

APOCALYPTICISM, SUNDAY LAWS, AND ALONZO JONES:

The key factors that spurred Seventh-day Adventists to become active advocates of religious liberty.

Grounded in the eschatological belief that religious liberty was doomed to be encroached upon before the soon return of Christ, Seventh-day Adventists originally manifested a cautious approach towards supporting liberty of conscience. However, after John Andrews presented his interpretation of Revelation 13 and 14, Adventists adopted a dynamic approach towards defending religious liberty while still believing in the inevitable violation of liberty before the end of time. The belief that the United States was “the second beast” of Revelation 13 that would bring persecution to the faithful “remnant” through religious legislation was pivotal in driving Adventists towards involvement in religious liberty.¹ Furthermore, once this prevision was confirmed by a stricter enforcement of Sunday laws that threatened the liberty of Adventists and the very existence of the Adventist church, Adventists found these factors were compelling reasons to take an active stand in defending freedom of conscience. Last, but not least, the influence of church leaders (most notably of Alonzo Jones) that mobilized Adventists to come to the forefront of political action for advocating religious liberty, played a major role in shaping the history of Adventist public ministry. Alonzo Jones’ editorship of the *American Sentinel*, the first Adventist magazine dedicated to the advocacy of religious liberty of all, left a legacy of Adventist public involvement through the use of media.

The interpretation of the second beast in Revelation 13 and of the three angel’s message in Revelation 14 set the Adventist defensive attitude towards Sunday laws. Although there was a general agreement among Protestants that the first beast in Revelation 13 symbolized the papacy, there were a variety of opinions regarding the second beast.² The first to identify the American

¹ Douglas Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic: The Public Involvement of a major Apocalyptic Movement*,” (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2001) 16.

² The historicist school first identified the first beast with papacy.

Republic with the second beast and to establish the principles that guided Adventists to advocate church-state separation was John Andrews. In 1851, Andrews published the Adventist apocalyptic interpretation of America in the *Review and Herald*³: The “lamblike” horns symbolized the United States’ peaceful appearance—seemingly of protecting liberty of conscience and individual liberty in general. In contrast with this appearance, the voice of the dragon revealed the United States’ true character, that of a persecutor. The two horns symbolized civil and religious power: the Republic and Protestantism, respectively. In the United States both of these powers betrayed the principle of liberty. Despite the American Republic’s professed liberty of all its citizens, it kept African-Americans in the bondage of slavery. Similarly, despite Protestantism’s professed allegiance to liberty of conscience it fell pray to creedalism and intolerance, persecuting those who believed in another day of rest than the one prescribed by papal tradition.⁴ Therefore, Adventists realized from the beginning that as a prophetic people they were called to “sound the alarm” to any danger to liberty of conscience because of its central place within prophecy.⁵

As a denomination, Seventh-day Adventists observed Saturday as the Sabbath, emphasized Biblical eschatology, and were born in a Protestant environment that regarded the papacy as the Anti-Christ. So Adventists were naturally prone to regard Sunday laws as signs that the end of time was near. Sunday laws preceded the organization of the Adventist church. Although Adventists, inspired by Andrews, didn’t regard Sunday laws as constituting the “image of the beast” or the enforcement of its mark, they perceived them from the beginning as evidence

³ J.N. Andrews. “Thoughts on Revelation XIII and XIV,” *Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald* 1 (May 1851):81.

⁴ Douglas Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic: The Public Involvement of a major Apocalyptic Movement*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2001) 17.

⁵ Christ Reinach and Alan J. Reinach, *Politics and Prophecy: The Battle for Religious Liberty and the Authentic Gospel* (Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2007) 11.

of the states' disposition toward unification with the church and toward "religious oppression" of dissenters. The United States was demonstrating its allegiance to the papacy by enforcing worship on Sunday, its institution.⁶ Therefore, Adventists' background and doctrine led them to manifest a special interest in religious liberty.

