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Introduction

The relationship between religious movements is a fascinating field of study. Similar to state relations and the interaction of individuals or groups, it shows considerable differences of dynamics depending on who is involved, which issues are at stake, and what history lies behind the actors. This is true both for ecumenical contacts of Christian churches and for encounters of believers with entirely different religious backgrounds.

This book contains a collection of texts that demonstrate how interchurch and interfaith relations were thought and lived by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. With more than 16 million baptized members and about 30 million adherents in total today, the denomination was founded in mid-19th century North America and spread to more than 200 countries. This expansion naturally led to manifold religious encounters with both fellow Christians and non-Christians. The result of the reflection on such encounters is visible in the statements and documents presented here.

On the whole, Seventh-day Adventist interchurch relations have been characterized by some degree of ambivalence. On the one hand, Adventists have had a strong sense of being called to proclaim their particular understanding of the gospel to the world, including other Christians. On the other, an emphasis on religious liberty led them to respect all other faith persuasions, and through an emphasis on the importance of searching for truth by means of Bible study, a positive relationship with committed Christians of other backgrounds was inherent in the denomination's theology.¹ These dynamics resulted in different ways of relating to other churches² and ecumenical organizations. While Adventists became members in national Bible Societies and participated in activities of missionary organizations such as the North American "Foreign Missions Conference," they usually did not join national councils of churches. In many cases, Adventists chose observer status; only in a few cases did they opt for full membership.³ Part I of this book documents theological reflections behind such decisions and activities.

¹ Cf. George E. Vandeman, *What I Like About ... The Lutherans, The Baptists, The Methodists, The Charismatics, The Catholics, Our Jewish Friends, The Adventists: Rescuers of Neglected Truth*, Boise: Pacific Press, 1986.

² While the relationship with other Protestants was generally friendly at least in the 20th century, the Adventist distance to Roman Catholicism (as was the case in much of 19th century North American Protestantism) is traditionally more marked; cf. Reinder Bruinsma, *Seventh-Day Adventist Attitudes toward Roman Catholicism, 1844–1965*, Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1994.

³ A survey of Adventist modes of involvement in interdenominational and ecumenical organizations is found in my article "Gaststatus als Modell von Ökumenizität? Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten und die Arbeitsgemeinschaft christlicher Kirchen in Deutschland – Hintergründe, Entwicklungen und Einsichten," *Freikirchenforschung* 18 (2009), 188–204, especially pp. 190–195.

With their hesitancy vis-à-vis ecumenism, the denomination's course of action evolved along lines that resemble developments in certain Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Therefore, the texts in this book can also serve to enlighten the thinking of such movements that, in spite of lacking enthusiasm for the Ecumenical Movement, attempt to cooperate with Christians of other denominational backgrounds in ways that are compatible with their specific convictions. This also explains the choice of the title of this book. "Ecumenism" has had a somewhat negative connotation in the Adventist discourse for most of the church's history;⁴ thus a more neutral term was used when the denomination established its "Council on Interchurch Relations" in 1980.

One of the major tasks of this entity – renamed "Council on Interchurch/Interfaith Relations" in the early 1990s – was to organize dialogues with other religious groups. After informal but important talks with North American representatives of the Evangelical Movement in the 1950s⁵ and conversations with theologians connected with the World Council of Churches in the 1960s and 1970s, the Seventh-day Adventist Church engaged in conversations with a few small denominations in the 1980s. In the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, the Council organized more formal dialogues – with the Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance. All the published reports of these dialogues are found in part II of this book.

The inclusion of the term "interfaith" in the name of the Council also implies a shift of emphasis, i.e., an opening to dialogue and the building of relationships with representatives of non-Christian faiths. The experience of dialoguing with other Christians made it natural for Seventh-day Adventists to engage in conversations with Jews, Muslims, and believers of other religions as well. Moreover, the long Adventist engagement in religious liberty issues implied a positive relationship with major religions even before formal dialogues were held.⁶ While there is still little

⁴ The title of the only monograph on ecumenism written by a Seventh-day Adventist is indicative of this feeling and the general Adventist ambivalence regarding the Ecumenical Movement: Bert Beverly Beach, *Ecumenism: Boon or Bane?*, Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1974.

⁵ Cf. Juhyeok Nam, "Reactions to the Seventh-Day Adventist Evangelical Conferences and 'Questions on Doctrine,' 1955–1971," PhD diss., Andrews University, 2005, and T. E. Unruh, "The Seventh-Day Adventist Evangelical Conferences of 1955–1956," *Adventist Heritage* 4.2 (Winter 1977), 35–46. Because of their unofficial nature, these talks did not result in a formal statement; however, on the Adventist side, it led to the publication of a book that is of great significance in the history of Adventist theology: *Seventh-Day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine: An Explanation of Certain Major Aspects of Seventh-day Adventist Belief*, Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1957.

⁶ Among the Adventist publications in the field of religious liberty, see, e.g., *Liberty: A Magazine of Religious Freedom*, published since 1906; *Gewissen und Freiheit / Conscience et Liberté*, published by the International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberty since 1973 (French and German editions; some volumes were also published in English, Portuguese, and Spanish);

Adventist literature on interreligious encounters except contributions from a mission context,⁷ the statements presented in part III of this book represent the beginning of Adventist reflections on this globally significant issue and a growing awareness of the challenges involved in it.

Since this book is the first of its kind with a focus on the Seventh-day Adventist Church, an attempt was made to include all relevant official texts from the history of this denomination;⁸ I shall be thankful, however, to be notified about omissions or possible additions.⁹ Some texts were translated into English for this book,¹⁰ and there may be more like these in various languages that could be included in a later edition. A few statements had actually not been published before, and many appeared in publications which are not easy for the general public to find.

It is my hope that this collection, like similar ones with other denominational foci,¹¹ benefits scholars of church history, ecumenics, free church theology, and Adventism, students of theology and religious studies, and all those interested in the study of interchurch and interfaith relations. If it can contribute to advance the understanding of the challenges and promises of the relationship between religious movements, it will have served its purpose.

and *Fides et Libertas: The Journal of the International Religious Liberty Association*, published since 2001.

⁷ Cf. the bibliography on Adventist interfaith relations at the end of this book.

⁸ One field that was deliberately left out of this collection is the relationship of the Seventh-day Adventist Church with churches and movements that separated from it in its history. An introductory study on these is Lowell Tarling, *The Edges of Seventh-Day Adventism: A Study of Separatist Groups Emerging from the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (1844–1980)*, Barragga Bay: Galilee, 1981.

⁹ For comments and suggestions, please write to stefan.hoeschele@thh-friedensau.de.

¹⁰ The translations were done mainly by my assistant Daniel Edwards, who also did much of the correspondence and proofreading connected with this book. It would definitely be an understatement to say that I am very grateful to him for his contribution to the project. I would also like to thank Pastor Jens Mohr and Professor Denis Fortin for their helpful comments on the manuscript.

¹¹ Cf., e.g., Gennadios Limouris, *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism: Statements, Messages and Reports on the Ecumenical Movement, 1902–1992*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994; Fernando Enns, *Heilung der Erinnerungen – befreit zur gemeinsamen Zukunft: Mennoniten im Dialog; Berichte und Texte ökumenischer Gespräche auf nationaler und internationaler Ebene*, Frankfurt a. M.: Lembeck, 2008.