Introduction

In just one generation, the theology of religions has grown from a specialists' subject in the periphery of the theological encyclopedia to one of the issues of major public interest and among those that theologians debate. Due to the globalized context of contemporary discourses and interfaith encounters on various levels, missiologists and systematic theologians alike have increasingly seen the need to pronounce their positions on this topic (see, e.g., Knitter 1985; Hick 1987; D’Costa 1990 and 2009; Rommen and Netland 1995, Dupuis 1997, and Kärkkäinen 2003; for a comprehensive bibliography and helpful discussion of publications, see Bernhardt 2007a and 2007b).

Both Roman Catholics and Protestant—including mainline and Evangelical Protestants—participate in the debate, and even Pentecostals have started to contribute to it (cf. Yong 2000). By way of contrast, Seventh-day Adventists have not yet produced any major systematic study on this subject. The desideratum expressed by Russell Staples in 1992, that
Adventists "are also forced to clarify... the uniqueness of Christianity amid world religions" (Staples 1992:13) still holds true. Nevertheless, Adventist theologians have published a few short essays on the topic during the last twenty years (Beardsell 1990; Dybdahl 1999; Oosterwal 1999; Rilloma 2003) as well as a several books that contain aspects of a theology of religions at least implicitly (Al-Rumi n.d; Hole and Schantz 1993; Owusu-Mensa 1993; Schantz 1993 and 2004; Bauer 2005a and 2005b; Doukhan 2002 and 2004; GMIC 2003; Heinz and Heinz 2007). In addition, there are a good number of unpublished dissertations and theses of a similar nature (see the works cited).

Unfortunately, the most elaborate Adventist reflections on the theology of religions so far have not been published (Oliver 1987; Sarcevic 2006). However, a few relevant statements crafted by church committees (BE-IRLA 2000; BE-IRLA 2003; BRICOM 2003; AJFC 2005; AMR-TED 2006; Bauer 2006:179–185; TED 2008) and the existence of the denomination’s Council on Interchurch/Inter-religion Affairs and various centers for the study of non-Christian religions testify to the fact that the interest of Adventists in the topic has increased in the recent past. The same can be said with regard to Adventist-sponsored journals and magazines, notably Shabbat Shalom and Fides et Libertas, and significant contributions to Ministry, the Adventist Review and Adventist World (see, e.g., Zachary 1999; Whitehouse 2001 and 2002; Schantz and Whitehouse 2003; Dybdahl 2006; Owens 2009; Johnsson 2009 and 2010).

While one cannot, in the absence of a monograph on the topic, speak of a clear-cut Adventist theology of religions at present, altogether these various documents do create a picture that is worth analyzing. Moreover, given the fact that the production of literature on the issue is increasing, this picture must be considered as an emerging discourse in its own right. Certainly a book-length work or dissertation on the topic would be needed to do justice to the issue and the Adventist materials related to it. This paper, therefore, provides a research bibliography but cannot discuss all the issues arising from the publications found in it. Rather, it gives an overview of positions taken, highlights the contributions of major participants in the Adventist theology of religions discourse, and formulates a few insights regarding the particularities of the debate in the context of this denomination. It is not the intention of this study to support a specific view found in Adventist writings so far or to develop a novel approach to the field; instead, it aims at presenting some overall findings and a tentative analysis of Adventist positions so far. Therefore, this article is written with the intention of clarifying the logic in the Adventist theology of religions discourse and to provide a basis for further discussion.

**Discourse Contributors**

**Phases and Persons**

When analyzing the history of Adventist theology and missiology, one can distinguish three phases with regard to the interest in the theology of religions. In the first phase—the 19th century—the main denominational focus was the conversion of other Christians to the Seventh-day Adventist faith. The contact with, and reflection on the fate of, non-Christians was, therefore, limited to a few instances. Therefore, there are hardly any references to Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or other major religions. Consequently one also finds little if any theological reflection on the adherents of these religions and the possibility of their salvation.

An exception to this picture is found in the writings of Ellen G. White. In several instances she emphasizes how God works among non-Christians. One example shall suffice to illustrate her inclusive thought, which differentiates between human worship and organized religion. "Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God" (White 1898:638).

