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The Adventist World-View:
A Ground to Stand, A Life to Live

Part I

"Give me a place to stand, I will move the earth." So said Archimedes. Since then for many philosophers, scientists, and theoreticians of all persuasions logic and reason, argument and rationality, experiments and verifiability have become the sole ground to stand, eroding in the process the validity of faith and belief in the pursuit of life and learning. This is not a new phenomenon to those who take the biblical view of life seriously, for the battle between reason and faith, between the mind and the heart are as old as the Serpent's attempt to "open" the eyes of Eve, and as complicated as the audacity of the deluge generation to indulge in scientific precision and architectural finesse in building an ark but refuse to believe in the possibility of rain, flood or redemption.

In the on-going battle between faith and reason, some Christians have taken refuge in Paul's counsel, "See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy" (Col. 2:8),[1] and tend to harbor an unnatural fear toward philosophy. When the second-century theologian cried, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"[2] or when Ellen White admonished that "Satan uses philosophy to ensnare souls,"[3] they may have wanted to convey a caution to emerging movements in history. Paul himself alludes to a significant danger. In his time Greek apologists and philosophic adherents were posing a real threat to the Christ event. The apostle had to issue a spiritual warning and a theological stance to the Colossian church: Christ is non-negotiable. "For in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness of life in Him, who is the head of all rule and authority" (Col. 2:9).

While Christian preaching and teaching ought to be grounded and rooted in its Christo-centric commitment, it must not fail to recognize that it operates in a world whose philosophic commitment and academic pursuit may be at variance with those of the Christian perspective. The early church had its Gnostics; today, we have existential nihilists and post-modern relativists. In the face of such philosophic and existential onslaughts, Christian education does not have the luxury of an ostrich syndrome; indeed it has an obligation to its students, its constituency, and its pursuit of the highest possible in the learning process.

Is it possible, then, to fulfill such an obligation? I believe it is if we can (1) dispense with some traditional myths associated with philosophy, (2) understand the nature and function of

philosophy, (3) develop a plausible Adventist worldview within which we can pursue the intellectual journey, and (4) apply that worldview to Christian life and witness.

Get rid of the myths

Among the traditional myths some Christians have developed regarding philosophy, one is that **faith and reason are incompatible.** But both faith and reason are God's gifts to human beings and any perceived incompatibility between the two cannot be grounded in biblical revelation. "Come now, let us reason together," invites the Creator (Isa. 1:18), and the same God also posits faith in Him as fundamental to our relationship with Him (Heb. 11:6; Rom. 1:17).

Christian faith underscores that when God created humans in His image (Gen. 1:16), that image meant that God has shared with human beings His creativity, which of course must imply a rational capacity. Human reasoning may often be faulty or marred, but that does not mean it has no role in Christian life. Indeed even the faith-life of a Christian must be lived, explained, and shared in a world that is tuned to reasoning with tools built by reason. Part of Christian education's task is to develop our rational capacity to the maximum. Says Ellen White:

> "All who engage in the acquisition of knowledge should strive to reach the highest round of the ladder. Let students advance as fast and as far as they can; let the field of their study be as broad as their powers can compass."[4]

This lofty goal, however, comes with a caveat:

> "But let them make God their wisdom, clinging to Him who is infinite in knowledge, who can reveal secrets hidden for ages, and who can solve the most difficult problems for minds that believe in Him."[5]

Thus there is a link between reason and faith; both are gifts from God, and both are to be exercised in Christian education. Scriptures mandate us to develop our mind, and growth in knowledge is part of the sanctification process (2 Pet. 1:5-7). Christian faith demands the "transformation of the mind" (Rom. 12:1); that is to say, faith does not abrogate mind or reason, but transforms it so that human mind can function with the assistance of divine enlightening. This is a task only faith can reach out and grasp.

The second myth that some Christians cherish is a fear that **intellectual growth undermines Christian faith.** But the fact is that an educated Christian can be a better informed, and easily communicative person. While the disciples of Jesus were, so to speak, formally uneducated (showing that God can use anyone He chooses), men like Moses, Daniel and Paul illustrate the power of educated persons who submit themselves to the demands of faith. To be sanctified does not mean to be stupid. Again Ellen White:

> "Ignorance will not increase the humility or spirituality of any professed follower of Christ. The truths of the divine word can be best appreciated by an intellectual Christian. Christ can be best glorified by those who serve Him intelligently. The great object of education is to enable us to use the powers which God has given us in such a manner as will best represent the religion of the Bible and promote the glory of God."[6]

A third myth is **a perceived distinction between the sacred and the secular** and a perceived demand that we should live that distinction. While this claim is partly true in that we must recognize the distinction between the sacred and the secular, a deeper understanding of the Christian faith demands that while we live in the secular, we must never give up the sacred; indeed, we must mediate the sacred to the secular, so that the later can better understand, appreciate, and grasp the dynamics and the sense of fulfillment found in the former. God is a God of both the altar and the laboratory, and the Christian must not be apologetic of the former or enamored by the latter.

