AND THE SCHOOL DOG IS NOT THE SCHOOL DOG: THE DILEMMA OF WRITING RELIGIOUS BIOGRAPHY AS ILLUSTRATED BY SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST LITERATURE.

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Analysing the life and work of members of religious groups presents predicaments not always encountered in other biographical endeavours. Some of the problems faced by religious biographers can be illustrated by assessing the work of those authors who have analysed the writings and life of Ellen White (1827-1915), a Seventh-day Adventist pioneer. For more than a century the Seventh-day Adventist membership, particularly in the U.S.A. and the Pacific, have been taught explicitly or implicitly that the central core of White's writings were received through visions or dreams given by God.

The Autumn 1970 edition of *Spectrum*, a journal published for Adventist academics, published an article analysing the use White made of historians in one of her most widely read books *The Great Controversy*. In this book, White describes the history of the religious world from apostolic times to the Second Advent. The historical skeleton she received by visions; she used historians to put flesh on it. William S. Peterson, Associate Professor of English at the Seventh-day Adventist Andrews University, claimed that in her chapter on the French Revolution, the historians used "were strong on moral fervour and weak on factual evidence".[1] Peterson's article emphasised that White not only used biased historians, but that she used them "carelessly, sometimes simply misreading them, and occasionally leaving out crucial facts, thereby distorting the significance of the event".[2] The article, together with others in the same issue, caused a furore within Adventism. Articles and letters debating the merits of Peterson's arguments appeared in following issues of *Spectrum*.

In the Summer of 1972, *Spectrum* featured an article by Ronald Graybill, a research assistant at the Ellen White Estate; the Adventist institution established to preserve and market the Ellen White corpus.[3] He revealed, from a study of the notes left by Clarence Crisler, White's secretary while the 1911 revision of *The Great Controversy* was being prepared, that White had used only one writer for her source, Uriah Smith, the Adventist author who published on the biblical apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. Graybill claimed that White "used nothing ... that Smith did not have. Every time Smith deleted material, she deleted the same material, although occasionally she deleted more ... There can be no doubt that she drew the historical quotations from Smith, not from the original works".[4] Graybill's article made it abundantly clear that White, contrary to over a century of Adventist belief and teaching, was not doing historical research at all. It opened the can of worms even further.

The *Spectrum* debate was followed by a "first-class piece of historical scholarship" on the source of White's principles of healthful living by Ronald Numbers, an Assistant Professor of the history of medicine and science at the University of Wisconsin.[5] Numbers demonstrated that White derived her health reform ideas, a key element of the Adventist lifestyle, from contemporary health reformers. He reminded his readers that White claimed to receive the principles of healthful living from God.

During the 1970s, Walter Rea, a Seventh-day Adventist minister, intensified his research into the sources of White's best loved devotional works. Rea asserted that "an alarming proportion of her published work had been borrowed from nineteenth-century writers ..."[6] Later in the decade it was also suggested that White's unique eschatological views were merely a reflection of religious currents in nineteenth-century America.[7]

By the 1980s White's credibility, as an inspired source of religious history, health, eschatology and devotional literature to the Seventh-day Adventist believer, lay in tatters. The Adventist prophet's sources had been discovered and there was little room for the belief that they constituted the visions of God, through His chosen messenger, to His chosen people. Her views were merely part of her socio-religious milieu.

The reactions to these critical analyses of the sources of White's inspiration and revelations give an insight into the quandary facing religious biographers.

Arthur L. White, secretary of the White Estate, in his six volume biography of, or rather 'monument' to, his grandmother, reluctantly accommodates a measure of the new data. However, in spite of his concessions, the work suffers from White being unaware of the academic milieu of his own sect. White not only believes in a prophetess who speaks to a select minority of religionists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but he continues to believe in the 'myth' in the light of current research by scholars of his own community.

In spite of its hagiographic tendency White's work is of higher biographical value than Noorbergen's work *Ellen G. White: Prophet of Destiny.* Noorbergen, a non-Adventist writer does not account for the findings of Adventist researchers, rather he highlights the Adventist mythology surrounding White without apology. Noorbergen is either out of touch with the Adventist academic community or he was aware of an appreciative Adventist market who would bolster the sale of a poorly researched volume, or both. Noorbergen's book is hagiography.