A second phase includes the first three quarters of the 20th century. In this period, Adventist missionary activity regularly confronted the church with non-Christian religions. Hardly any Adventist missionary or scholar developed a strong interest in these religions as such due to the urgency they felt about their missionary task (cf. the absence of materials on Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism in the Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia [Neufeld 1962]; in the Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Students’ Source Book [Neufeld 1966], there is a general article on Islam). There are, however, a few instances of individuals whose thinking penetrated to deeper levels of such religions. Three outstanding examples of European origin for an interest in and a constructive approach to non-Christian religions are Ernst Kotz, Wilhelm Lesovsky, and Erich Bethmann.

Kotz, the most famous German Adventist missionary, was the first Adventist to translate a full New Testament into a new language. He worked...
among the Pare of Tanzania and took a keen interest in the culture and religion of his host people. His two books on the Pare (1922 and 1925) are quite critical of major elements of Pare traditional religion in spite of Kotz’s sympathetic and perceptive view of traditional culture in general. Still, being the first Adventist ethnographer, Kotz deserves respect for finding some traces of God in a context which most of his Adventist contemporaries rejected as merely “heathen.”

Bethmann and Lesovsky both worked in the Middle East during the following decades. While their view of Islam differed, both took Muslims seriously (for a thorough analysis, see Vierus 1991). Bethmann was the first Adventist to produce a monograph on Islam, in which he presents a critique of conventional missionary methods and stresses the need of a properly theological approach to build a “Bridge to Islam” (Bethmann 1950; cf. Bethmann 1966). Lesovsky, a medical doctor and scholar of education, produced the most far-reaching conclusion; in his thinking, what he calls “proto-Islam” and Adventism are identical. Thus, according to Lesovsky, Adventist mission was to unearth the original content of Islam and thus point Muslims to the Adventist message (Lesovsky 1936). Altogether, these examples from the early and mid-20th century demonstrate the potential for later developments in Adventist reflections on the theology of religions even if these first attempts remained sketchy.

The third phase, beginning in the 1980s, is characterized by a growing number of voices and increasingly explicit theological reflection on non-Christian religions. Among the many writers of articles and dissertations, six who have contributed significantly to the discussion should be mentioned in particular. While other scholars have written only single pieces of reflection or produced unpublished dissertations, these few have brought forth a discourse, even if it is still in its infancy.

The largest number of significant contributions have been made by Jon Dybdahl and Bruce Bauer, two of the denomination’s leading missiologists. Dybdahl has produced the most varied relevant writings: reflections on Buddhism (2000), non-Christians in general (2004), the question of their salvation (1999), and the kind of theology needed in non-Christian environments and arising from within such contexts (2006). In addition to writing on folk religion (2000) and directing many dissertations related to non-Christian religions, Bauer has been instrumental in editing several volumes which document the rising Adventist interest in the theology of religions (2005a; 2005b; 2006; 2007).

Although other authors have directed their attention to particular

Religions and Church Entities Involved

The observation that the reflection on particular religions regularly forms the basis for more general theological thinking can be further substantiated when comparing the relative weight that the various religions carry in the totality of the available publications and studies of this field. While there are only five items each related to Hinduism and Buddhism, items focusing on Judaism and Folk/Traditional Religions count more than ten each. Certainly this is partly due to the fact that Asian Adventists have not been very active in scholarly publishing until recently and that there is no easy accessibility to their academic work. Another factor is that both Judaism and African Religions are traditionally of more interest to Adventist scholarship because of the mission successes on the African continent and the Christian and particularly Adventist roots in the Jewish religion. Still, the fact that there are studies from all regions indicates that the discourse, even if still weak, has grown into a global phenomenon.

This is definitely true also for the discussion on Islam, which has contributors from various continents. With more than thirty items, this field of discussion is the largest single set of Adventist studies containing theology of religions content—even slightly more than the studies dealing with religions in general. This should not come as a surprise given the growing importance of Islam globally both in the realm of politics and as a challenge for Christian interfaith relations.
The growing number of studies on diverse religions contributing to general reflections on the theology of religions is paralleled by an ongoing diversification of organizations, institutions, and levels of church administration involved in the discourse. On the one hand is the denomination’s General Conference, which renamed its Council on Interchurch Affairs (established in 1980) “Council on Interchurch/Inter-religion Affairs” in 2007 when Bill Johnsson was appointed as an assistant to the General Conference President for Interfaith Relations. Its activities so far include dialogue meetings and conferences with Muslim organizations and representatives of the Jewish faith, which presupposes the recognition of positive elements in these religions. Together with the long tradition of Adventist lobbying for religious liberty manifested in organizations such as the International Religious Liberty Association (cf. BE-IRLA 2000 and 2003; Liberty; Conscience and Liberty) and the appointment of an assistant to the General Conference president for interfaith relations (cf. Johnsson 2009 and 2010), this situation shows that the very leadership of the denomination is aware of the need to continue exploring the Christian stance vis-à-vis other religions.

