REDISCOVERING CHRISTIAN TRADITION: DIALOGUE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

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1. On Two Key Factors in Ecumenism and Theology

Tradition and dialogue are realities we encounter every day. Woven into the very fabric of our lives as creatures who exist because others exist, we engage in, wrestle with, or are absorbed into either of the two almost continually. In theology this double bond appears in an even more pronounced way: the major tool being our tongues, we can hardly escape dialoguing, while the technical term “tradition” is indispensable for describing the sources from which we create our discourse.

Yet tradition and dialogue appear to be a mismatched couple. It would be hard to find any critical voice on the latter: “dialogue” seems to be the epitome of the desirable whenever conflict plagues societies or groups. Tradition, by way of contrast, commonly receives more chequered credentials. Valued for providing security and for the cosy sense of community it comes with, it fell into disrepute centuries ago not only theologically (in the Reformation) but also in a categorical manner (in the Enlightenment). Besides, suspicion lingers that its conservative makeup actually contributes to the conflicts that dialogue then has to solve. When we mention the term, therefore, we often link it with a contrasting item: tradition “and modernity”; “vs. Scripture”; “or innovation.”

This presentation juxtaposes tradition and dialogue in a specific and less dichotomizing way: it asks how experiences of dialogue have impacted the appreciation of Christian tradition at large in the theological and doctrinal reflections of a particular denomination — the

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Seventh-day Adventists (SDA). With this perspective, the following analysis of the development of Adventist teaching becomes a case study of the dynamics of the dialogue-tradition nexus and, as such, an examination of what can be called "implicit ecumenicity." The approach taken is an interpretative one: major episodes in the history of Adventist theological thinking will be evaluated with the aim of identifying patterns of how these two forces have shaped the emerging theological discourse in this church.

Before we look at the Adventist story and the role that dialogue and tradition have played in its different stages, some preliminary reflection on these two terms is necessary. Tradition is so broad a term that ethnologists (whose major subject matter is the ensemble of traditions in a people group) hardly define it; as "an anthropological universal," its ubiquitous and constant presence reminds us that we can critique particular forms of it but never escape its grasp. Evidently tradition is so closely tied to human consciousness of self, group, and time that its absence would make us wonder if we are still the same species; this is why Jan Assmann thinks of it as an exemplary instance of "cultural memory." That religion is not only in need of tradition but that the two can be construed to be almost identical is well known; Christianity is just one instance where the emergence of both traditions and a concept of tradition can be particularly well traced because we have access to very early sources.

Attempts at presenting even a sketch of the major discussions on tradition in the history of the Christian Church would go beyond the scope of this paper; others have presented comprehensive accounts in a masterful way. What seems sensible, however, is to (1) refer to a few developments relevant to this presentation, (2) note the variety of perspectives on the theme, and (3) derive insights for an appropriate definition of "tradition." As Old Testament authors did not create a pertinent lexeme, the concept of "remembering" prefigured what is formulated in the New Testament with words that shape Christian parlance until today: parádoxos, some uses of parádoixos, at times in combination with παραλείπομαι, and parádeigma as the result or an aspect of parádoxis. The crucial insight regarding NT usage is that a clear rejection of traditions "of men" gives way to an entirely positive view of the gospel of Jesus Christ as the new and valid "tradition."

The same usage continues in the following centuries; however, later Church Fathers also tend to assume that most of their practices and beliefs are grounded in tradition.

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4 In Islam, for example, "tradition" is commonly translated as sunna (custom), i.e. the entirety of habits, directives, and norms derived from the life of Muhammad, or as hadith (report, story), i.e. the collections of sources where these customs are addressed.


6 Here the root παίω is crucial, but also the term παίζω (sign), which often appears with forms or derivatives of παίς. Later periods of Judaism developed a very distinct understanding of tradition linked to the term παίδες (manus - what is binding, derived from παίζω [binding, holding] – but cf. also παίδευμα [handing over, committing something to someone]). See Thesologische Rezeptionskunde (TRE), vol. 33, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, s.v. "Tradition III: Judentum", col. 701–705.

7 The term παράδοσις appears as an expression for the Christian faith in general in 2 Thess 3:6; similarly in the plural παράδοσεις in 2 Thess 2:15 – and with a different meaning of "instructions" in 1 Cor 11:2 (in the context of Paul's directives on women covering their head).

8 See, e.g., the introduction in Paul's instructions on the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:23), where he states, παρέδωκα ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου ὑμῖν ἡ παράδοσις ὑμῖν. Similarly in 1 Cor 15:3: παρέδωκα γιὰ ὑμῖν ὑμᾶς ἡ παράδοσις; cf. also Gal 1:12 (where Paul claims reception by revelation rather than from men) and Acts 16:5, where Paul and Silas are depicted as delivering the decisions of the apostles' council (παράδοσεις ἄνωθεν φωτοῦσεν τὰ δόγματα καὶ κεκριμένα στὰ ἄνωτα παραδοτά καὶ παραγενώμενα ἐν Ιερουσαλήμ). In Jude 3, the Christian faith is described as "once and for all entrusted" (θέτεις παράδοσιν) to the saints, for which believers are to contend: cf. also 2 Peter 2:21, where "the sacred command" is connected with παράδοσιν.

9 See 1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:12; 14, in each case, παράδοσις is combined with a form of φωτισμός.

