

Bible and Adventism. A Monocentric or a Polycentric Unity?

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The starting point for Adventism believe and living is the bible. So, the search for the today needed church unity must start here. But, is the access to the bible so immediate, direct and neutral as we Adventist presuppose and would like it to be? Certainly not, because we only get into the bible through Adventism itself and through our rootage in western culture. The so much praised 19th century objective reading not only doesn't exist at all but actually is the worst biased reading because it is unaware of its own historical limitations. We Adventists have managed to develop a kind of pre-lapsarian hermeneutics i.e. the believe that our interpretation of the bible has the objectivity and purity of the pre-fall adamic situation and by no means is conditioned, even less, modified or biased, by our cultural, sociological and epistemological today limitations .

For this reason a true and solid Adventist anchorage in the Bible can't be achieved by a resolved, persuaded and inflamed declaration or an outspoken defence of the “Sola Scriptura Principle” in whatever of its forms it may be expressed, as much as one doesn't become American, Peruvian or German by just singing the national anthem. Adventism's relation to the bible is not an easy one. Unfortunately we have oversimplified it and underestimated all the theological and cultural implications of this. We still keep clinging to a simplistic and linear model of relationship to the bible. This linear model has become, among our members and pastors and also among some theologians, a kind of magical amulet that by itself gives somebody immediately the patent of unquestionable orthodoxy. The relationship to the bible is not linear but circular (see the hermeneutical circle).¹ Not only the bible influences us but also the other way round. We, as rooted historical beings, tend to privilege and foster our own personal or communitarian ideological frame as intermediary between us and the bible. Said it differently, ours is just an Adventist reading of the bible that we naively try to elevate to a universal reading. We find there what we are looking for. There are in the bible numberless categories, horizons or heterogeneous material we don't see and we don't use because they simply don't belong to our Adventist mind-setting as for instance ecology, emotionality, instinctiveness, corporality, corporatism, hierarchy or as is this case, alternative and parallel forms of unity as the “polycentric-unity” . We read the bible just as Adventists and this reading makes us

¹ Ricoeur, Paul 2002, Du texte a l'action. Essais d'hermeneutique II, Paris: Seuil, 5-13.

even more Adventists. And our situation is worst today than it used to be in the past because in opposition to our pioneers we are conditioned now by a larger and heavier Adventist tradition accumulated in time.

But this is not the worst news in our so boasted and purist Adventist biblical Hermeneutics because what conditions us even more than Adventism, in our biblical reading, is our western cultural imprinting. We read the bible as westerns and the fact that we try to update ourselves from being modern to become illuminated post-modern theologians, only radicalizes even more our cultural particular belonging. We post-moderns are may be less modern but our post-modernism doesn't make us less westerns. On the contrary our post-modernity radicalizes our Westernness.

Are we then ineluctably determined by our culture? Not necessarily. We can't avoid to be culturally influenced but at the same time we must resist any kind of cultural determinism. And this, not only because the force of the Gospel then would be denied but also because we would elevate unduly a culture above the others. But cultural determinism is not only that ugly anti-religious ideology there outside in society. Actually, cultural determinism is the more diffuse and implicitly working religious attitude also in Adventism.

Why this introduction and why in these terms? Because our search for a biblical model of unity for Adventism today has become, in the present situation, a circular movement. We find in the bible apparently "new" motives and hints for unity that "de facto" are just the updated re-elaborations of the classical Adventist and western type of unity. To escape this circular movement we need to de-construct our understanding of it, in order to evidence its biased limitations. To reach that, we will proceed in three steps. We will consider our current understanding of biblical, Adventist and western paradigm of unity.

I. Adventist Biblical Reading on Unity

We Adventist like to underline the heterogeneity of the bible. Compare to other sacred texts the bible appears to be really a pluralistic book. Various authors, different periods, diversified historical settings, plurality of characters and even variety of theological viewpoints and perspectives. And today, more than Christians in the past, we can appreciate this enormous plurality thanks to the visionary and disciplined research going on in biblical history, linguistics, literary or psychological studies. The Koran, in opposition to this, appears more homogeneous, synthetic and linear. The bible has a more fragmented, sinuous and tortuous profile. But the point is

precisely this. The miracle is that all this radical and structural diversity and plurality seems to be superseded and overcome in and by a miraculous compact theological unity. In other words we take biblical diversity just as a circumstantial and transitory condition that can't contained the final message of truth. At the end, for Adventist reading, diversity is not a noble theological category. It has a validity just at an initial stage to make emerge by contrast afterwards, the power of the noble final theological unity. Reading the bible like this, makes us on one side to overlook the enormous biblical relevance of diversity for understanding biblical unity and on the other side to remain with a depleted and depauperated concept of unity.²