Another approach to the issue is represented by the denomination’s Religious Study Centers and a forum in which their directors convene annually, the Global Mission Issues Committee. They drafted a number of statements in 2000 and 2002 dealing with the relationship between Adventism and Muslims, Jews, Hinduism, and Buddhism, as well as with World Religions in general (Bauer 2006:179–185 and 2007:94–95). Although these texts have not yet become official statements, they indicate the need to appreciate what is agreeable in other religions while spelling out major differences with Christianity. The same need led to statements on Adventist-Jewish relations and on Adventist-Muslim relations, the former issued by the denomination’s Biblical Research Institute Committee (2003), the latter by the Trans-European Division (2008) and its Adventist-Muslim Relations Committee (2006). This church region includes the Middle East, which explains the special interest in the issue.

When assessing the different types of Adventist texts dealing with the theology of religion, one can thus find that many entities engage in, and various categories of studies contribute to, the emerging discourse. Ranging from official pronouncements to scholarly studies and from popular to academic articles, all but academic monographs on the issue are available today. What is more, with an institutional anchorage in several organizations at the highest level of the denomination, the issue will undoubtedly keep its momentum in the near future.

### Theological Aspects

A theological evaluation of positions regarding the religions must ask several questions. The foundational question is soteriological: Is there a way for non-Christians to attain salvation? Given the intimate connection of soteriology with christology, some aspects of the latter are included in the debate, although it does not focus on the classical controversies on Christ’s nature but on the more functional question as to what role his salvific acts play for persons who have not made a commitment to him.

A second major area of theological concern is ecclesiology. What part does the church take in the plan of salvation as far as non-Christians are concerned? How is church membership connected with it? Although this discussion commonly focuses on the church as an organized community of believers, this is also a pneumatological question; after all, the church is part of the third article of the Apostolic Creed.

In the following presentation of Adventist thought regarding these issues, these two areas cannot be neatly separated. However, an attempt is made to focus on ecclesiology in the first subsection, on soteriology in the second, and to consider the Adventist synthesis of the two in the third. These two foci also coincide with two common positions in the theology of religions, exclusivism and inclusivism, for which Adventist evaluations will be presented.

#### Exclusivism and the Ecclesiological Question

The exclusivist position in the theology of religions is the view that salvation can solely be attained through Jesus Christ—by either only those who have made a commitment to him (radical exclusivism) or also by those who receive the benefits of his salvific acts in another way (moderate exclusivism). It excludes any role of non-Christian religions as far as salvation is concerned. While the role of the church does not need to be a decisive issue in the debate for moderate exclusivists, radical exclusivists would deny the possibility of salvation for non-church members with few exceptions such as underground Christians. The latter position, therefore, may be well summarized with Cyprian of Carthage’s dictum extra ecclesiam salus non est.

Although Seventh-day Adventists have not linked church membership (or membership in the Adventist Church) to soteriological notions, the denomination’s pronounced “remnant” ecclesiology entails a tendency to view the affiliation with the church as an indispensable element in what may
be called the unconscious Adventist ordo salutis. This tendency is enhanced by the “Great Controversy” motif, which contains the apocalyptic view of only two discernible groupings at the end of world history, one being God's faithful people and the others those who reject him.

At the same time, the Adventist type of exclusivism has remained explicitly moderate, evidently on the basis of the insight that the end of time is yet to come. Thus salvation is portrayed as definitely accessible for non-Christians in Adventist writings on the issue. Whether this view is based on Ellen White statements, on the tradition of God judging people according to the light they had, on progressive revelation (for all these, see Oliver 1987:44–45), on people's good deeds as depicted in Matt 25 (Christo 2006:16), or on biblical case studies—there is unanimity that God saves according to criteria beyond the mere confession of Christ. Even empirical research has confirmed that Adventists hold a significantly more positive view regarding the potential access of non-Christians to salvation than most other conservative Protestants (Stark and Bainbridge 1985:58; here the statement “Being of the Hindu religion would definitely prevent salvation” is affirmed only by 17 percent of Adventists).