10 Matt 15:23; 3:6 par adds ὑμῖν of παρέδωκα ἑνὸς (15:2) and τῶν ἀνθρώπων (Mk 7:8) to παράδοσις. Col 2:8 also adds τῶν ἀνθρώπων, and in Gal 1:14 Paul characterizes himself as γῇ τὸν παράδοσον τῶν ἀνθρώπων.
views — i.e. their traditions in the plural — are apostolic and therefore binding. It is against such later reinterpretations and abandoning practices associated with them that reform movements from the 12th century onward protested, and as is well known, Luther then also devised his christocentric theology on the basis of the tradition-critical scripture principle. Ever since the 16th century, the contraposition of Scripture and Tradition relates to the rather negative Protestant view of the latter, as opposed to the synthesis of Trent, which was modified but also partly confirmed in Dei Verbum during Vatican II. Both in fundamental theology and in the realm of ecumenism, these differing conceptions remain one of the major conundrums.

Of the many attempts at clarifying the concerns behind these differences, and at creating at least a common language that would enable proponents of various views of "tradition" to communicate, a report of the 1963 Faith and Order World Conference remains most useful. It distinguished five meanings of the term: (1) The Tradition (with a capital T), designating the "Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church." (2) With a small t, "tradition" as "the traditatory process." The plural "traditions" may mean either (3) "the diversity of forms of expression" or (4) confessional traditions, and (5) a "further sense" is "when we speak of cultural traditions." The Faith and Order list hints at a necessary, but oft-forgotten distinction between several meanings in traditio itself — the act or process of transmitting (tradere, actus tradendi), the content or empirical result, i.e. the transmitted (traditum), and the normative category of what is to be transmitted (the tradendum). While the process is clearly referred to in no. 2 above, tradition as tradita can refer to all the other categories, and when the question of what the tradendum is comes up, the difference of what belongs to the capitalized or the non-capitalized will be but one onerous step towards either consensus or agreement to disagree. Be that as it may, tradition in the following sections of this paper refers to all but the first — i.e. all except the most generally agreed upon content of the capital T variety (which evidently all Christian churches claim to preserve amidst what is peculiar to their belief and life).

This brings us to the question of dialogue. At a first glance, tradition and dialogue have little in common except fitting together like two puzzle pieces that complement each other: the "traditional" entails stability and authority whereas what is "dialogical" implies flexibility and negotiation. Yet this complementary nature is not merely a situation of opposition. Both are forms of communication, the first in a more vertical and diachronic manner (of "passing on" through time), the second in a horizontal, synchronic mode (of "sharing" in time).
Different from tradition, the definition of, and discussion about, dialogue does not suffer from a history of conflicting positions and assumptions. The word has become a key term in philosophy and in communication studies in the last two generations,\textsuperscript{18} and its importance for the social sciences is undisputed. Although its meaning has become much broader than διάλογος in antiquity, where the term meant (oral, face-to-face) conversation of various kinds,\textsuperscript{19} there is little in the fairly well-established canon of dialogue theorists and protagonists – Buber, Bakhtin, Gadamer, Freire, Bohm – that would cause contro-

based patterns. – Tradition incorporates what Blanke calls Authority Ranking (AR), the relational mode in which hierarchy is the primary principle of order: tradition is valid because of its authority and as it is embodied by authorities. At the same time it is of crucial importance for the relational mode of Community Sharing (CS), where the values of group unity and group solidarity are the key characteristic of defining relationships: tradition is important in this perspective because it enhances and preserves these values. AR-CS combinations are typical of traditional, conservative societies and of many religions, where security and belonging are valued by members. By way of contrast, dialogue is typical for the two relational modes called Equality Matching (EM) and Market Pricing (MP). MP could also be called “negotiation relationship”; it is a pragmatic approach to the interests of those involved and aims at reaching contractual agreements; in the ecumenical sphere, this would imply, for instance, a consensus text. EM is derived from the concept of strict equitability, distributive justice; in the context of dialogue, this would mean a discussion at eye level, where attempts at domination are consciously excluded. The EM-MP combination is typical of pluralistic societies, i.e. in the interaction of groups that differ in commitments but want to live together peacefully.\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Rob Anderson – Leslie A. Baxter – Kenneth N. Cissna (eds.), Dialogue: Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies, Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2004. From communication studies, the concept of dialogue has also migrated into computer science (see, e.g., Laila Dybkjar – Wolfgang Minker, Recent Trends in Discourse and Dialogue (Text, Speech and Language Technology 39), Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media, 2008.\textsuperscript{19} According to Geoffrey Rockwell, even in philosophical dialogue it was the oral performance which made it “dialogue”; see the discussion in his comprehensive treatise Defining Dialogue from Socrates to the Internet, Amherst: Humanity, 2003, 43–44. Here he refers to Aristotle's Poetics, 1447a–b, where Aristotle does not use διάλογος even for Socratic conversations and argues that there is no word for the genre which, today, we would call (written) dialogues. Moreover, as Victorio Hösle, Der philosophische Dialog: Eine Poetik und Hermeneutik, Munich: Beck, 2006, 48, notes, “all of antiquity does not know of a terminological difference between conversation and dialogue.”

versy among their disciples;\textsuperscript{20} after all, dialogue is about trying to enhance mutual understanding.\textsuperscript{21}