An example of the entrenchment of historical misinterpretation within Seventh-day Adventism is to be found in the significance of an Ellen White dream of a furrow on the property purchased for the site of the future Adventist Avondale College at Cooranbong in New South Wales. It is believed that White's relating of the dream to those involved in assessing the property aided in their decision to purchase the land. Two dissertations by Australian Adventists, Lindsay and Hook, discuss the significance of the dream.[8] Lindsay's explanation lacks careful historical analysis. He believes the furrow vision was critical in the decision to purchase the site.

Hook on the other hand, stays close to the primary historical sources. He leaves the reader with three possibilities; the furrow story was a figment of White's imagination, the dream was symbolic, or only White saw the dream and the furrow. Hook believes it played only a minor role in the decision to purchase.

The work of Lindsay and A. L. White do not give sufficient weight to historical conditions in assessing White's charisma and her contribution to Adventism. The handling of the furrow dream by Lindsay and A. L. White supports the view that the biographers of sect and denominational leaders have often allowed themselves "to portray the subject in such heroic proportions that the historic conditions appear to possess only

superficial relevance and play no real role in controlling or conditioning the person".[9]

One of the elementary difficulties facing writers of religious biography is the comprehension of the mind-set of the subject. While it may be difficult for a non-religious biographer to appreciate the religious dimension of a subject, the task for a non-believer to fully comprehend a peculiar religious psyche can be well-nigh impossible. In order to capture the unconventional milieu of certain religious groups, particularly conservative groups, it is helpful for the biographer to have the insights of an insider. For example, while Adventist jargon such as 'truth of the message' can be quickly learnt, the underlying psychological implication of the phrase is only fully comprehended and experienced by those who '*know* the truth of the message'. In this respect insiders have the advantage of an extra dimension as religious biographers.

Religious biographers who are insiders are confronted, however, with other unique task predicaments. To critically investigate their subjects, religious biographers must endeavour to stand above their own mind-set. An oscillating dilemma is thereby set in motion. The researcher is continually being forced to choose between the roles of appreciative insider and critical outsider. In time this oscillation can produce a personal spiritual crisis. A member of a religious organisation may have the advantage of insights available only to insiders but the religious biographer and "believer can find it difficult to inhabit the same skin in tranquillity and harmony".[10] The researcher may unearth disturbing data concerning their organisation and find it impossible or intolerable to return to their previous personal religious standpoint. The changing viewpoint and disquieting data may permanently damage the researcher's personal belief structure and complete loss of faith may result and be reflected in their analyses. However, this dilemma has the potential to produce poignant and perceptive insights. For as Sandeen so astutely observes:

> When the historian and the believer are the same person, the writing of a book can become an enterprise fraught with tensions and, occasionally, agony. One must be an obtuse reader, indeed, not to see this tension and even feel this agony ...[11]

Unlike A.L. White, Noorbergen and Lindsay, other Adventist writers have been able to discern, to a lesser or greater degree, the influence of the Adventist sub-culture upon their own mind-set. They have been able to discern the effect on their belief structure of the consequences of the revelation of the misinterpretations of the writings of White. The shock of the exposure tends to be reflected in their subsequent treatment of Adventism and White.

Walter Rea, after a decade of research on the sources of White's devotional books, produced a vitriolic attack on White and the White Estate in particular, provokingly titled *The White Lie*. Unfortunately his bitterness tends to spill over to include all religionists. His book received scathing criticism from the staff of the White Estate.[12] Rea saw too clearly the large gulf fixed between current Adventist scholarship on White and the organisation's theological stance. He attempted to dialogue with the Adventist leadership but when attempts were made to lessen the significance of his research he began a campaign of disclosure to the laity.

Robert Brinsmead, a long time critic of mainstream Adventism in his book *Judged by the Gospel* spent five chapters on 'Whitolatry'.[13] His iconoclasm is less vitriolic than Rea. Brinsmead attacks the concept of White's uniqueness, yet he praises her contribution in the field of christology. Brinsmead the long time Adventist fringe-dweller and critic is less severe than Rea, the previous Adventist minister of good and regular standing. The unfortunate effect of Rea's exposure on his own world view is transparently evident in *The White Lie*. Rea had spent most of his life teaching the Adventist message and in particular the divine origin and relevance to the end-time of White's teaching. Rea by his disclosure had a great deal to lose, his career, his standing within his sub-culture and his friends, with no gain whatsoever. His analysis of White reveals his hurt and anger.