Moreover, Adventists were motivated to proclaim religious liberty by their premillennial doctrine. Believing that Scripture teaches the complete destruction of the earth before the establishment of Christ's one-thousand-year kingdom, Adventists cast doubt on the optimistic view of the majority of Protestants that there would soon be a peaceful millennium in the U.S. Despite the United States' scientific progress and its apparently prosperous government, its spiritual decline and the sobering realities of slavery, as well as the prophecies of Revelation 13, led Adventists to conclude that such a millennium on earth was impossible. Adventists viewed Sunday laws as attempts to bring the kingdom of God through political measures. These "attempts to hasten the millennium" by compromising the rights of religious minorities would have the reverse effect of bringing the spiritual "downfall" of the United States.⁷

The three angels' message brought religious liberty to the core of Adventist theology. Andrews was again a pioneer in that he showed the connection between Revelation 14 and liberty of conscience. He interpreted the second angel's message as a cry against the unification of church and state—a union that corrupted the Protestant churches. Exceeding the zeal of "Papists," Protestants "united with the kingdoms of this world," which united them with Babylon. The fall of Babylon, the city depicted in Biblical prophecy, was precisely due to the

⁶ Douglas Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic: The Public Involvement of a Major Apocalyptic Movement*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2001) 18.

⁷ Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic*, 19.

unification of religious and civil powers.⁸ Despite their antipapal position, Adventists were more concerned about Protestants' betrayal of the principle of religious freedom than about the political influence of Catholic citizens. Protestants' compromise of religious liberty, interpreted from Revelation 14, motivated Adventists to step forward to protect this right.⁹

The almost "bystander" approach was very soon shifted to an active one during the 1870-1880s, when Adventists became directly involved in the repealing of the California Sunday law. This was the beginning of Adventist active opposition to Sunday laws, as a stricter enforcement of Sunday legislation and the emergence of the National Reform Association (NRA), a movement seeking to nationalize Christianity, severely restricted liberty of conscience in the U.S. The Adventist belief that persecution will precede the end of time led Adventists to identify Sunday laws in particular, and the movement to nationalize Christianity in general, as apocalyptic signs. Alonzo Jones played a major role in motivating Adventists to fight against religious legislation through both his writings and his political activism. Furthermore, once Sunday laws directly affected Adventists through imprisonments and the threat of the existence of the church itself, Adventists felt compelled to step forward to protect their religious liberty rights. Sunday laws were the key factors and Jones was the main leader that drove Adventists to become actively involved in religious liberty.

Adventists' promotion of Saturday as the true, Biblical Sabbath and their conviction that they should work on Sunday had naturally made them the targets of judicial correction. Adventist theology struck at the core of religious legislation by Biblically arguing not only against the legitimacy of Sunday as Sabbath, but also against the right of the state to interfere in matters of conscience. Believing that they were called to proclaim the "present truth" –as

⁸ J.N. Andrews. "Thoughts on Revelation XIII and XIV," *Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald* 1 (May 1851): 82.

⁹ Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic*, 18.

depicted in Revelation 14- Adventists began to defend religious freedom and to oppose any attempt at church-state unification.

During the 1870's Adventists had aggressively attacked the religious and legal basis of the California Sunday law through public evangelism. In order to increase its electoral support for the coming elections, the Republican Party decided to heed Protestant interests in a stricter enforcement of the Sunday law passed in 1861. Adventists were among the majority of the 1,600 Californians arrested in 1882 for breaking this law, including Joseph H. Waggoner, the editor of the *Signs of the Times*, and W. C. White, the son of Ellen G. White. Furthermore, California's largest publishing firm and Adventist's literature center, the Pacific Press Publishing Association, was closed during this time because of the California Sunday law.¹⁰ Adventists' apocalyptic theology of Sunday influenced their interpretation of those imprisonments as being part of "the final crisis over God's Law before the Coming of Christ," and under the leadership of Waggoner it also galvanized them to enter the political arena to advocate religious liberty.¹¹