The theological and ecumenical perception and reception of the theme is somewhat curious. On the one hand, dialogicity in matters of faith is largely taken for granted; nevertheless, the term as such has not entered the standard theological terminology. In the realm of ecumenism, dialogue is one of the major tools for interchurch encounter, so much so that at times all instances of interdenominational relationships are labelled “dialogue.” Voluminous tomes have been produced to document doctrinal discussions and dogmatic convergence or consensus in past decades,\textsuperscript{22} yet most of the research focuses on the content, while insights on dialogue dynamics as such have been treated only marginally so far, and a comprehensive critical discussion of the potential, limitations, and variety of interchurch dialogues is not extant to date.\textsuperscript{23}

One reason for this state of affairs may be that underneath the clarity regarding dialogue as communicative interaction in conversation lies such a variety of instances that, ultimately, dialogue seems to happen everywhere and all the time. In fact, total monologue hardly exists:

\textsuperscript{20} See John Stewart – Karen E. Zediker – Laura Black, “Relationships among Philosophies of Dialogue”, in: Anderson – Baxter – Cissna (eds.), Dialogue, 21–38. These authors also refer to theorists of dialogue whose contribution should not be overlooked but who rank second in importance: Jürgen Habermas, Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas; Carl Rogers. While these are cited frequently, dialogue does not play such a crucial role in their work.


\textsuperscript{23} The situation in interfaith (inter-religious) dialogue is different because of other goals pursued in that context: without the idea of visible unity, interfaith dialogue can be practiced in a much more diverse and open-ended manner. Cf. the wide-ranging collection Catherine Cornile (ed.), The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. For a recent study with a focus on dynamics in an atypical bilateral dialogue, see Jelle Creemers, Theological Dialogue with Classical Pentecostals: Challenges and Opportunities, London / New York: Bloomsbury / T&T Clark, 2015.
dialogical exchange is the rule. It takes place in a host of spaces, and one may distinguish at least five levels: (1) inner dialogue, (2) face-to-face conversation, (3) interaction of individuals in a larger time or space framework (e.g. a protracted discussion in a newspaper), (4) exchange on various larger levels (e.g. between organizations or groups), and, finally (5) between cultures (or, I would add, between other entities beyond the level of organization, such as religions). In this paper, I use the term in a broad sense, i.e. in all but the first meaning.

2. Adventist Theology Facing Dialogue and Tradition

The short case study on the dialogue-tradition nexus in this paper is taken from the development of Adventist theology. The denomination behind the theo- logical thinking presented here emerged in a context where the disinclination both to dialoguing with other Christian movements and to valuing the larger Christian tradition seemed to be the rule rather than the exception. The common pattern among what have been called “democratic” churches in 19th century America was an appeal to popular sentiments such as revivalism, religious egalitarianism, pragmatism, biblicism, and common sense epistemology. In this context, the religious heritage of distant centuries seemed of minor importance at best and a grand deception at worst, the very notion of

a Christian consensus in the first four or five hundred years seemed preposterous. With the notorious “Bible as the only creed” slogan and their disdain for traditional Christianity, many of these movements made the very rejection of tradition the platform for their religious operations.

Adventists were particularly well-known for their anti-tradition stance and continue to cultivate little regard for the role of tradition in their theology until the present. The desire to return to the

have inherited from their ancestors were actually invented recently. See the collection of essays on historical examples in Scotland, Wales, Britain, India, Africa, and Europe in Eric Hobbsawm – Terence Ranger (eds.), The Invention of Tradition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, especially Hobbsawm’s introduction, “Inventing Tradition,” pp. 1–14.

29 Such is as visible in the famous formulation of Vincent of Lérins, “quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditur est” (Commonitory II.3; cf. II.6, where he appeals, again, to “universalitas,” “antiquity” and “consent” as criteria but adds, “we adhere to the consentient definitions and determinations of all, or at the least of almost all priests and doctors.” Here consent becomes a majoritarian perspective rather than a true “ab omnibus.” For a comprehensive discussion of the “consensus quinquese æcularis” concept, see Andreas Merkt, Das Patristische Prinzip: Eine Studie zur theologischen Redennteth der Kirchenvater, Leiden: Brill, 2001.

30 No published study on Adventists’ view on tradition is extant to date. However, even a cursory overview of the use of the term (both singular and plural) in the writings of Ellen White (the most influential author) and of other early writers demonstrates that almost without any exception, the word is used for what is undesirable, opposed to Scripture, in need of reform, or connected with a state of apostasy. A search of the CD-ROM Ellen G. White Writings: Comprehensive Research Edition, Silver Spring: Ellen G. White Estate, 2008, yields 411 + 729 (sing/pl.) hits in her published writings (among which some are duplicates because of repeated publication of materials). A similar picture is found in the earliest Seventh-day Adventist church paper, Review and Herald (RH). A few examples of early articles, which are consistently unfavourable to tradition: John N. Andrews, “Tradition”, RH, October 10, 1854, 69–70; Castle Churchill, “Traditions of Men”, RH, December 16, 1858, 30; E. Goodrich. “History – Mosheim’s Testimony”, RH, March 5, 1867, 148–149; William Penniman, “Is Tradition of More Authority than the Word of God?”, RH, February 22, 1870, 79; D. T. Bourdeau, “Protestantism”, RH, March 4, 1875, 73–74.