II. Western Adventism Reading on Unity

But this model of unity applied to biblical reading is just the application and the extension of a more primitive model; that of Adventism itself. In fact Adventism looks into itself in the same way as it looks into the bible. It starts listing and proudly counting the enormous diversity existing in the Adventist community around the world: ethnic diversity, linguistic plurality, diversified witnessing strategies, heterogeneous family organizations, multiform historical sensibilities etc. Adventism, we like to underline it, is only second to the Catholic church in securing an international transversal presence in almost all the countries of the world. But here as with the bible, all this diversity easily evaporates and disappear in the altar of the today Adventist church main Moloch: unity. Diversity in Adventism seems to be only transitory and circumstantial. And at the end we Adventists consider that the essence of Adventism can be expressed only in unity and by no way in diversity. In fact we don't feel at Easy, we become rapidly suspicious and even administratively repressive toward whatever kind of theological diversity may emerge in the church. The so boasted Adventist linguistic and ethnic diversity, "de facto" are for us just folkloristic and aesthetic manifestations without any serious theological validity and relevance. In fact our theology, as much as our liturgy or hymnology, is universally the same in South-America, Cameroun, Florence or New York. Unity always manages to resist and finally to win, but which unity? At the end, an impoverished unity that overlooks and supersedes diversity and by this depotentiates its motivating and inclusive power. Great is Adventist diversity but even greater is its overcoming unity. A typical example, of the many possible to quote here, of this reductive and idolatric Adventist unity, is the anachronistic, naïve and caricatural Sabbath School lectionary imposed, in the content and even in the form, to every Adventist in the world.

² Brueggemann, Walter 2005, *Theology of the Old Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 10-15.

III. Western Cultural Reading on Unity

But this model of unity applied by Adventism to Adventism after have been applied to the bible itself is just the application and extension of an even more primitive cultural model; that of western culture.

Europeans as nobody before, and may be for the first time so massively, discovered cultural diversity in extraordinary and unique ways: geographical diversity, radical ethnic differences, linguistic plurality, differentiated kinship systems, parallel religious mind-settings, alternative medicines, diversified and sophisticated economical organizations etc. But after describing diversity, as much as Adventism with the bible, Europeans managed to overcome and dismantled it by imposing to every culture and nation in the world their normative European abstract universalism.³ This type of abstract universalism can be found in arts as much as in literature, in science as in theology. This reductive type of unity would like us to naively believe that polyphony, sociology, philosophy or science just started two or three centuries ago in Europe. And western abstract universalism has been diffused and disseminated through a couple of powerful and sophisticated cultural strategies: assimilationism and multiculturalism.

a. The assimilation model.⁴

After this first model of western universalism, coming from the French liberal tradition, the integration based on the idea of equality, can be achieved through the full adoption of the rules and values of the dominant society and through the avoidance of any consideration of diversity. Here is promoted the need to respect common legal values and principles that are shared by all in order to foster a cohesive, inclusive society. This republican assimilationist model, is based on the idea of monoculturality and the full adoption, by submission or absorption, of rules and values of the dominant society so that the minority group becomes culturally indistinguishable from the dominant society.

b. The multicultural model.⁵

³ Marramao, Giacomo 2003. *Passaggio a Occidente. Filosofia e globalizzazione*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 10-20.
Marramao, Giacomo 2008. *La passione del presente. Breve lessico della modernità-mondo*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
Marramao, Giacomo 2008. *Multiple Self: identità multiple e comportamenti oscillanti. Passione per il presente. Breve lessico della modernità-mondo*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri. 64-67.

⁴ Modood, Tariq 2007. *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea*. Oxford: Polity Press.

⁵ Triandafyllidou A., Modood T., Meer N. 2011. *European Multiculturalism: Cultural, Religious and Ethnic Challenges*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

After this second model coming from the Anglo-Saxon pluralistic tradition, present also in countries like Sweden, Netherlands or Canada, the integration is based in the respect and protection of cultural diversity within a framework of shared belonging. Here the cultural diversity is acknowledged, protected and even promoted. The state doesn't try to eliminate diversity or cultural difference, doesn't stigmatize it, but rather tries to adequately administrate it by assigning appropriate spaces and moments in which they can be freely manifested and cultivated. Here monoculturality is apparently overcome and gives place to cultural pluralism. But the problem is that this remains a non-communicative and a non-dialogical pluralism. Each culture grows up in its own corner somehow segregated and excluded from the real present history where the supremacy remains attributed uniquely to the dominant culture with the cynic alibi that they have a formal and juridical recognition of other cultural sensibilities. But formal recognition of cultural diversity is just an elementary and rudimentary kind of recognition that paradoxically can cohabit and even justify cultural subordination and segregation.

IV. The Discovery of the Complexity of Unity

In opposition to this classical western abstract universalism there are interesting movements that parallel to what is happening also in the biblical sciences. The discovery of complex systems that presuppose a different kind of unity that we will call a "poly-centric" unity. We'll just briefly refer to two disciplines: physics and anthropology.