We must not dichotomize the sacred and the secular to the extent that we must restrict religion to the heart and to the Sabbath, and education to the mind and to the rest of the week. The hidden danger of the secular is to think and live as though God does not exist, where as the mandate of faith is to face that danger in its own territory and overcome its wiles. To do that faith needs to maintain its God-given ability to reason at its sharpest focus. We live in the world, but we are not part of it. The world is both our home and our mission field.

The integral relationship between faith and reason is well summarized by Ellen White:

> "Knowledge is power, but it is a power for good only when united with true piety. It must be vitalized by the Spirit of God in order to serve the noblest purposes. The closer our connection with God, the more fully can we comprehend the value of true science; for the attributes of God, as seen in His created works, can be best appreciated by him who has a knowledge of the Creator of all things, the Author of all truth."[7]

Understand what philosophy does

To question is philosophy's occupation as well as its tool. Whenever the world around presents an opportunity, philosophy asserts its right to probe, prod, doubt, analyze, and seek. The need to question is to arrive at meaning and coherence. Morris notes:

> "The philosopher's job is to ask the kinds of questions that are relevant to the subject under study, the kinds of questions we really want to get answered rather than merely muse over, the kinds of questions whose answers make a real difference in how we live and work."[8]

All philosophy is concerned with basically three questions: What is real? What is true? What is good? **The first concerns with ontology and metaphysics**, the study of reality and existence. What constitutes reality? Is human existence real? Does the tree that you see make up part of reality? Or does the idea of tree-ness or human-ness take precedence in the understanding of reality? As Schaeffer says, "Nothing that is worth calling a philosophy can sidestep the question of the fact that things do exist and that they exist in their present form and complexity."[9]

The second area of interest in philosophy is epistemology. How do we know? How do we know that something is true? How do we know that something is not true? Is what is true always true? What are the conditions and limitations of knowledge? Are we as humans responsible for the creation, certification and verification of truth? Is truth relative or absolute?

The third area of concern to philosophy is ethics. What is good? What defines appropriate conduct? Is there a universal norm for behavior? Is it objective, subjective, relative

or absolute? What is the source of that norm—tradition, social mores, current practices, the will of the ruling power, situation, religion? Is valuing a conditional process?

Philosophy's answer to these questions depends on the worldview that it adopts. For example, if you were a follower of Plato, you would have a worldview of idealism—that is, your point of intellectual functioning is from the standpoint that reality consists of the world of ideas. From that point of departure, an idealist would define what constitutes reality, truth and ethics. But if your worldview is that of a materialist, an evolutionist, or existentialist, your perception of reality and truth will be quite different.

So how should a Christian relate to philosophy? First, it is never to the disadvantage of a Christian to understand the complexities in which various philosophies and their advocates function—their views, their methodology, their conclusions, and their challenge to Christian intellectual and faith life. Mars' Hill, Paul found, was not an impediment but a propeller to a better understanding and proclamation of faith (see Acts 17:22-34; cf. 1 Cor. 2:1-7). Second, a Christian must develop a worldview that will provide an adequate ground to stand, and having stood carry on a meaningful dialogue and witness with the secular world.

Build an Adventist worldview

In dealing with philosophy, Adventist educators must avoid the twin dangers of capitulation and indifference. In the first, they feel obliged to surrender to the philosophic onslaught and are compelled to reinterpret or reject their faith-claims. In the second, they exist as if afraid to ask or face critical questions. While surrender may destroy one's faith commitment, panic renders one's faith-witness ineffective. Instead, the Adventist has a responsibility to deal effectively with the questions philosophy raises and to provide credible answers from the perspective of a Christian worldview. Schaeffer puts it candidly:

> "Christianity has the opportunity. . . to speak clearly of the fact that its answer has the very thing that modern man has despaired of—the unity of thought. It provides a unified answer to the whole of life. It is true that man will have to renounce his rationalism, but then, on the basis of what can be discussed, he has the possibility of recovering his rationality." [10]

While philosophers have located their unity of thought in what they have chosen to be their point of departure—mind, matter, existence, materialism, language, class, etc.—where should we go for developing a Christian worldview? Without pretending to be either exclusive or exhaustive, I suggest three basic faith affirmations with which we can build an Adventist worldview. These affirmations are wholistic in nature, universal in scope, biblical in origin, and non-negotiable in commitment.