31 Apparently the only two significant Adventist studies on tradition so far (rather than studies on Adventist tradition or on SDA views on tradition, which are extant to date) are Kwabena Donkor, “Tradition as a Viable Option for Protestant Theology: The Vincentian Method of Thomas C. Oden”, PhD diss., Andrews University, 2001, and, by the same author, “The Role of Tradition in Modern and Contemporary Theology: Mediating Epistemic Divides”, Andrews University Seminary Studies 41 (2003), 185–197. The article also reflects the critical Adventist general view of “tradition.” The absence of a discussion on tradition both in the significant Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology (ed. by Rauli Dederen), Hagerstown: Review
original faith of the apostolic age was, of course, a peculiar tradition itself: they had inherited it from the Restorationist Christian Connection movement, which had received this heritage themselves from Anabaptists, Puritans, and Calvinists. The Adventist eschatological radicalism intensified this perspective, and their sabbatarian convictions symbolized their seriousness of standing aloof from almost all other believers if their interpretation of pristine Christianity clashed with conventions that had hardly been disputed for more than a millennium. At the same time, the Adventist movement's growth into a church organization necessitated coming to grips with questions (practical and theological alike) that seemed unnecessary even to ask in the earliest period of intense apocalypticism. Thus developed a differentiated picture of tradition, and it is the central thesis of this section that this differentiation was fostered mainly by various forms of dialogue. Twelve examples will follow.

1. Establishing Tradition: Dialogical Beginnings. There is no deconstruction without reconstruction. An old theological house may be torn down; but whoever engages in this demolition work will by necessity seek shelter at some other dwelling place. The earliest Adventists—Millerite revivalists—came from various theological backgrounds; the beginnings of their “ecumenical” movement must be understood as the attempt at constructing theology in a highly contextual mode by dialogue with all those who were united on a very few points of faith. It is this exchange of denominationally divided believers that created a novel tradition.

2. Modifying Tradition: Renewed Study of Scripture. Each Christian church lays emphasis on certain elements in Scripture in an eclectic manner. The period when Seventh-day Adventist “distinctive doctrines” were hammered out from the remains of the Millerite revival, i.e. the years 1845–1851, saw the movement's earliest protagonists dialogue with the earliest Christians—the biblical writers—in a manner that allowed them to hear new accents. Thus certain elements of their Christian heritage received more attention than others in this formative period. This did not imply a total departure from earlier conventions, but led to a reconfigured, modified edifice of beliefs.

3. Adopting Tradition: Sorted-out Puritanism. Even the most tradition-critical movement judges alternative systems of belief on the basis of shared assumptions; a rejection of tradition in its entirety is almost impossible. Early Seventh-day Adventists felt that their convictions summarized Christian truth in the most accurate manner; at the same time, almost all of their unique teachings had already been promoted at least by some of the Puritans in earlier centuries: an emphasis on Christ's ministry in a heavenly sanctuary. Saturday sabbatarianism, the non-immortality of the soul, a historicist approach to prophecy,


32 Two of the three main founders of the denomination, James White and Joseph Bates, came from a Connecticuttarian background; the third, Ellen White, had been a Methodist.

33 The anti-tradition tradition was already rooted in the Westminster Confession, which asserted, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men” (WCF:6).

34 Everett N. Dick, William Miller and the Advent Crisis, 1831–1844, Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1994, 166, sound that of 174 Millerite Adventist preachers with an recognizable religious background, 44 % were Methodists, 27 % Baptists, 9 % Congregationalists, 8 % were from the Christians movement, and 7 % Presbyterians. However, the Christians' input was relatively strong among the leadership:

of the 19 Millerite leaders, four were Baptists (including Miller himself), six were Methodists, and five belonged to the Christians, including the main organizer in the movement, Joshua V. Himes; see David T. Arthur, “‘Come out of Babylon’: A Study of Millerite Separatism and Denominationalism, 1840–1865”, Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1970, 14.

35 For an in-depth analysis of this period and a detailed account of the dynamics leading to the formation of a distinct movement, see Merita D. Burt, “The Historical Background, Interconnected Development, and Integration of the Doctrines of the Sanctuary, the Sabbath, and Ellen G. White’s Role in Sabbatarian Adventism from 1844 to 1849”, Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 2002.

36 They called their distinctive teachings “present truth” with reference to 2 Peter 1:12; even the earliest (pre-denominational), 1849–1850 regular publication bore this name. For an insightful discussion of this term in the context of the evolution of Adventist theological thinking, see Rolf J. Pöhler, “Change in Seventh-Day Adventist Theology: A Study of the Problem of Doctrinal Development”, Th.D. diss., Andrews University, 1995, pp. 351–358.
and a premillennial eschatology. Hence they unwittingly continued the Puritan tradition by unconsciously dialoguing with those who had bequeathed it to them — although they gave it a unique and new overall shape.

4. Tracing Tradition: The Discovery of Antecedents. The most well-known Adventist peculiarity, the keeping of the Saturday Sabbath, provides an example of another manner of dialoguing with the Christian Other: both the denomination’s first major theologian, John N. Andrews, and its major 19th century missionary (who later turned into the most important European SDA heretic), Ludwig Richard Conradi, published voluminous books on the history of sabbatarianism. By discovering an abundance of like-minded believers throughout the history of Christianity, these early Adventist thought leaders realized that they were actually not isolated partisans but continued a much larger heritage.