Still some discussion has been evoked during the last decade on the question as to what role the church should play in view of movements to Christ in contexts where these Jesus followers remain embedded in their respective traditional religions. The fact that several such movements exist in different non-Christian contexts, including quasi-Adventist segments (cf. Bauer 2005b and contributions to Bauer 2006 and 2007), demonstrates the need of further ecclesiological reflection with inspiration from the theology of religions. Among the fruit of this reflection has been the release of two denominational statements (GMIC 2003; GC-EC 2009) which express the desire for an alignment of such movements with the organized denomination while conceding that "transitional structures" are a reality.

At the basis of such deliberations is the question whether a more ecclesiocentric approach or a more kingdom-oriented view should be the point of departure of Adventist thinking on salvation and the religions. While these two should not be viewed as opposites, it is clear that they are distinct concepts and that God's kingdom is not immediately linked to the church, although the latter is an instrument of the kingdom (Johnston 2005). Thus Staples (2006 [1999]) is right in emphasizing that "Adventist ecclesiology is more functional than ontological," implying that Adventists believe the "remnant" has been called to do a particular work of proclamation but is not an exclusive vessel of mediating God's grace. God's Spirit is at work even beyond the church as an institution and God's Spirit may act even outside the Judeo-Christian tradition (cf. de Alwis 1982:297–299). The Adventist nonsacramental ecclesiology stresses the importance of the church's witness to God's saving work but refrains from limiting access to salvation to persons with a nominal church membership (cf. Sarcevic 2006:41–42).

### Inclusivism and Issues of Soteriology

With its pronounced but predominantly functional ecclesiology, it is also mandatory for an Adventist theology of religions to consider aspects of the inclusivist position. This position conceives the possibility or even the fact of divine revelation in some religions and therefore attributes salvific potential to them. At the same time, the inclusivist's own religion is considered superior; thus ultimately the other religions depend on it to reach completion. Together with exclusivism, the inclusivist view can, therefore, uphold the essential difference between Christianity and other faiths while evaluating the latter in a more positive light.

Although Adventist writers have not gone so far as to ascribe to particular elements in other religions actual salvific relevance, the evaluation of non-Christian systems of belief has been generally well-balanced. Dybdahl (2000:82) for instance emphasizes that a Christian “promise-fulfillment” outlook on Buddhism is more adequate than a “search and destroy” attitude. According to him, Adventists should approach this faith with an “attitude of learners willing to see good in Buddhism” (81; cf. also Insom 2008). This is a position that rejects a simplistic black-and-white scheme and sees both positive and destructive elements in religions, a perspective that is typically Adventist (cf. Rilloma 2003; Dybdahl 2004; Doss 2009).

Due to this balanced approach, Adventist authors do not idealize religions either; thus, certain types of religious activities and identities are depicted in a critical way. Folk religion and faiths with “animistic” and ancestor or spirit veneration components (Ncube 1988; Chikwekwe 1997; Almocera 2000; Bauer 2000) as well as folk Islam with its superstitious and magical elements (Twumasi 1996) are consistently rejected. At the same time, one meets an appreciation of at least some features of traditional religions such as their holism (Nwosu 1995) and elements pointing to a heritage connected with Judaism (Owusu-Mensa 1993; N'Getich 1996).

The most lively debate relevant to the inclusivist position has been going on regarding Islam during the last decade. While some Adventist scholars depict Islam mainly as a competitor to Christianity and a stumbling block to salvation for its adherents (Schantz 1993 and 2004; Coleman 2004), others...
recognize its monotheistic teaching as a framework in which spiritual growth and even genuine followership of Jesus is possible (Whitehouse 1998 and 2006; Lepke 2001; Carr 2002). Thus they assess Islam as a quasi-Old Testament paradigm. Again others stress certain ambiguities in Islam (Worschech 2002; Heinz and Heinz 2007; Diop 2008).

