**Religion and the Adventist University**

**The Role of the Adventist Religion Teacher**

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My guess is that all of us here this weekend share an affection for the academic life that never makes perfect rational sense. The life of the mind proved to be too alluring to resist. So we spent years pursuing academic degrees, acquiring increasing expertise in areas of interest to fewer and fewer people, teaching students many of whose salaries in the marketplace soon surpassed our own. And yet I imagine few of us would wish for anything else. The academic life, whatever its frustrations, carries with it a sense of high adventure. Like every adventure, it involves risk and sacrifice, and its rewards are hard to describe to people who haven’t experienced them.

Our topic this evening concerns one facet of this adventure, the role of religion in the Adventist university. What is it that makes a college or university Christian? And what can we do to ensure that our colleges and universities cultivate and maintain an Adventist Christian identity? Recent developments both in our church and in the larger community make it more important than ever for us to reflect carefully on the nature of Christian education and our role as religious educators. I would like to address two questions this evening as we pursue these goals. *How religious should we be? And, how should we be religious?*

**How Religious Should We Be?**

Religion can figure in the life of a college or university in several different ways. The purpose of certain institutions is indoctrination. They exist to promulgate a specific religious vision. At a Jewish yeshiva, a Roman Catholic seminary, or a fundamentalist Bible college, religion is not only central to the curriculum, in many ways it *is* the curriculum. The purpose of the institution is to immerse students a specific tradition. Teachers and students all hold a common religious vision—they are often asked to sign statements to that effect. Students pursue similar vocational goals.

Religion also plays a role in many secular institutions. Within the past few decades, the study of religion has come of age as an academic discipline. Along with community colleges, state universities and private universities not only offer courses in religion, many of them offer a major in religious studies.

At public institutions, the approach to religion is one of scholarly examination. They study religion as an important aspect of human culture, and the institution as such takes no stand on religion. No one assumes that faculty members or students share anything in the way of religious convictions, let alone a common religious vocation. A professor I knew at a nearby University of California campus declined to identify her own religious affiliation to students in her classes. She didn’t want them to think she had a preference for one tradition over others. Religious organizations may exist on secular campuses, but they are voluntary associations with no official connection to the institution.

Many institutions stand somewhere between these extremes, including some prestigious universities. Harvard, Yale and Princeton all started as training schools for ministers, and they all have divinity schools today. But nobody thinks of them as religious institutions anymore. (People who found Harvard too liberal founded Yale. People who found Yale too liberal founded Princeton. And people who found Princeton too liberal founded Westminster Divinity School.)

Other institutions emphasize their religious identity while striving for intellectual breadth and academic excellence, as Robert Benne describes in his book, *Quality With Soul.[[1]](#footnote-1)* They give religion an important role in both their curriculum and their student life. And they typically attract students who have strong religious commitments. Wheaton College, Westmont College, and Azusa Pacific University, for example, are known for the "evangelical" convictions of their teachers and students. Still other institutions have a close association with religion, but their students do not share a specific religious perspective. At places like Notre Dame University, there is considerable diversity among students (and faculty members, too) in their attitudes toward religion.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Do any of these profiles fit the Adventist college or university of today? The situation varies from one institution to another, but overall the answer is No. The traditional goal was arguably indoctrination. When I attended La Sierra College years ago, non-Adventist students were rare. The campus provided a protective environment, with lots of required religious services and numerous social restrictions. A good number of us planned on careers in ministry. And everyone seemed to agree that religious devotion would naturally lead a person to participate in the Adventist church.

None of these factors applies to the present situation. We no longer closely monitor our students' behavior; after all, they're legally adults. And fewer undergraduates are looking to the church for employment. Many of them are not members of the Adventist church, and a number follow traditions other than Christianity. Moreover, while some of our students feel strong ties to organized religion, many with religious commitments do not. Today’s students often regard themselves as “spiritual, but not religious,” and take little interest in formal religious activities. And those who choose to be religious—it's now a choice, not an expectation—express their commitment in various ways, not necessarily by attending traditional Adventist services. Whatever the future of religion at Adventist colleges, one thing is apparent—it will be different from its past.