1. God is the ultimate reality. "In the beginning God..." (Gen. 1:1). There lies the Christian foundation for a worldview. Because God is, I am. Without Him, nothing is. "In Him we live, move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). To the Christian, God as a Person is what constitutes the ultimate reality. He is the cause and designer of creation, and His activities have structure, purpose, and order. As Schaeffer says,

> "The strength of the Christian system—the acid test of it—is that everything fits under the apex of the existent, infinite, personal God, and it is the only system in the world

where this is true. No other system has an apex under which everything fits. . . . Without losing his own integrity, the Christian can see everything fitting into the place beneath the Christian apex of the existence of the infinite-personal God."[11]

2. We know because He has revealed. A second dimension of a Christian worldview is that our knowledge is based on God's revelation in nature and in Scripture. Hence we study nature and its flow in history and experience within the context of God's creation of, and action in, nature. The believing mind discerns the workings of God in the beauty and mystery of nature, praising one and probing the other. The Christian also accepts the Bible as an epistemological cornerstone for the Christian worldview. This means that

> "no interpretation of ultimate significance can be made without biblical revelation. Lacking the perspective it gives us, the things of the world are disconnected objects only, the events of the world are mere unrelated coincidences, and life is only a frustrating attempt to derive ultimate significance from insignificant trivialities."[12]

Accepting God's Word as an epistemological source, however, does not mean that the Bible becomes a divine encyclopedia, but it does mean that it addresses life's great issues: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? What is the meaning of history? What is my role in life? The Bible has something to say on these and other crucial questions of existence and destiny, and Christian education and worldview must take into account what it says, even as they encounter positions of other systems.

3. God relates to the human. The Christian worldview accepts a Christian anthropology that recognizes a close kinship between God and humans. The kinship manifests itself in three major assertions: (a) God created human being in His own image (Gen. 1:26, 27), and as such they are not a result of some cosmic accident or the apex of some evolutionary paradigm, functioning according to a complex system of mechanical laws. Kinship with God makes the human to function creatively, to relate meaningfully, and to be held accountable for his or her actions. (b) The Christian relates this kinship to interpret evil in the world as a result of a rupture in God-human relationship, called sin in the Bible. Sin—alienation from God—is at the root of distortion of perceptions, relationships, and values. This, says the Christian worldview, explains the chaotic, confused, and hopeless situation that warps life into an existential dilemma. (c) Because of God-human kinship, God has not left humans without hope. The Christian worldview is both redemptive and surgical. It is redemptive in that God has provided for the redemption of humanity from sin through the Cross of Christ that reconciles God with the human (2 Cor. 5:19). It is surgical in that it looks forward to an end-time when sin and its results will be completely wiped away from earth, giving way for the creation of "new heavens and a new earth" (Isa. 65:17). Both aspects of restoration are rooted in the life and death of Christ, and thus to know Him and to relate to Him becomes central to both Christian living and Christian learning, and without Him there can be no Christian worldview.

This God-human kinship, founded in creation, renewed in redemption, and restored in an absolute sense in the eschaton, is at the basis of the Christian confession that God exists and exists as the anchor of the world in which the Christian lives, relates, works and worships. Such a personal experience owes to the grasp of faith and not to any flight of imagination and is not at the mercy of any human apologetic. Carl Laney states it beautifully:

"My belief in God is founded on many things, including the witness of creation, the influence of God's Spirit on my conscience, and the evidence of the Word of God. But fundamentally I have experienced God in my life, and therefore I believe. God has answered my prayers, quieted my tears, provided for my needs, delivered me from temptation, strengthened my resolve, granted me peace, and demonstrated His reality in my life again and again. No argument how logical or factual, could convince me that God is not real. My personal relationship with God on a daily basis refutes any and every suggestion that God does not exist." [13]

[1] All biblical references are from the Revised Standard Version.

[2] Tertullian, *De praescriptione*, vii.

[3] Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Hagerstown, MD, 1957), 1: 270.

[4] Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1943)*, p. 394.

[5] Ibid.

[6] --------, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Pub. Assn., 1923), p. 45.

[7] White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers and Students,* p. 38.

[8] Van Cleve Morris, *Philosophy and the American School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 20.

[9] Francis A. Schaeffer, *He is There and He is Not Silent* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1972), p. 1.

[10] --------, *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 82.

[11] --------, *He is There and He is Not Silent, p.81.*

[12] Richard H. Buber, *The Human Quest:A New Look at Science and the Christian Faith* (Waco, Texas: World Books, 1976), pp. 52-53.

[13] J. Carl Laney, *God* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1999), p. 7.