The Adventist assessment of Islam is of special interest when comparing it to the theological interpretation of contemporary Judaism. The last decade has seen a number of publications that stress the continuity of the Jewish and Adventist faiths (Doukhan 2002 and 2004; BRICOM 2003; AJFC 2005), and that counteract the theory that Israel has been rejected by God in the Christian dispensation. The differences between the Jewish and Muslim faiths must be duly recognized, not least the fact that one is pre-Christian while the other considers itself as post-Christian. Nevertheless, the Adventist treatment of the two, which takes their monotheistic basis into account, must be viewed as peculiar: Judaism and, at least partly, Islam, are regarded as special cases in the Adventist theological reflection. Soteriologically, this is a necessity either because salvation is viewed in a theocentric manner (which would be contrary to the christocentric Adventist approach) or because one sees potential to redefine the respective faith through biblical Christianity. The latter is happening in both cases in that models have been developed in which Christ becomes the focal point of new variants of the respective religion.

The Jewish and Muslim cases—i.e., theologies of specific religions—are important not only with regard to the differences in assessing the two, but also because they show the limits of a general theology of religions. Such a general theology presupposes that all non-Christian faiths should be called “religions” and be grouped together. The fact that Judaism is often removed from the debate due to its special relationship to Christianity indicates, however, that reality is more complex. Once one assigns Islam the role of another special case and continues to apply the principle of differentiation to other traditions, the whole endeavor splits into theologies of single religions.

This insight may be helpful in understanding the Adventist approach toward the religions. On the whole Adventist theologians see no soteriological value in religious traditions of any kind; at the same time, though, these traditions need not be a complete blockage for salvation. With such a dialectical stance, an Adventist approach to the faiths of the world would decline to give a comprehensive theological judgment on “the religions”; rather, it would preferably evaluate each religion and its elements in their own right (cf. Rice 1985:215).

This Adventist consideration of inclusivism can conclude, therefore, that the recognition of traces of divine revelation in some religions can indeed be derived from denominational tradition. A salvific potential in non-Christian faiths, however, would be denied. Adventist thinkers would reject the concept that other religions depend on Christianity to reach completion if this entailed some sacramental notion but they would accept it as far as “truth seeking” is concerned. Finally, the view that Christianity makes its adherents superior in some way does not fit in with the Adventist understanding of faith (cf. Rice 1985:215). Adventist theology stresses the importance of sharing access to salvation with others; therefore, the question is not one of superiority at all but of responsibility.

An Adventist Contribution: Missiological Universalism

A third position which is commonly discussed alongside exclusivism and inclusivism is the pluralist theology of religions. According to this theory, many religions are fully valid paths of salvation. Representatives of this pluralist thinking are to be distinguished from those who teach universal salvation, for the latter view includes even those in the divine therapy and restoration of the cosmos who reject particular or all religions. Nevertheless, the pluralist position is to be viewed as a further step on the continuum ranging between the radical exclusive and universalist extremes.

The model of such a one-dimensional continuum is certainly helpful in that it clarifies options on the basis of one tangible criterion: access to salvation through particular religious systems. The strengths of models, however, are often also their weaknesses. In this case, one dimensionality provides clarity but also represents a somewhat schematic approach to the relationship of religion and salvation. It presupposes that religions as such are salvific systems and eclipses the possibility that salvation is not dependent mainly upon institutional religious belonging.

Adventist approaches to the religions provide an alternative to this model. They clearly reject the pluralist position (for an exceptional and non-representative Adventist position, which appears to come close to pluralism, see Selmanovic 2009). The recent “Roadmap for Mission” document of the denomination’s General Conference, for instance, while granting that there is a “genuine quest for God in world religions,” stresses that mission is not merely to make “Hindus better Hindus, Muslims better Muslims, Buddhists better Buddhists, and so on” (GC-EC 2009). At the same time, Adventist theologies of religion incorporate one of the major concerns behind the
pluralist position (and behind inclusivism): an emphasis on God's abundant grace, which is not bound to institutional Christianity. Still Adventist thinking would emphasize that this grace is not inherent in other religious systems. This view is connected with the conviction that the gospel includes a global mission, which is why many of the Adventist works with theology of religions implications focus on mission (see, e.g., Roth 1983; Sundaraj 1992; Solomon 1994; Osindo 1996; Twumasi 1996; Babu 2000; Kilonzo 2001; Kujur 2001; Saputra 2002; Roy 2003; Gumbo 2008). In other words, at the basis of the reflection on the religions stands a need for both communicating God's plan of salvation and a positive view of people's potential access to his grace for all humans, whatever their affiliation to particular religious systems.