So, where should we go from here? Some say it is time for us to modify our religious identity and dedicate ourselves to becoming the best private educational institutions we can. We could have fine colleges and universities, they argue, without striving to maintain a distinctive religious orientation. Since we are no longer primarily a training ground for denominational workers or a refuge from surrounding society—geographically, intellectually, or socially—and since our students are no longer exclusively church members, it's time to leave our religious distinctives behind and relocate ourselves on the academic landscape.

Following this proposal would put us in good company. As we have seen, it is the route taken by many notable centers of learning. So, the question is not whether this is a model worth emulating; clearly, it is. The question is whether this is the best model for us in the Adventist academy. Given the distinctive resources and challenges of the present, should we respectfully leave our religious identity in the past and move in another direction? The answer, I believe, is No. While such a prospect is attractive to some, we would lose a great deal if we made it our goal to become small, well-run colleges and universities without a strong religious identity. This is not the time for us to soften our religious profile. Instead, I am convinced, we should strengthen it. So, how religious should we be? I think the answer is, very religious.

There are many reasons why we should underscore our religious identity. One is historical. When we think about religion and the university in the Adventist context, the first thing to notice is how important education is in the Adventist view of things. The roots of our interest in education reach deep into the soil of Adventist experience.

Seventh-day Adventists believe they have a mission to the whole world, and they believe they have a mission to the whole person. Many of us are testimonies in one way or another to the global expanse of the church’s vision. My grandparents on both sides were overseas workers. My father’s parents served in west Africa, what is now Angola. My mother’s parents got married specifically because my grandfather had accepted a call to Korea, and church policy would not allow him to go if he were single. So, a GC official proposed on his behalf to my grandmother, a Swedish immigrant, who reluctantly but dutifully said Yes. We see the results of this global vision in the fact that 90% of our membership now lies outside North American and Europe.

Seventh-day Adventists also believe they have a mission to the whole person. So, besides vigorous evangelistic endeavors, the Church operates medical and educational institutions in many different parts of the world. These lines of work embody important elements in the Adventist spirit—a desire to serve others, a conviction that physical and spiritual health go together, and a commitment to excellence in all human endeavors. We believe that Christ’s command to go “into all the world” calls for the church to present the Gospel, not only to people in all parts of the planet, but also to people in all levels of society, including those with intellectual and cultural advantages. We have a ministry to people of privilege as well as to those who are economically challenged, to the educated as well as the uneducated.

There are other factors that place Christian higher education at the center of the Adventist vision. For Seventh-day Adventists, education is not just a preparation for Christian service or a single facet of Christian existence; it is the very heart of the Christian life. As Ellen White put it, “the work of education and the work of redemption are one” (Ed 30). In other words, education serves a “salvific” purpose and salvation has an educational goal.[[3]](#footnote-3)

###  As Adventists understand it, Christian education is comprehensive in several different ways. Because all truth is God’s truth, Christian educators encourage students to pursue knowledge across the whole spectrum of human inquiry.[[4]](#footnote-4) Two features in this view of education have particular application to institutions of higher learning. Because all truth is God’s truth and because we seek to develop all the soul’s powers, the goal of Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities is a comprehensive learning experience, “an education that is as high as heaven and as broad as the universe” (Ed 19). Consequently, we offer a variety of majors and provide instruction across a spectrum of disciplines, including the sciences, the humanities, and the arts, as well as vocational and professional pursuits. These convictions also account for a serious commitment to the study of religion. Because religion is basic to human existence, the study of religion is basic to the entire enterprise of Adventist education.

And because they seek the development of all the soul’s powers, teachers are concerned not only with *what students believe*, but with *how they think.* Consequently, they encourage students not only to master information, but to learn to frame questions, weigh evidence, evaluate different points of view, and formulate their own conclusions and defend them. The overall goal is to “train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men’s thoughts” (Ed 17).[[5]](#footnote-5)

There is another aspect of the SDA view of education that deserves attention. A careful review of the church’s history reveals that searching for truth is just as important to Seventh-day Adventists as defending the truth. Accordingly, religion teachers must do more than understand and articulate the church’s doctrinal positions. They must constantly seek a deeper understanding of truth, and more effective ways of expressing it. From time to time this will involve raising questions about time-honored positions, and this can be disturbing to some in the church. But without a willingness to reconsider past positions and make changes, Seventh-day Adventists would never have revised their understanding of the shut door, embraced righteousness by faith, affirmed the full divinity of Jesus Christ, or developed a trinitarian understanding of God. In other words, Seventh-day Adventist doctrine would never have become fully Christian. As Ellen White insists, “The truth is an advancing truth, and we must walk in the increasing light.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Because not everyone in the church understands the importance of such questioning and probing to the life of the community, teachers need the understanding of church leaders and, in particular, the support of academic administrators.