5. Confirming Tradition: The First Conversation Attempts. The first instance of a deliberate communicative exchange with another Christian denomination over a significant timespan (1870–1879) was achieved by Seventh-day Adventists when they drew closer to Seventh Day Baptists, their historical progenitors and only significant sabbatarian contemporaries. The full recognition of another body of Christians as fellow believers, and of their church as an instrument of God, was a first in their growing consciousness of Christianity at large. In this case, such a development was, of course, easier than in others: by confirming part of their own traditio — the Sabbath doctrine with the crucial role that it played for them — their Baptist soul-mates were a more likely mirror than non-sabbatarians. Yet again this process meant opening up to a larger world with some degree of variety, for essentially Adventists also mostly confirmed Seventh Day Baptists’ tradition.

6. Absorbing Tradition: The Reconstruction of Soteriology. In the late 1880s, one generation after organizing Adventism as a Christian denomination, the movement went through a serious crisis. Adventists had largely adopted a semi-Pelagian soteriology through the channels of their Christian Connection forebears. A younger generation of leaders attempted to steer Adventist theology into a more typically Protestant direction, which at the time meant shaping it according to the contemporary Holiness Movement. Two young theologians in particular, Ellet J. Waggoner and Alonzo T. Jones, succeeded in promoting their conclusions with regard to the centrality of grace and faith, slowly moved away from the biblicist “proof-text” approach with which the denomination was tickled at the time, and won the support of Ellen White, the denomination’s spiritual mother figure. Waggoner’s publications of the period demonstrate that his study of Protestant authors contributed to his move in the direction of Reformation thought.

7. Reinventing Tradition: The Resumption of Trinitarian Discourse. With Adventists’ early anti-tradition stance came also a non-trinitarian position advocated by the overwhelming majority of denominational

37 Bryan W. Ball, The English Connection: The Puritan Roots of Seventh-Day Adventist Belief, Cambridge: Clarke, 1981, provides ample documentation for each of these and a few other Adventist ideas occurring in the thought of major Puritans.


40 An interpretative account is found in Stefan Höschele, “Interchurch Relations in Seventh-Day Adventist History: A Study in Ecumenics”, Habilitation thesis, Charles University, Prague, 2016, 147–159.

41 The discussion was about what was then called “righteousness by faith” — a christocentric approach to justification and sanctification as opposed to former legalistic tendencies. For a comprehensive account of the period and its major event, the 1888 General Conference Session at Minneapolis, see Richard W. Schwartz — Floyd Greenleaf, Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Nampa: Pacific Press, 2000, 175–188 (chapter 12, “Righteousness by Faith: Minneapolis and Its Aftermath”).


43 Noteworthy (although essentially forgotten) is his book Fathers of the Catholic Church: A Brief Examination of the “Falling Away” of the Church in the First Three Centuries, Oakland: Pacific Press, 1888 (392 pp.). Here Waggoner applied the typical Protestant anti-tradition approach of the time to early church history; at the same time, he used Protestant literature extensively, thus becoming acquainted with discussions that were going on outside his denominational horizon.
leaders. It is, again, the background of the contemporary Holiness-Methodist sphere that can explain the slow Adventist shift to trinitarianism: in the 1890s, shortly after moving closer to other Protestants soteriologically, the personality of the Holy Spirit became a topic dear to Ellen White, and soon trinitarian language began to appear in her writings. In this context dialogue, with Christians outside their own confines took place only in a rather general and limited manner; however, its result in terms of arriving at conclusions akin to traditional expressions of the trinitarian dogma was certainly significant.

For 19th century Adventists, the absence of a creed or confession of faith was emblematic of their dismissal of tradition. They were convinced that their beliefs came straight from the Bible and, therefore, did not need “human” formulations. This creedless state, however, created a communicative challenge: how would they convey the content of their faith, and dialogue with the world around if no authoritative point of reference existed? It is in the early 1930s that missionaries’ requests from Africa led to the formulation of a first set of 22 “Fundamental Beliefs”, while this statement was not intended to be understood in a credal manner, it clearly constituted an analogy to similar texts in the Protestant tradition, and incorporated the main elements of Christian orthodoxy.

The Fundamental Beliefs proved helpful in the first major (but unofficial) dialogue experience that the denomination underwent. In the 1950s, a series of doctrinal discussions with leading representatives of the Evangelical Movement in North America led to the first full-length monograph of Adventist theology written with a general public in mind. Denominational leaders actively pursued a course of repositioning their church into the Evangelical camp. This created quite a controversy both among Evangelicals and Seventh-day Adventists; among the latter, particularly over detail questions of Christology.

However, the fact that the church was able to adjust its doctrinal self-expression to conversation partners demonstrated that at least some aspects of tradition are so malleable that dialogue plays a major role in translating them into contextual theological pronouncements.

10. Encountering the Traditions: The WCC Conversations.
Similar dynamics can be seen in a seven-year series of conversations with representatives from the World Council of Churches in the 1960s and early 1970s. Multilateral dialogue allows participants to encounter a diversity of traditions, personified in the conversation partners who represent them. In this case, the significance for Adventist church leaders was that they were able to relate, as a group, to a mixed Christian team in a brotherly manner. Simultaneously, they were able to experience the way the Ecumenical Movement balances the unifying capital T Tradition with the variety of traditions it encompasses.