Despite their Republican views, Joseph Waggoner, together with other Adventists, sided with the Democrats in a successful campaign during the general elections, which led to the repeal of the California Sunday law in 1883. Although Adventists were a minority, they exercised immense pressure, which brought the Sunday law to the forefront of political discussion. According to historian Sandra S. Frankiel, Adventists played an important role in California's rejection of "that bond with traditional Protestant culture," represented by Sunday laws, "in favor of a more open and diverse society."¹² Mostly due to the Adventist's successful religious and political campaign, California was the first state to completely repeal its Sunday law.

¹⁰ Sandra S. Frankiel, *California's Spiritual Frontiers* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 53.

¹¹ Douglas Morgan, *The American Sentinel and the Crusade to Nationalize Christianity*.

¹² Sandra S Frankiel, *California's Spiritual Frontiers* 55.

Following the California Sunday Law crisis, Adventists' freedom of conscience was severely challenged by the Arkansas Sunday law. After the exemption to Sabbath observers was repealed in 1885, supposedly in order to prevent saloon operation on Sunday, Arkansas registered 21 cases related to Sunday offense. Nineteen out of these cases had targeted seventh-day Sabbath keepers. In contrast with the two exceptions whose cases got dismissed without bail, Adventists had to pay exorbitant bails, raging from \$110 to \$500, the maximum amount equivocating to a year's salary for a laborer. Since no saloon keeper was arrested, Alonzo Jones argued that Adventists were guiltless of any crime other than differing from the mainline religious trend.¹³

Through the *American Sentinel* Alonzo Jones also argued against the National Reform Association's campaign to nationalize Christianity. One of the main issues that spurred the creation of this magazine was the NRA's proposed constitutional amendment that would have declared the American Republic as a "Christian Nation." The *Sentinel* became the channel through which Adventists communicated their beliefs in relation to liberty of conscience. Under the leadership of Alonzo Jones, the main editor of the magazine, the *Sentinel* turned into a "relentless" watchdog observing every move of the National Reform Association.¹⁴ The actions of Jones were not limited to writing and publishing; he boycotted the NRA's conferences by leading in the spread of literature opposing it and by personally participating in those meetings. Alonzo Jones carefully deconstructed the arguments of the National Reform Association in the *American Sentinel* with the purpose of showing their threat to liberty of conscience.

Once the National Reform Association's attempt to introduce the Constitutional amendment failed, it focused on the promotion of a national Sunday Law. Heeding the NRA and

¹³ 45.

¹⁴ Douglas Morgan, "The American Sentinel and the Crusade to Nationalize Christianity," *Liberty*, September/October, 2009, <http://www.libertymagazine.org/index.php?id=1568>.

the Woman's Christian Temperance Union' appeal, Senator H. W. Blair introduced the National Sunday Law bill in the Senate in 1888. The purpose of the bill was the observance of Sunday "as a day of religious worship," by imposing restrictions on labor, recreational, and commercial activities.¹⁵

Through a prophetic lens, Adventists immediately interpreted the National Sunday Law bill as a key event in the destruction of American religious freedom.¹⁶ Alonzo Jones took the Adventist lead to prevent the passage of this proposed law. The bill wasn't passed in the Fiftieth Congress, largely due to Jones's argument before the Congress on December 13, 1888 and his leading of Adventists in petitions circulation.¹⁷ The circulation of petitions against the Blair Sunday bill proposal, which raised nearly 500,000 signatures by 1889, represented one of Adventists' "most energetic activities" for religious liberty. The secretary of the NRA was forced to admit the effective power of the 25,000 Adventists that outweighed 26,000,000 Sunday-keeping Christians. This petition campaign gave Adventists a positive "national publicity" as safeguarders of liberty rights. George Knight described Alonzo Jones as "the most aggressive Adventist in the nation in religious liberty between 1888 and 1895."¹⁸ His public speaking effectively contributed to blocking religious legislation and made him the most active leader of Adventists religious liberty at that time.