Giving religion a prominent role in our educational program makes sense for other reasons, too. One is a growing appreciation for spiritual and moral values. Educators and public figures everywhere are calling for more emphasis in schools and colleges on ethical and religious matters.[[7]](#footnote-7) Many of them want to place the inculcation of personal values at the center of education, and this can be done most effectively at institutions with a strong religious identity.

###  Another is the growing popularity of church-related colleges and universities. Years ago “Enrollments Surge at Christian Colleges,” proclaimed a headline several years ago in The Chronicle of Higher Education.[[8]](#footnote-8) From 1990 to 1996, the article went on to say, undergraduate enrollment increased by 5 per cent at private institutions and 4 per cent at public colleges, but by 24 per cent at ninety U. S. evangelical institutions. Enrollment at some schools almost doubled during these years. At Indiana Wesleyan, the number of undergraduate students increased from 889 to 1,628. And in some schools the growth has been almost stunning. At California Baptist University, in Riverside, CA, not far from LSU and LLU, enrollment 25 years ago was 829. And this fall it reached 10,000. Evidently, more and more young people—or their families, at least—want to spend their college years at institutions where learning is based on Christian principles and where student life reflects solid Christian values.

###  There is also a practical reason to preserve our religious profile. As we face the challenge of an increasingly competitive academic market, we need to remain responsive to our natural constituency. In spite of the growing religious diversity of our students, most of them still come from Adventist families, and we must continue to attract Adventist young people. Our constituents are rightly concerned about the religious environment of their children. Most parents want higher education to be a positive experience for their children religiously as well as academically.

###  Maintaining a strong religious identity in our higher education is important for a number of reasons. But one is more important than all the others. And that is the essential purpose of higher education. While all colleges and universities seek to stimulate intellectual growth and provide professional preparation, this is only part of the picture. The most basic goal of higher education is to assist students in becoming well-balanced, fully mature human beings. As described by Sharon Parks in The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By, Sharon Parks identifies the essential goal of higher education as that of helping students on the difficult path to adult faith. She calls this endeavor “meaning-making.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Contrary to popular belief, most young people do not arrive on a college or university campus with a well-formed system of personal values and religious convictions. To the contrary, the young adult years are a period of immense fluctuation and transition. This is when people make the commitments that guide them through life.

###  People sometimes speak of the educational enterprise at church-related colleges and universities as a religious version of what is essentially a secular task. But in fact, the converse is true. Non-religious institutions provide a secularized version of what is really a religious task—to help students make meaning in their lives. We can pursue this objective most effectively where religious values are explicitly affirmed.[[10]](#footnote-10) If education is essentially a religious task, its ideal setting is a religious institution.

###  So, how religious should Adventist colleges and universities be in the future? The answer is "very religious." Our religious identity should be a factor in every aspect of our plans and activities.

**How Should We Be Religious?**

If we decide we should be very religious, we face the challenge of determining just *how we should be religious.*  If it is undesirable to move away from our historic identity, but virtually impossible to perpetuate the religious forms and styles of past decades, where does this leave us? The growing diversity of our students makes indoctrination inadvisable, and treating religion as an object of mere scholarly interest is undesirable. We want students to view religion as an important part of their personal lives, not just part of human life in general. And this calls for something more than dispassionate inquiry. One way to describe our task, I believe, is along the lines of "recommending a religious perspective*."*  While we do not assume, or require, a certain attitude toward religion from our students, neither do we treat religious values and beliefs as matters of purely private preference. Instead, we can encourage students to think carefully about their religious convictions, and provide a framework of commitments for them to consider as they do so. This proposal calls for several concrete measures.