45 Ibid., 204–220 (chapter 14, entitled “Ellen White’s Role in the Trinity Debate”) and 221–231 (Supplement to ch. 14: “Ellen White on the Trinity: The Basic Primary Documents”). The authors hold that Ellen White’s view remained slightly different from the Christian mainstream.

46 One significant but rarely noted element in this story of change is the publication of a non-Adventist tract on the question in the same period. While it contained criticism regarding speculative elements in trinitarianism and stressed "The Subordination of Christ" (title was its original title), the position it suggested was essentially a trinitarian teaching that largely avoids philosophical concepts not derived from biblical statements. See Samuel T. Spear, The Bible Doctrine of the Trinity (Bible Student’s Library, no. 90), Oakland: Pacific Press, 1892 (originally published in a newspaper: New York Independent, November 14, 1889).

47 On the general non-credible self-conceptualization of the “democratic” churches during that period, see Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity, 162–167, 179–183.

48 From 1931 onward, they were published in the Seventh-Day Adventist Yearbook (1931 edition: Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1931, 377–380). In 1980, a completely reworked version was voted by the denomination’s General Conference.

49 The full title of this book, which is commonly called Questions on Doctrine (or QOD), is Seventh-Day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine: An Explanation of Certain Major Aspects of Seventh-Day Adventist Belief Prepared by a Representative Group of Seventh-day Adventist Leaders, Bible Teachers, and Editors, Washington, D.C.; Review and Herald, 1957.

50 See the account in Ihyeok Nam, "Reactions to the Seventh-Day Adventist Evangelical Conferences and Questions on Doctrine," 1955–1971. Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 2005. The main point of contention was the difference between the prelapsarian and postlapsarian views of Christ’s human nature.

51 There is no major published account on this dialogue so far. A collection of related documents is So Much in Common: Documents of Interest in the Conversations Between the World Council of Churches and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church,
11. Limits of Tradition: Abortive Talk with Sabbatarians. The SDA-WCC dialogues are particularly striking in contrast to dialogue attempts in the 1980s and 1990s, when several meetings with other sabbatarian denominations essentially failed.52 The insight that shared convictions and practices such as those connected with the weekly day of rest do not automatically provide a platform for convergence was somewhat surprising to Adventists. However, this experimental approach to those who seemed closest to them actually sheds light on the limits of tradition: similarities on the theological surface may at times conceal more deep-seated divergence.

12. Deliberating Tradition: Dialoguing with World Christian Communions. Various full-fledged bilateral dialogues from the 1990s onward, notably with the Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and several Evangelical and Free Church groups53 indicate that one and a half centuries had brought Seventh-day Adventists full circle. The great-grandchildren of the interdenominational revival that had turned into an anti-tradition movement were now engaging in conversation with many of the major Christian communions54 in a search for a common understanding of the Tradition and a reflection on the diverse extant traditions, including one’s own.55 Such deliberations combined the virtues of both valuing what was received from one’s spiritual forebears and openness for the workings of the Spirit wherever he blows.

This outline of instances in which the interface of dialogue and tradition played a role in the development of Adventist theology makes no pretense of completeness; it could be complemented with other cases where tradition was ignored, unconsciously inherited, revived, adapted, or shared.56 Yet because a balanced concept of the traditio and tradenda was not developed in the denomination, the deliberate acceptance of tradition, a conscious negotiation about it or an intentional accentuation of certain elements remained a difficult task. Against this background, the development of a differentiated tradition model by Adventist theologians would certainly be a step forward. Beyond the 1963 Faith & Order categories, such a model could draw for instance on Martin Chemnitz, one of the leading Lutheran theologians after the death of Luther and Melanchthon.57 Chemnitz developed a critical

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52 A short account of 20th century dialogue attempts with Seventh Day Baptists, the Church of God (Seventh Day), the Assemblies of Yahweh, the United Church of God, and the Worldwide Church of God is found in ibid., 326–330.
53 Depending on what is to be counted as a real dialogue, about nine such dialogues took place from the 1980s onward: for an overview, see Stefan Höschle, “Adventistische Missionskonfessionelle Dialoge”, Spes Christiana 21 (2010), 139–154.
54 It is noteworthy that some attempts at dialogue have not realized so far or only reached a preliminary stage. Attempts at initiating conversations with various Orthodox churches did not mature, presumably because of the minor significance of Adventists for most Orthodox. Exploratory conversations with representatives of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity were relatively short-lived (2000–2002) and are fraught with theological difficulty. Many Pentecostal groups have even less experience and interest in dialogue than Adventists, and a traditional SDA scepticism regarding Pentecostal/Charismatic revivalism makes the distance to these movements relatively great.
55 It is significant that the most comprehensive report of a bilateral dialogue with Adventist participation so far – the LWF-SDA dialogue – contains a formulation that suggests an analogy between the Lutheran “creedal and confessional documents” which are “for Lutherans derived norms of faith (norma normativa)”, and writings of Ellen G. White, which “represent for Adventists an authority which is derived from Scripture and which is to be tested by Scripture” (Lutherans and Adventists in Convention: Report and Papers Presented 1994–1998, Silver Spring: General Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists / Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2000, 22).
56 Some examples: (a) Ignoring tradition typically happened as a consequence of rejecting it; this, however, would imply that Adventists later had to face it again, as in the question of women’s ordination, which has been discussed since the 1970s. (b) Interiting Reformation tradition is a claim that Adventists have made more or less explicitly for generations, even though they are much more the heirs of Arminians and Wesleyan than of Luther and Calvin (cf. the forthcoming symposium proceedings volume Rolf Pöhlker (ed.), Perceptions of the Protestant Reformation in Seventh-Day Adventism, Friedensau: Institute of Adventist Studies, 2017). (c) Reviving tradition happened in the SDA footwashing ceremony before the Lord’s Supper. (d) Adapting tradition is visible in the way the denominational Church Manual is supplemented with an appendix in various regions of the world, where elements of incorporation are added to what is considered normative for the denomination worldwide.
57 Together with Jakob Andrea (from Tübingen), Chemnitz (who represented Lower Saxony) was the main contributor to the Formula of Concord. A few years earlier, he had written his well-known critique of Trent. Examen decretorum Concilii Tridentini, vols. 1 and 2, [Frankfurt a. M.:] Feierabed & Huder, 1566. An English version of the section on tradition in the Examen was published already in the 16th century: A discoverie and bavery of the gret foyt of vnwriten traditions: otherwise, on
overview of eight tradition types and thus demonstrated that Lutherans
support seven of them,\footnote{2} objecting only to one type of "tradition" —
practices and teachings that clearly contradict the Scriptures.\footnote{3}