Classical Newtonian physics worked with a mechanical, homogeneous, Unitarian and predictable understanding of time-space reality. Twentieth-century theoretical physics came out of the relativistic revolution and the quantum mechanical revolution. But still was all about simplicity and continuity (in spite of quantum jumps). Its principal tool was calculus. Twenty-first-century theoretical physics is coming out of the "chaos revolution". Its principal tool category is complexity.⁶

The same input comes from other field studies as for instance anthropology. After the Italian anthropologist Francesco Remotti⁷ of the university of Turin, western societies are not complex but just complicated societies because they obsessively privilege one dimension above all others becoming "De Facto" mono-centric societies only interested with quantitative growth as the GDP obsession shows. Non-

⁶⁶ Giorello, Giulio 2011. *Se ti spiegassi la scienza?* Milano: Aliberti, 12-14.

⁷ Remotti, Francesco 2011. *Cultura. Dalla complessità all'impovertimento*, Roma: La terza, 35-50; Tourraine, Alain 2002. *Pourrons-nous vivre ensemble? Egaux et différents*. Paris: Arthème Fayard.

western societies are slower societies not because they are lazy but because they try to maintain in a sophisticated equilibrium all these various contradictory levels of human existence: relations to others, to nature, to God. Their complexity is given by this poly-centric organization and orientation of their internal life.

The same can be said of the bible. And the new developments particularly in the synchronic approaches to biblical interpretation evidence this irreducible and positive complexity of the biblical narratives. In opposition to this complexity the Koran, for instance, offers a different image. The image of a strong and compacted unity and homogeneity. The problem is that many Adventist read the bible as it was the Koran. But actually the bible is not the Koran. I would like to characterize the indubitable unity in the bible with three words: poly-centric, developmental and paradoxical.

a. A Poly-centric Unity

The bible is polycentric not only because it has integrated structurally various narratives of the same events or because it has included a diversified list of authors. The bible is theologically poly-centric because it gives place to diversified theological projects that cohabit together in despise even of their mutual excommunication. That's the case of the Jewish-Christian community and the Gentile-Christian community in the new testament canon. The same could be said of the pneumatology issue. Is the epistles' Subordinationist ethical oriented pneumatology the only pneumatology possible? Certainly not, because we have in Matthew for instance a pneumatology that is not subordinated to Christology but is rather life-oriented. In fact Christ is born by the action of the Holy Spirit. Both pneumatologies are licit and cohabit together. This "poly-centric" unity makes emerge a syn-chronical plurality of the various existing theological options.

b. A Developmental Unity

The bible is written in such a way that it doesn't close the theological elaboration but rather fosters and facilitates it. Contrarily to what is generally thought and said the bible never says the last word but wisely articulate its discourses to enhance further theological thinking. This developmental strategy is seen for instance with the creation narratives. The creation is not a homogeneous story in the Bible. It has various versions, and each declined in a different context and different periods. There are Theo-centric versions of creation as that of the book of Genesis or that of the last chapters of the book of Job. There are Anthro-centric versions of creation as that of some psalms as psalm eight. There are also soteriological versions of creation as witnessed by various New Testament hymns and prayers. But there are also Cosmo-

centric versions of creation as the one we find in psalm ninety eight. This “developmental” unity makes emerge a dia-chronical plurality of the various existing theological options.

c. A Paradoxical Unity

And particularly the bible is not obsessed, as we Adventist are, with theological synthesis. While the Koran works out a final synthesis of the various reported narratives, the bible leaves untouched the various versions of the narrated events integrating so a structural tension that increases the possibility of theological meaning. A theology, as unfortunately happens to be the today Adventist institutional theology, that is not able to cohabit with this tensional element derived from the structural heterogeneity of biblical material, is just a poor theology. Sure the biblical final editor of a book or passage doesn't remain passive just registering this heterogeneous material. He does his theological work creating a common –not a corpus of formal theological statements and declaration- theological horizon and mediating perspective. That's the case for the two creations narratives in genesis 1, and 2. The stories are not touched by the editor but link together in their diversity by theological and editorial bridging strategy. This paradoxical unity makes emerge a positive tensional plurality of the various existing theological options.

V. A New Paradigm Needed for Unity Today

But even this beautiful biblical paradigm on unity, a poly-centric, developmental and paradoxical unity, is not enough. We can't always submit historical reality and accommodate it to the biblical paradigm in order to save the validity of the biblical model. This move actually represents only the “centripetal dimension” of the bible that needs to be maintained but not absolutized. The bible has also a strong “centrifugal dimension” by which the bible tries to follow and accommodate itself to the external historical reality.

The limit of the biblical model of unity is that what is happening today in Adventism as much as in today societies is just unique and the bible just don't speak about because it doesn't know such particular situations. That's also true for other topics as women ordination, homosexuality or life style issues. For instance, old testament unity is “temporarily” long but at the same time just an intra-ethnic unity that can hardly be the final model for us Adventists who are an inter-ethnic community. The new testament unity instead has become a true inter-ethnic community but that remains “temporarily” short that can hardly become a model for us who are

celebrating this year our 150 anniversary of existence with all what this implies in relationship to unity.

In other words, the bible will not do, what we ourselves are called to do i.e. invent a new paradigm of church unity getting the best ingredients from the biblical testimony, from a realistic reading of ourselves as a multicultural religious community and finally, from an accurate and intelligent perceptions of today society that represents, more than we believe, the historical arena where every theology is rooted and emerge.