First of all, it will affect the way we teach religion. To recommend a religious perspective, we will require students to take religion classes in several different areas, and we will explore our religious tradition "from within," as well as "from without." In other words, we will teach as representatives of a religious community, not merely as historians, literary scholars, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, etc. This doesn't mean that we avoid looking at religion as a phenomenon that deserves scholarly investigation, nor that we uncritically recite traditional doctrinal formulas. To the contrary, we are not averse to the rigorous exploration of religious ideas, institutions and practices. But the goal is for students to reflect carefully on the claims of Christianity for themselves.

Second, it will affect the way we teach, period. Recommending a religious perspective means that we bring Christian ideas and values into conversation with the beliefs and values reflected in all the disciplines we pursue. It does not mean that faculty members hold identical religious views or avoid raising serious questions about religious issues. It does call for faculty members to be sensitive to students' religious needs. And it invites them to share their own convictions with students both inside and outside the classroom.

To recommend a religious perspective, we will attend to the public side of religion, too. And this has implications for student life. Students need to learn something about the perspective we're recommending in settings other than the classroom. Religious universities across the spectrum—Jewish, Catholic and Protestant—provide religious services for their students. It's part of the educational experience such institutions provide. For the same reason, we will must provide religious services for students on Adventist campuses, and to show that we are serious about this aspect of religion, we will provide programs of the highest quality, whatever it costs to do so.[[11]](#footnote-11) In addition to various required activities, students should also have plenty of opportunity to express and explore religion on a voluntary basis in informal settings.

It is clear that recommending a religious perspective requires us to resist developments that would relegate religion to the purely private, individual sphere of our students' lives. One is the notion that serious academic work approaches religion from outside, never from inside, a religious tradition. So, instructors should refrain from expressing their personal religious convictions in the setting of the classroom. Another is the tendency to emphasize the emotional, and downplay the intellectual, aspects of religion; to elevate private above public expressions of religion. Both tendencies rest on the assumption that serious academic inquiry and formal religion have little to do with personal religious experience. But a religious perspective is more than personal preference and private experience. Christianity, and its Adventist expression, involves shared beliefs, values and experiences—in other words, tradition and community. And our students need to appreciate these aspects of religion, too.

Finally, recommending a religious perspective means bringing Christian beliefs and values into conversation with all academic disciplines and with all human concerns. One of the most important things we can communicate to our students is an expansive vision of Christian scholarship. They need to believe that a Christian commitment summons them to high intellectual endeavor. They need the confidence that Christian beliefs and values give them a secure basis for pursuing any avenue of human inquiry and interacting with bright minds wherever they meet them.

Our church’s commitment to higher education expresses the belief that all truth is God’s truth and that the acquisition of truth calls for the diligent application of all our powers. These convictions support the attempt to bring all knowledge within the overarching perspective of Christian faith.[[12]](#footnote-12) In *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind,[[13]](#footnote-13)* Mark A. Noll challenges Christians to "think like a Christian" in every area of life. This means taking "seriously the sovereignty of God over the world he created, the lordship of Christ over the world he died to redeem, and the power of the Holy Spirit over the world he sustains each and every moment." This is the kind of thinking we must encourage our students to do.

It takes more than religion professors, of course, to teach religion effectively. The purpose of an Adventist college or university is to bring Christian ideas and values into constructive conversation with all the disciplines of the academy. One of the most important things we can provide our students is an expansive vision of Christian scholarship. They need to believe that a Christian commitment summons them to high intellectual endeavor. They need the confidence that Christian beliefs and values give them the security to pursue any avenue of human inquiry and interact with bright minds wherever they meet them.

If there is one thing teachers need to remember above all else, it is the extent of their influence on students’ lives. As Sharon Parks describes it, the role of a college teacher as one of “mentoring.” A mentor in this sense is not what we typically think of as a “role-model.” College students are not casting about for adults they want to imitate. But they are looking for people who represent values and goals they find acceptable. So, teachers do much more than convey information. We have a unique opportunity to help young people make the most important decisions a human being ever faces. In Parks’s words, a college professor is nothing less than a “spiritual guide” to his or her students. Here again, she is not referring to something we may or may not choose to do. She is describing something that happens inevitably. Teachers play a mentoring role in students’ lives, whether they deliberately choose to or not. The values we project, the commitments we make, the attitudes we display—all have an indelible impact on their thinking. Students may accept or reject what they see in us, but there is no way they will fail to notice it.