I suggest that this position be called “missiological universalism.” It stresses that God gives each person the chance to enter his kingdom, although none is taken in against his will, and the importance of sharing the good news of this kingdom with everyone. It takes seriously both the exclusivist stress on Christ's unique salvific role and the pluralist and universalist desire to see all people saved. Yet it also relativizes both: it emphasizes the greatness of God's grace, which is not bound to organizational ties and birth in auspicious historical circumstances in which people have a chance to hear about Christ—and the necessity of individual commitment, i.e., living faith.

A missiological universalism of this kind entails several crucial theological aspects. It is theologically founded on a subtle balance between ecclesiology and soteriology. Missiological universalism stresses that salvation is larger than the church but assigns the church the important task to spread the good news of this very salvation. God's Spirit is viewed as being at work beyond the borders of institutional Christianity, but non-Christian religions are not considered as vessels of grace. This also implies a theology of the world taking into account both eschatology and protology, i.e., two of the defining elements of Adventist theology. In this framework, some aspects of religions may be assessed as part of the human condition as created in the beginning while others must be evaluated as standing under God's judgment. Thus missiological universalism takes seriously, and maintains a fruitful tension between, general and special revelation.

While this kind of thinking is not limited to Adventists, it may be considered the typical Adventist position and as such a contribution to the theology of religions discourse. Several Adventist authors have actually observed that their thinking on the religions does not neatly fit in with the common categorizations (Schantz 1983:724; Oliver 1987:34–46; Beardsell 1990:34; Dybdahl 1999:59). They correctly note that the characteristic

Seventh-day Adventist stance combines traits of all the major positions, for it is (1) exclusivist regarding the salvific agency, which is only Christ, (2) inclusivist regarding the opportunity of salvation for adherents of any faith, and (3) it stresses God's intention of saving all humans.

Other Adventist scholars advocate something like a moderate exclusivist position while clearly rejecting radical exclusivism (Staples 1992:13; Bruinsma 2000:133-142; Rodriguez 2009). Yet a proposal has also been made to call the Adventist position “open exclusivism” in order to indicate that Adventists do not aim at adopting a fixed, inflexible theology of religions (Sarcevic 2006:41). Rather, they are open to God's actions in contexts and ways with which Christians are unfamiliar—in or in spite of particular cultures with their religious traditions. Such an open exclusivism is essentially synonymous with the missiological universalism charted above.

The open exclusivist / missiological universalist stance is intrinsically linked to a missional ecclesiology. Perhaps it is the Adventist genius to combine in the denominational tradition a rejection of sacramental notions of "church," thereby conceiving the church wholly as a mission agency, with a stress on individual responsibility as far as the relationship with transcendence is concerned. Therefore an Adventist theology of religions will not construe a neat separation between those who call themselves Christians and non-Christians but emphasize the search for truth and the need for a practiced faith, leaving the issue of salvation with God alone.

**Issues and Consequences**

This last section presents, in lieu of a conclusion, two issues arising from the Adventist theology of religions discourse which deserve closer attention: interreligious dialogue and the hermeneutics of non-Christian sacred scriptures. The latter implies consequences for theory, the former for praxis. Thus an Adventist theology of religions is not merely a result of denominational theologizing but does in turn influence the activities and thinking of the church.

**Dialogue**

The theology of religions and the engagement in interreligious dialogue are distinct but related discourses and fields of activity. Their relationship is shaped by the specific theological positions taken: a radical exclusivist persuasion, for instance, implies the tendency of viewing such dialoguing
as unnecessary, while a pluralist stance commonly welcomes dialogue as a replacement of mission.

A differentiated Adventist view as outlined above would follow another path. As its long engagement for religious liberty with its dialogical foundation has shown, the denominational tradition has not avoided constructive relationships with those belonging to non-Christian traditions. Moreover, on the basis of what may be called a “communicative theology,” a missional theology that views outreach, witnessing, and overcoming barriers between humans as paramount, the Adventist approach to the religions contains an intrinsically dialogical dimension. While listening may not be the first priority and the strongest ingredient in the traditional Adventist ways of approaching adherents of other religions, it is evident that proclamation is only possible for persons who are also ready to listen and learn which messages people are ready to receive (cf. the thinking behind the book Missions: A Two-Way Street [Dybdahl 1986]).

