

Nicholas Miller

Naked in the Garden of the Past:  
Is There a Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of History?

“Historians walked in the Garden of Eden, without a scrap of philosophy to cover them, naked and unashamed before the God of history. Since then we have known Sin and experienced a Fall.”

Edward H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 21.  
Commenting on 19<sup>th</sup> century historians in general.

Conventional historical wisdom describes the evolution of church history as proceeding from a providentialist, confessional outlook, to one that is based on an objective, critical, detached view on the past. While modern scholars generally agree that pure objectivity is impossible, most historians retain the modernist propensity to believe that personal biases and prejudices should be bracketed as far as humanly possible, especially religious ones. The mark of truly modern history, it is proposed, is the embrace of a philosophical methodological naturalism.

This philosophy, it is argued, will limit the historian to natural, as opposed to supernatural causes, and cause her to use empirical observation and critical inquiry to examine, interrogate, and organize historical sources. This philosophically self-aware critical distancing allows the historian, in Carr’s evocative quote above, to move away from the Edenic naivety of believing in a natural epistemological objectivity, where one can simply collect facts from the past, and arrange them in self-evident array.

The “fallen” historian, in Carr’s account, is aware of his own biases and inclinations, as well as that of his sources, and will achieve some level of critical engagement and analysis because of this. The knowledge of our “sin” will cause us

to compensate for it with the tools of critical history, and we can emerge with a version of history that is largely cleansed from our personal biases and superstitions. (what biases systems of critical history might have is another question that we will deal with further later on.)

Adventist historian Gary Land, in probably the most complete and helpful overview of Adventist historiography to date (despite it being written nearly 25 years ago) traces the evolution of Adventist history writing. He notes the shift from “memoirs, apologetics, and story books,” written in a providentialist framework, to “the emergence of a scholarly approach to the Adventist past” in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Land describes the emergence of a sense of professional, scholarly history in Adventism as coinciding with the rise of *Spectrum* magazine in the 1970s, where a number of scholars began to look more critically at Ellen White’s writings. In a series of *Spectrum* articles, questions were raised about her use of sources, as well as her “intellectual and social milieu and her own intellectual development.”<sup>2</sup>

These early efforts to engage more critically with Mrs. White were generally resisted, according to Land, by the White Estate. Matters really came to a head with the publication in 1976 of Ronald Numbers *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White*. Land notes that in his preface, Numbers revealed that “he did not presuppose inspiration or ignore witnesses who rejected Ellen White as inspired.”<sup>3</sup> Land was actually being rather generous in his assessment of Number’s position. What Numbers actually wrote was that “I have tried to be as objective as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Land, “From Apologetics to History: The Professionalization of Adventist Historians,” *SPECTRUM*, 10 (March 1971), 89.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Thus, I have refrained from using divine inspiration as an historical explanation.”<sup>4</sup> So, rather than merely not “presupposing” inspiration as Land suggests, Numbers actually “presupposed” the opposite—that inspiration was *not* a possible explanation.

Once this assumption regarding the non-reality of inspiration was in place, everything else in Number’s book inevitably followed. Suddenly, rather than just not ignoring witnesses who questioned or rejected Mrs. White’s inspiration, these witnesses become, by definition, the tellers of truth about her work. Because inspiration is not an accepted category, her life *had* to be explained through some sort of psychological disorder. Numbers and his wife, a clinical psychologist, propose “somatization disorder with an accompanying histrionic personality style,” previously known as hysteria, as one explanation. Mrs. White’s visions “shrink to mere epiphenomena” and are ultimately explained as “self-hypnotic episodes.”<sup>5</sup>

In a paradoxical flip, Numbers tried to correct the Adventist story that assumed the truth of the prophet and her supporters, with a story that assumed the falsity of her central claims and assumed the truth of her opponents. Rather than a move to objectivity, it was in reality a move to an alternate, competing ideology and apologetic of methodological naturalism.