In this complicated situation, Seventh-day Adventist religion teachers today face significant intellectual and personal demands. While we believe that religion deserves our best scholarly efforts, religion in the Adventist college or university will always be more than an object of academic study. We want students to view religion as an important part of their personal lives, not just a part of human life in general. And this calls for something more than dispassionate inquiry. Accordingly, we encourage all our students to think carefully about their religious convictions and we are willing to share our own.

Teachers of religion at today’s Adventist colleges and universities thus face formidable challenges. As scholars, we are required to complete a demanding course of graduate study, and expected to continue to contribute to specific areas of academic inquiry. As instructors, they must acquire the skill to communicate information clearly and design effective learning experiences. As mentors, they must convey to students excitement for learning and enthusiasm for the Christian life.

Is it easy to meet all these expectations? Of course not. Perhaps that’s why the Apostle James wrote to early Christians, “not many of you should become teachers” (Jas 3:1). But as many of us have found, it is hard to imagine anything more interesting, more exciting, or more rewarding than the vocation of teaching religion. And there is nothing else we would rather do.

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1. *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions* (Eerdmans, 2001). The institutions he describes are Calvin, Wheaton, Valparaiso, Notre Dame, Baylor and St. Olaf. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to a recent article in *Sports Illustrated,* there are 100 daily masses on the campus of Notre Dame (SI, October 22-29, 2018, p. 38). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On this exalted view of education, the purpose of Christian mission is to continue the work of Christ in restoring human beings to their original relationship with God, with one another, and with all creation, and to promote the development of all the soul’s powers throughout this life in preparation for the life to come (Ed 19). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Let the youth advance as fast and as far as they can in the acquisition of knowledge. Let their field of study be as broad as their power can compass” (MH 402). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Teachers should lead students to think,” states Ellen White, “and clearly to understand the truth for themselves. It is not enough for the teacher to explain or for the student to believe; inquiry must be awakened, and the student must be drawn out to state the truth in his own language, thus making it evident that he sees its force and makes the application” (6T 154). “In both the home and the school it should be the student’s effort to learn how to study and how to impart the knowledge gained. Whatever his calling, he is to be both a learner and a teacher as long as life shall last” (MH 402). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. CWE 33. Cf. these statements: “The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people, is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation” (CWE 35). Naturally, this quest for truth must be accompanied by commitment to the welfare of the community and a healthy respect for the achievements of the past. Ellen White urges that no new doctrine or interpretation of the Bible should be accepted without first “submitting it to brethren of experience” (CWE 47). And she insists, “We are not to receive the words of those who come with a message that contradicts the special points of our faith” (CWE 32). On the other hand, she bemoans the sort of self-confidence that leads church members to feel “no necessity for more truth and greater light” (CWE 41). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Among recent publications that illustrate this are *The Book of Virtues* by William Bennett, former Secretary of Education (Simon and Schuster, 1993) and *The Culture of Disbelief* by Howard Carter (Doubleday Anchor Books, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. March 5, 1999, p. A42. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By* (Harper & Row, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I came to the conclusion long ago that if my children could attend a Christian school for only four years of their lives, those should be the years they spend in college. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. We should abandon the oxymoron, "required worship." If worship is the soul's free response to God, it cannot, by definition, be required. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. As a college senior, my daughter attended a summer seminar at the University of Notre Dame sponsored by the Pew foundation. Its purpose was to encourage religious young people to pursue careers in academia as their Christian vocation. She found it inspiring to study with world-class scholars from some of America's great universities who were not the least bit defensive about their Christian beliefs. In fact, rather than apologizing for Christianity, they felt that the burden of proof rested on people who were not believers. I was glad she was exposed to that attitude, and I hope the students in Adventist schools find in their teachers the same combination of scholarly excellence and Christian confidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Eerdmans, 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)