As far as dialogue practice is concerned, the denomination has made a number of positive experiences so far together with Muslims and Jews (AJFC 2005; Johnsson 2009). Thus the Adventist engagement in this field is comparable to the denominational experience in interchurch dialogue (cf. Höschele 2010) and in fact grew out of the organization dealing with it, the Council on Interchurch/Inter-religion Affairs. Clearly the necessity of interfaith dialogue is recognized by Adventists across the theological spectrum (Rilloma 2003; Davis and McDaniel 2000). A task that remains, however, is to develop a thoroughly reflected Adventist concept of dialogue. While there is much Christian literature on this theme in general, only one major study on dialogue has been done so far by an Adventist theologian (de Alwis 1982). It is telling that this study is not a treatment of dialogue as such but presents reflections on a meta-level—it discusses another Asian theologian’s view of dialogue, thus approaching the theme mainly in theory. De Alwis is to be credited for investigating the issue all the more considering that in school, and in theological training and correctly points out that each of these situations has different parameters to be taken into consideration. Yet he encourages the use of such scriptures as starting points to meet people where they are and to build upon what they treasure, basing this suggested method on several biblical examples where a similar procedure is employed.

Two denominational statements on mission approaches which were released during the last decade adopt this perspective (GMIC 2003 and GC-EC 2009 both call this “building bridges”) but emphasize the unique role of the Bible. According to them, “the nurture and spiritual growth of new believers” has to rest “on the basis of the Bible and its exclusive authority” (GMIC 2003 and GC-EC 2009) At the same time, the first document concedes that non-Christian sacred writings “may contain elements of truth that find their fullest and richest significance in the way of life found in the Bible.” Thus, the potential and the limitations of the use of non-Christian scripture is presented in a balanced manner, which corresponds to the Adventist missiological-universalist orientation.

Like the theology of religions in general and interfaith dialogue, the question of the Christian use of non-Christian scripture has been discussed extensively only in one Adventist publication so far (Maberly 2006 [1998]). Still, it should be viewed as a major issues connected with the theology of religions. Clifton Maberly, at the time director of the denominational Buddhism Religious Study Center, distinguishes the use of non-Christian scripture in polemics, apologetics, liturgy, Bible study groups, instruction in school, and in theological training and correctly points out that each of these situations has different parameters to be taken into consideration. Yet he encourages the use of such scriptures as starting points to meet people where they are and to build upon what they treasure, basing this suggested method on several biblical examples where a similar procedure is employed.

Hermeneutics

Interreligious dialogue, which lacks common holy scriptures except in the Christian-Jewish dialogue and, to a much lesser degree, in conversations with Muslims, raises a significant hermeneutical question for Christians: the way non-Christian sacred writings should be used. Many Adventists would probably not see a fundamental difference between interchurch and interreligious dialogues due to their inherited reservation towards Christian traditions of the “established church” type. However, at least intra-Protestant dialogues are clearly easier to handle because they can be based on the biblical scriptures, thereby excluding other sources of religious truth claims. In encountering people adhering to non-Christian religions, the situation is inversed; the dialogue partners can only agree to disagree on what should be considered authoritative for faith.

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Like the theology of religions in general and interfaith dialogue, the question of an appropriate use of extrabiblical sacred writings awaits a more detailed analysis. When done by Adventists, such an inquiry would presumably follow the lead of Jon Dybdahl’s reflections on “Doing theology in mission” (2005; 2006) with its model of dynamic biblical theologizing. Beyond the reflections presented here, such a comprehensive study would show that the theology of religions is of enormous importance even for fundamental theology, i.e., the very way in which Adventists conceive of understanding and reflecting on God.
Other Christian Works


Adventist Works


Conscience and Liberty. Published by the International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberty, 1973ff. (French and German editions; some years also in English, Portuguese, and Spanish).


Middle East Division of Seventh-day Adventists, ed. 1961. Institute of Studies Concerning the Adventist Work Among Islamic Peoples. Beirut, Lebanon: Middle East Division of Seventh-day Adventists.