Alonzo Jones' religious liberty leadership role within the Adventist church was confirmed during the Adventist General Conference at Minneapolis in 1888. At this conference

¹⁵ Alonzo T. Jones, *The Two Republics or Rome and the United States of America* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Publishing CO, 1891) 829-830.

¹⁶ George R. Knight, *A.T. Jones: Point Man on Adventism's Charismatic Frontier*, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2011), 31.

¹⁷ Alonzo T. Jones, *The National Sunday Law: An Argument of Alonzo T. Jones before the Limited State Senate Committee on Education and Labor at Washington D.C., Dec. 13, 1888* (New York: TEACH Services, Inc.2002) 5-6.

¹⁸ George R. Knight, *From 1888 to Apostasy: The Case of A. T. Jones* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1987) 78,79.

Jones became the main voice for religious liberty. His speech included several aspects of current religious liberty issues, including the distinction between civil and religious duties and the danger posed to liberty of conscience by the constitutional amendment proposal and the National Sunday Law bill.¹⁹ Through his persevering appeals and confrontational style, Jones played a major role in drawing the attention of Adventists from myriad doctrinal conflicts, including the Galatians dispute, to the burning religious liberty issues of the day. Along with Joseph Waggoner and Ellen White, Alonzo Jones played a major role in pushing the Adventist leadership to become publically involved in the religious liberty issue.

By the 1890s, the center of attention for Adventist imprisonment due to religious legislation moved to Tennessee. This crisis was described as “one of the most celebrated struggles for religious liberty ever waged on the American soil.”²⁰ The Tennessee Sunday Law critically affected Saturday-keepers who (believing that God not only commanded Saturday-Sabbath observance but also “equally demanded labor on the other six days,”) were often tried and fined for breaking this no-work-on-Sunday law.²¹ Alonzo Jones was among the most influential Adventists who held this radical view, and he pushed it to the extreme, using Adventist opposition to hasten what he saw as the final events before the Second Coming of Christ.²² In contrast, Ellen White persistently advised Adventists **not** to work on Sunday—to avoid the reputation of being lawbreakers and unnecessary persecution.²³ Nonetheless, most

¹⁹ George R. Night, *A.T. Jones: Point Man on Adventism’s Charismatic Frontier*, (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2011) 44.

²⁰ Chattanooga Daily Times, November 6, 1895, 7, quoted in Dennis Pettibone, *A Century of Challenge: The Story of Southern College 1892-1992* (Collegedale, Tennessee: Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992) 17.

²¹ Dennis Pettibone, *A Century of Challenge: The Story of Southern College 1892-1992* (Collegedale, Tennessee: Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992) 17.

²² George Knight, *From 1888 to Apostasy*, 83.

²³ Ellen G. White, *Testimony for the Church: Volume Nine* (Boise: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), 232-235.

Adventists shared Jones' view rather than White's in this matter, which led to mass imprisonments of dissenting Adventists in Tennessee.

The persecution resulting from Sunday law enforcement pressured Adventists to fight for religious liberty rights. A notable case was the Graysville Academy in Tennessee: because students were encouraged to work on Sunday in order to pay for their tuition, many faculty staff and students were targeted for prosecution, which almost brought Graysville Academy to its end. The imprisonment of three out of five of the faculty members forced the school to close until July, 1895. This caused the school's enrollment to decrease from 125 to 75 students.²⁴ Therefore, the damaging effect of the Sunday law on Graysville Academy forced Adventists to take an active stand in defending the right of all people to religious liberty.