Lowell Tarling's *Taylor's Troubles*, a disguised account of school life at the Strathfield Seventh-day Adventist Senior High School during the 1960s, is also iconoclastic. *Taylor's Troubles* can be interpreted as a thinly disguised criticism of Adventist education and its educational philosophy which is based on the teachings of White as spelt out in such writings as *Education*.[14] The humour of Tarling's semi-autobiography indicates that he does not believe that an Adventist education is of any special significance to prepare young Seventh-day Adventists for the Kingdom of God

or to be witnesses to society of the 'truth'. He depicts life at Strathfield during the 1960s as typical of the life of the average school boy in any 'normal' Australian school of the era. Cheating, canings, fights, humorous sporting incidents, visits to the headmaster's office, girlfriends and hero worship are all part of Tommy Taylor's troubles. The humour reveals his disillusionment with Adventism education in particular and Adventism in general.

The work of Rea, Tarling and Brinsmead illustrate that the conflict between belief and scepticism is at the very heart of the dilemma of equilibrium in the work of religious biographers. Van Harvey argued that "it almost seems like a historiographical law that the best scholarship is produced by the sceptical believer".[15]

In 1983, Graybill, the first doctoral student to have immediate and unlimited access to Ellen White's personal and unpublished papers, produced "The Power of Prophecy: Ellen G. White and the Women Religious Founders of the Nineteenth Century".[16] In spite of its lack of depth and a final overview, it illustrates a remarkable ability by a religious writer to balance disturbing historical data by being cognisant of both the Adventist academic environment and the social milieu outside Adventism. Unfortunately his mission "of rescuing Ellen White from burning buildings by tossing her from tenth story windows" did not save him from dismissal as associate secretary at the White Estate.[17] He was fired for the unauthorised use of sensitive manuscripts and "the wrong impression of ... White created by the dissertation"[18]

Both Graybill and Numbers exhibit a deep concern for the history of White. It is apparent on every page. Numbers discovered aspects of White's teachings and attitudes that appeared to shock him. Yet he also possessed the courage and balance to clearly state the results of his research. But where Numbers and Graybill were successful, others failed. In short, A. L. White, Noorbergen and Lindsay fail to account for exposed 'fable' in their work. Their work is hagiographic. Rea, Brinsmead and Tarling to varying degrees, display a lack of critical distance; their writings indicate an inability on their part to handle the shock of the exposure of problematic myth. Graybill and Numbers, in spite of being as iconoclastic as Rea, Brinsmead or Tarling, have managed to produce an element of tension between the shock, surprise and sometimes agony which faces religious biographers as they expose the 'fables' of their own belief system.

When interpreting the writings of religious biographers it is imperative to ascertain the stance of the writer on three interlocking aspects. First, the writer's relationship to the group under review must be determined. Being a member of the subject's sub-culture can help the writer to appreciate the effect of the belief structure on the thought patterns of the subject. The insider has a clear interpretative advantage over the outsider.

Secondly, it is vital, to discover the writer's awareness of the peculiar 'myths' of the group. Some religious biographers are unfortunately unaware of the follies of their own sub-culture. But even those who are aware of the 'myths' of the sub-culture often fail to fully re-evaluate their analysis in the light of the exposure of those myths as problematical.

Thirdly, of those writers who do accept such re-evaluations many often lack sufficient distance and thus over-react to the undermining of their cherished views. It has been claimed that if one lives in many tribes one is not fooled by the errors of one's own. But if one is first fooled by the errors of one's own tribe, it can be traumatic to expose that foolishness and to move among other tribes.

In short, mind-set and problematic myth must be accounted for in religious biography for this sub-section of writing to be taken seriously. The failure to account for such phenomena is the single most significant reason why the histories of some sects have never been written, yet books on their histories abound.

An element of humour is probably necessary to ease the pain for serious writers of religious biography. Most fail to perceive the humorous peculiarities of their own sub-culture. Humour is rarely used by Seventh-day Adventist writers. Tarling resorted to humour in his semi-autobiographical children's story of his school days. He has also unwittingly issued a warning in his 'Author's Note' to all who write and analyse religious biography. Tarling cautions:

> ... John Piles is not John Pye
> and Mr. Cooper is not John Cox.
> Leon Collett is not Mr. Carlsberg,
> Carlyle Heffron is not Carlyle Needham,
> Clayton Smith is not Clayton Sims
> and the school dog is not the school dog.[19]

Not all religious biography gains critical impartiality. Unfortunately even the ubiquitous school dog is often not the school dog in religious biography for the 'myths' upon which the biography is based have not always been fully accounted for by the writer.

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