All in all, the dialogical forces that shaped the SDA interaction with
Christian tradition at large led to a surprising variety of results. The
discoveries of dialogue helped produce a considerably differentiated
picture: in spite of a generally negative rhetoric regarding tradition, its
de facto roles depended on a whole set of issues. This is significant also
because of the parallel to Adventists' largely disaffirming pronounce-
ments on ecumenism coupled with a variety of options in interchurch
relations that the denomination pursued actively. This brings us to a
last part of this paper, which attempts to draw conclusions from the
interplay of dialogue and tradition for ecumenical theology in general.

\footnote{2} Examination of the Counsell of Trent, touching the decree of Traditions. Done by
Martinos Chemnitzus in Latine, and translated into Englishse by R[obert] V[aas],

\footnote{3} Chemnitz distinguished the following classes of tradition to be supported (in the 1566
version of his Examen: pp. 296–425 / De Traditio[nibus]): (1) the oral preaching of the
gospel converted into writing ("ex quaese Christus & Apostoli uiau uoce tradiderant,
quae postea ab Evangelistis & Apostolis litteris consignata sunt"; 300 in the Latin
version); (2) the transmission of Scripture ("libri Scripturae sacrae ... fideliter ad
posterum transmissi, nobisque quasi per manus trutit sui"; 308); (3) the apostolic
teaching summarized in the apostolic symbola; (4) correct interpretation of Scripture
against heretics; (5) the dogmas of the patristic period ("quoi Patres aliquando ita
uocant illa dogmata, quae non totius litteris & syllabis in scriptura poutuntur, sed
bona, certa, firma & manifesta ratificacione, ex perspicuis Scripturae testimonii
colliguntur": 335–336). (6) The consensus of the Church Fathers; (7) rites and habits
("ritus" and "consuetudines" — not "dogmata fidei"), which do not stem from Script-
ture, but do not contradict it and are thought to have been practiced since the time of
the apostles (362).

\footnote{4} The Examen strongly criticized what Chemnitz identified as an eighth type: traditions
which the "papists" ("Pontifici") demand to be accepted but which "can be proven by no
witness of Scripture" (ibid., 370; wrongly numbered as p. 470 in the 1566 original).
His categorization implied a strategic argument of demonstrating that Lutherans were
supportive of almost all (i.e. seven) Christian tradition types and rejected only this
last one.

3. Ecumenical Theology as Dialogical Inquiry into Christian
Tradition

The material presented here demonstrates that dialogue and questions
of tradition are frequently insolubly linked and that this nexus plays a
crucial role in theological development. How theologies of particular
communities evolve is, of course, a complex matter: internal develop-
ments, contextual factors, and sociological dynamics\footnote{5} go alongside
the exchange with other faith communities and the unfolding of tradi-
tions — both those peculiar to an actual church and those that many
churches cultivate. Yet the Adventist story also illustrates that several
kinds of dialogue can play a part; for them it went hand in hand with
all of the major steps in theological advance. As the denomination's
tradition widened and its representatives learnt to appreciate aspects of
the broader Christian tradition, Adventists developed an unconsciously
but increasingly definite implicit ecumenicity. By way of modifying a
Spanish proverb, one might formulate, "Tell me with whom you talk,
and I will tell you who you are."\footnote{6}

The Adventists' path of theological thinking was interpreted by the
denomination's leading church historian as constituting, in part, a
search for "what is Christian."\footnote{7} I would argue that this interpreta-
tion is actually valid for these entire journeys — and, thus, includes the
rediscovery of Christian tradition as a major theme from the begin-
ing.\footnote{8} In spite of the common SDA anti-tradition rhetoric and their

\footnote{5} In his comprehensive dissertation ("Change in Seventh-Day Adventist Theology",
pp. 292–301), Rolf Pohler discusses some of these factors: he summarizes them under
the headings "prophetic disconfirmation," "church growth and internationalization,"
and "social adaptation and internationalization." In this context, it is also helpful
to remember that all elements of the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Scripture,
tradition, experience, and reason) play a role — and that capital T Tradition includes
Scripture and tradition while dialogue relates to all four elements.

