanity cannot summarily disentangle "objective" from "subjective" or be automatically switched on and off when we go about seeking. Our desire and decision "to go about seeking" do not come from lifeless molecules, biochemical pathways, or chemical reactions. Instead, they come from our emergent humanity, consciousness, and soul, from which we experience awe, wonder, reverence, purpose, persistence, and faith. From this mix, "we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28, KJV). We seek, research, and engage the world with our whole selves.

Also, since nature does not reveal her secrets all at once, we must be patient and persistent. We must have fortitude so that when we face failure or setbacks, we don't wither or wane in pursuit of purpose but steadfastly persist against the odds. We learn, we adapt, and we innovate. This is not the result of a secular, cynical mindset but the product of optimistic realism, hope, and faith. As genuine seekers and dedicated researchers, we can hope that the best is always yet to come, and we must pass this spirit of optimism and faith on to every new generation of researchers.

While the nature and process of research can be

sacred, as outlined above, the *attitude* and *meaning* that the researcher brings to it can be secular, lacking in divine consciousness, awareness, awe, and purpose. It is our own values and our humanity that determine whether research is perceived, defined, and utilized as solely sacred or secular. I pray we have within us the unrelenting persistence of Jacob as he struggled with God, as described in Genesis 32:22 to 32 (KJV). May our seeking and our struggle bring us the blessings of greater revelation of the mysteries of God.

Can research be sacred? Yes. I hope we learn that truth lies waiting for the persistent seeker and that research—the seeking and the struggle—is its own blessed and sacred reward.

Research Is Ministry, Too

Traditionally and generally, we have limited the meaning and practice of ministry to pastors, doctors, nurses, and teachers, while intellectually assenting to the fact that ministry can be done in a diversity of ways and through multiple professions. However, research is generally not the first thing that comes to mind when speaking of ministry and ministers. This dissonance between belief and behavior, philosophy and practice, actually presents Adventism with an opportunity to re-examine and redefine ministry and what it means to be a minister. The opportunity to intentionally expand and elevate our corporate and institutional understanding of research as ministry can lead to broader impact and greater good as we seek to redeem and change the world in the 21st century.

In the most profound sense, I believe research is ministry, not just philosophically but pragmatically, in the following practical ways: (1) it is and has been an indispensable service in advancing the standards of living across our world, (2) it improves human life and well-being, (3) it saves lives here and now, and (4) it helps us to be better stewards of God's works, including our environment. Through research, we can become more knowledgeable and capable co-workers with God in restoring and redeeming our world. Through research, we can probe cells and molecules to learn how and why we make decisions and where our memories and forgetfulness come from. We can discover precision-targeted medicines; and innovate how best to administer and

individualize the dosages for improved patient care. Research can assist us in developing greener agricultural processes that result in abundant, high-quality food sources to feed a growing world population. Through research, we can address hunger, poverty, and our growing global water crisis; we can proactively deal with future microbial outbreaks and pandemics.

Imagine our world without the benefits of research—a world without refrigeration, aspirin, gasoline, penicillin, vaccines, cellphones, airplanes, personal protective equipment, electric power, blood transfusions, air conditioning, or batteries. It would be a world without the complete and growing revelation of God.

While there may be some debate regarding the usefulness of specific types of research, this in no way undermines the overall value of research. Nor does it diminish the inherent value of seeking after God in His Word and His works. It is good to have accountability, including peer review, in the research enterprise to ensure that investments are worthwhile, that money expended is not wasted, and that real-world applications and benefits are delivered to all society and not just to the powerful and privileged. This accountability can enhance the potential that research remains a ministry, and not a vanity.

Some point to using science and research for evil intent and with harmful consequences as a reason to distrust and discredit the entire process. However, secular and ecclesiastic history testify that the corruption of the good is pervasive throughout every human era and endeavor. The Holy Scriptures reveal that even when given a flawless, perfect Eden, humans turned it into their


Sidebar 3. Implications

Seventh-day Adventists are known for our global education, healing, and literature ministries. This series of articles proposes a fourth—the ministry of research. Indeed, the research ministry can independently and synergistically support, empower, and further enhance all our other ministries. Broad consequences arising from the realization and recognition of research as a ministry should include:

1. Institutionalization of the ministry of research within our church;
2. Formal recognition of researchers as ministers alongside pastors, teachers, doctors, and nurses;
3. Intentional investment and budgeting to provide hands-on, minds-on research opportunities at all levels of our educational institutions.

own downfall. Research is no exception, for it too can be and has been used for evil, such as developing and using chemical and biological weapons. Research can and has been conducted in unethical, immoral, and inhuman ways, such as in the Tuskegee Experiments.²² Also, the Martin Shkreli case²³ shows that research can also be motivated by pure avarice, greed, and profit. These and other examples of the corruption and abuse of research do not suggest that research cannot be sacred or be used for good and ministry.

Our choice of research topics can also bear witness to our faith and mission. Many pressing challenges and problems in our world would benefit from discoveries, developments, and innovations that can arise from research in areas such as agriculture, food, water, health, pollution, urbanization, climate change, medicines, neuropsychiatric disorders, and infectious diseases, to name a few.

Considering the global reach of both Adventist education and health care it makes sense that Adventist health-care and education systems engage in research together—intentionally, closely, and collaboratively. With more than 8,500 schools, colleges, and universities, 650 hospitals, clinics, and dispensaries, and seven medical schools²⁴ together, these entities can seek knowledge, develop innovations that alleviate human suffering and pain, and promote new approaches to learning and public-health education (see Sidebar 3). In so doing, we will bear witness and bring healing, Christ-like servant leadership, faith, and values to our world—right here and now. Researching God’s Word and works must be our sacred ministry, from elementary through university levels. I pray we let it be so.²⁵ 

This article has been peer reviewed.

Dedicated to my parents, Auldith and Hartwell Murray, my first and forever teachers. They nurtured my inward hunger and curiosity and were my first examples of seekers and innovators.

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