Besides the Adventists in Graysville, there were about seventy-six Seventh-day Adventists prosecuted between 1895 and 1896 in the United States and Canada for breaking Sunday laws. Twenty-eight of these Adventists spent an average of three and half years in prisons and chain work gangs.²⁵ Because of their refusal to pay fines, eight Graysville Adventists were sentenced to work in a chain gang to build roads and a stone bridge at Spring City because of their refusal to pay fines. Most Adventists who refused the defense of an attorney were convicted, while those who accepted legal defense got their cases dismissed.²⁶

Amongst the people brought to trial for Sunday law breaking, Adventists were discriminated against primarily because of their religious beliefs, which were considered sectarian. Adventists faced prejudice because of doctrines that set them apart from other

²⁴ Dennis Pettibone, *A Century of Challenge*, 19.

²⁵ William A. Blakely, *American State Papers on Freedom in Religion* (Takoma Park, Washington D.C.: Review and Herald, 1943) 562.

²⁶ Dennis Pettibone, *A Century of Challenge*, 18.

Protestant churches, such as the seventh-day Sabbath and the soon return of Christ.²⁷ Adventists charged with breaking the Sunday law received heavy fines (between \$2.50 and \$15 which today would be \$62.50 to \$375) plus courts costs. Many Adventists chose to be imprisoned due to their belief that paying for these fines was equivalent to acknowledging that the sentence was just. Adventists convicted of breaking the Sunday law were given terms ranging from twenty to seventy-six days. The Chattanooga Times pointed out that Adventists were trialed mostly for Sunday law breaking as compared to others who were offenders but not from religious convictions.²⁸ During a time when the United States was dominated by Evangelical Sunday-keeping and by a sense of optimism in the growing prosperity of the relatively new American Republic, Adventism was generally perceived as a sect that was threatening to Christians.

The persecution faced due to Sunday laws urged Adventists to invest in public communication. Alonzo Jones had a major part in the emergence of the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA). Originally entitled the National Religious Liberty Association (NRLA), its declaration of principles stated the preservation of the United States Constitution and opposition to the National Reform Association, two of Jones' main religious liberty concerns. The *American Sentinel*, edited by Jones, served as the official media channel of the NRLA. The focus of the organization was to obstruct religious legislation that supported church and state union in the National Congress and in the state legislature, by aiding "persecuted people of any race, color or creed."²⁹ As its president, Jones played a formative role in developing and carrying out the rationale and objectives of the IRLA.

²⁷ Lawson, Ronald. "Church and State at Home and Abroad: The evolution of Seventh-day Adventist Relations with Governments", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Summer 96, Vol. 64 Issue 2, 281, <http://ezproxy.wallawalla.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.wallawalla.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rh&AN=ATLA0001019264&site=ehost-live>.

²⁸ Pettibone, *A Century of Challenge*, 18.

²⁹ Syme, *A History of SDA*, 34.

Apocalypticism, Sunday laws, and Alonzo Jones intertwined in motivating Adventists in becoming one of the most active supporters of religious liberty. Because Adventists believed—even before they were singled out as Sunday-lawbreakers—that Sunday laws will precede the end of time, they adopted a dynamic approach to religious legislation. The discrimination that Adventists faced in the enforcement of Sunday laws prompted them to act in defending religious liberty rights. Alonzo Jones rose to the forefront of the Adventist religious liberty battle as the right man at the right time. Due to his political activism that alerted Adventists to the threat of religious legislation, mobilized their actions in opposing such legislation, and inspired the guiding principles of Adventist religious liberty associations, he became the most prominent Adventist religious liberty leader at that time. Between 1882 and 1895, due to the persecution suffered from religious legislation, the concept of Adventist liberty of conscience crystallized. Adventists began to view liberty of conscience as a fundamental human right that encompasses all other liberties.³⁰ Coming to this conclusion, Sunday laws influenced the Adventist interpretation of prophecy. Instead of taking a passive attitude while waiting for the inevitable cessation of freedom, Adventists' mission became to represent the God of Liberty by taking an active stand for the cause of liberty for all.

³⁰ David Mitchell, *Seventh-day Adventists: Faith in Action* (New York: Vantage Press, 1958), 229.