\footnote{6} The Spanish proverb actually says, "Tell me with whom you walk, and I will tell you
who you are" ("Dime con quien andas y te diré quien eres").

\footnote{7} George R. Knight characterized the period between 1885 and 1919 as the generation
in which the question "What is Christian In Adventism?" was central. See the title
of chapter five in his book A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-Day

\footnote{8} Knight characterizes the period between 1844 and 1885 with the question "What
is Adventist in Adventism?" (55–89), thus describing the formative period of the
denomination. However, this description might well be applied to the 1840s and
long-running hesitancy to engage in formal dialogues, their practices of borrowing and conversing in various ways betray an increasingly dynamic view of their general Christian heritage. If they could begin to interpret their own tradition as a contribution to Christianity in general, the ecumenicity implied in some of their actions would, indeed, become more explicit.

How, then, do tradition and dialogue relate? Tradition is paradoxical: on the surface, it is about continuity. Yet in a changing world, what remains “same” inadvertently changes as well — in the way it is understood by the context. Moreover, traditions hardly ever remain exactly the same. Minor modifications, subtle shifts in emphasis and the creation of meanings in a tradition that it did not have from the outset are the rule rather than the exception. In other words, tradition is frequently more flexible than it seems; its significance is only properly appreciated as it is interpreted, which in itself is a dialogical exercise.

Likewise, dialogue (especially in the ecumenical realm) depends on the existence of traditions among the discussion partners; what would be the point of conversations in which no diversity of view occurs at all? Concise definitions of dialogue therefore incorporate the notion of contrast: e.g., “communication between simultaneous differences” or 1850s only, or one may modify it to read “What is unusual in Adventism?” This question regarding the movement’s peculiarity implies the manner how its representatives interpreted Christianity, thus indirectly putting, again, to the issue of Christian tradition. The 1919–1950 period is titled “What is Fundamentalism in Adventism?” by Knight (128–159), and the years since 1950 “Adventism in Theological Tension” (160–197). Both chapters accurately analyse how the denominational thought leaders of the time situated themselves in the whole of Christianity, thus making their themes further variations of “what is Christian.”

One might interpret this setup of constant sceptical attitude coupled with clandestine borrowing and actual conversation as a kind of “inverted florilegium” approach. Jaroslav Pelikan recalls his time as a student, when he first studied Byzantine florilegia and searched in vain for the compilers’ own words in them — until several Czech and Russian Byzantinists initiated him into the art of comprehending this genre of repeating tradition in peculiar ways, of building a mosaic that speaks through its overall composition and in contrast to other such mosaics (see Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, 73–75). As it were, Adventists chose the opposite approach: by consistently negating (instead of citing) tradition, continuity with their own traditional outlook was assured, which in turn allowed them to choose and emphasize a variety of traditions that fit in with their general religious perspective.

64 Rockwell, *Defining Dialogue*, 169; he borrowed the structure of this definition from Bakhtin’s fashion of defining a novel because Bakhtin viewed Socratic dialogue as the precursor of the novel: “The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types ... and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (ibid., 169, citing Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, 262).


69 Ibid., 55.

70 Ibid.
On the basis of these considerations, Ecumenical Theology has a task that can be formulated in a rather straightforward manner — and which, nevertheless, entails an enormous challenge: it is a dialogical inquiry into the Christian tradition. The simplicity of this description lies in the exclusion of exclusivity in terms of traditions to be tapped; the whole breadth of the traditio is to be taken seriously and to be included in the conversation when we conceive of God-talk in a non-parochial manner. The challenge presents itself in the same inclusivity and its consequences: if everything is to be addressed, all is subject to debate — here the distinction between the traditio and the tradenda becomes significant.

Since dialogue is the “normal and original” state of affairs in human conversation, its importance points to both the past and the future. Discussing tradition always implies weighing what is of lasting and universal significance and what is of more limited weight, arising of concerns that no longer need to determine our faith discourse. Every theology is contextual and cannot, therefore, claim global authority; yet even where far-reaching truth-claims are made, where awareness or appreciation of the Christian Other seems to be lacking or is ideologically reduced to a minimum, as was the case for some time among the earliest Adventists, an ecumenical substance and infrastructure will subsist. There is no theology that can claim its subject matter and the sources that it utilizes just for one’s own; it will always incorporate elements of diverse or even divergent traditions. In this sense, whether more explicitly or in a more subtle, latent way — ecumenicity (i.e. the interface of dialogue and tradition) is a characteristic of all theological inquiry.

**Summary:** Tradition and dialogue seem to be everywhere in theology, even though these two features of the Christian faith are frequently perceived as diverging forces. This article provides a case study of how Seventh-day Adventist theology has interacted with the larger Christian tradition through dialogical experiences. It identifies a multiplicity of instances and patterns of how tradition and dialogue shape theological discourses and concludes that ecumenical theology is essentially a dialogical inquiry into the Christian tradition.

**Keywords:** Tradition; dialogue; Seventh-day Adventists; ecumenical theology.

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71 This is a perspective similar to the one provided by Ivana Noble, *Tracking God: An Ecumenical Fundamental Theology*, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010, xiii. She explains her approach to ecumenical theology as “the studying of Christian traditions in their plurality as our common heritage.”