In discussing the Number’s episode, Land, in my opinion, overlooks Number’s underlying commitment to a closed, materialistic outlook. Land concludes that Number’s book “made clear” the problem that “the church could not live easily with

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: Ellen G. White and the Origins of Seventh-day Adventist Health Reform* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), xv.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 212, 214.

attempts to understand Adventism, particularly Ellen White, within its historical context and on the basis of critically re-examined and more extensive documentation."<sup>6</sup> But this is to mist-state or at least understate the Church's problem with Numbers, as well as Number's problem with the Church, the Bible, and indeed the concept of the supernatural.

It is true that most religious body exist in uneasy tension with attempts at close historical scrutiny of the context and culture of their origins. This is simply an unavoidable by-product, in my opinion, of the epistemological tensions found at the border of faith and reason. Adventists, and any other faith communities that believe in divine revelation, must wrestle with the contours of this boundary. We certainly have not always handled that tension perfectly or ideally. There is much for historians and other scholars to critique and propose in seeking a more faithful balance between these two worlds and ways of knowing.

But Numbers is asking for far more than this. If it were just a case of taking historical context more seriously and examining documents more closely and critically, most Adventist historians that I know would have no objection. Indeed, this is what most of us aspire to do. But to abandon or deny the category of divine inspiration, and by extension any category of the supernatural, is something that Adventist historians simply cannot do and remain Adventist, or even Christian, historians. Numbers may well respond that Adventist historians have to choose, then, between their faith and church, and their profession.

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<sup>6</sup> Land, 95.

But there are many very good, practicing historians working at both religious and secular universities that would differ with Numbers. They would argue that Numbers position is one that equally involves faith commitments to a metaphysical framework that is no less religious than the one he believes he has escaped from. The British philosopher of history and Oxford professor, R.G. Collingwood, identified one central problem with the version of naturalistic, critical history espoused by Numbers, which is really a version of the critical, scientific history proposed by F.H. Bradley in 1874.<sup>7</sup> As Collingwood notes, Bradley combined critical methods of inquiry, which were in themselves unobjectionable, with “uncriticized and unnoticed positivistic assumptions.”<sup>8</sup>

In other words, it is not wrong to question the claims made on the face of historical documents by writers and witnesses from the past. There must be some critical engagement with the testimony of the past, even if just to sort out conflicting claims and observations. We do bring some sort of criteria to bear to determine if we think that a historical witness is reliable, accurate, and truthful in his or her claims and observations.<sup>9</sup> But what Collingwood was critical of was Bradley's

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<sup>7</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Rev. Ed.)(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 135.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>9</sup> Even here, we must be careful of bringing an unremitting skepticism to bear on the claims and observations of historical witnesses. Some treat witnesses from the past, especially religious ones, as subject to an assumption of falsity unless there is particular indicia of truthfulness, such as corroborative evidence or they are making statements against their own interest. Yet, as detectives and lawyers know, most people attempt to tell the truth most of the time (whether they are quite accurate in doing so is another question, but relates to their perceptions and abilities, and not to their intents and motives.) Even liars have to tell the truth most of the time, or their lies will not be successful. Rather than a presumption of untruth, historical witness should be give a presumption of truthfulness, subject to indicia of deception, such as

assumption that only testimony that accords and can be verified by our own experience can be believed. He noted that Bradley's attempt to insert scientific standards into historical knowledge was "where the positivism of his age begins to infect his thought."<sup>10</sup>

The essential problem with this anti-supernatural positivism is that it is internally incoherent. As Collingwood succinctly puts it:

One the one side, it claims that scientific thought reveals to us laws of nature to which there cannot be exceptions; on the other, it holds that this revelation is based on induction from experience, and therefore cannot give us universal knowledge that is more than probable. Hence in the last resort the attempt to base history on science breaks down; for although there might be facts which are inconsistent with the laws of nature as we conceive them (that is, miracles might happen), the occurrence of these facts is so improbable that no possible testimony would convince us of it. This impasse really wrecks the whole theory; as what is true in the extreme case of miracles is true in principle of any event whatever.<sup>11</sup>

On other words, science, which is built on induction and the observation of the particular, by its very nature cannot generate absolute laws that should cause us to reject testimony about unusual events out of hand. The principle that Bradley tries to bring into history would, if taken to its logical conclusion, cause us to doubt any and all events we had not experienced, thus making historical knowledge, other than one's own memory, impossible.

More recently, Brad Gregory, who formerly taught history at Stanford University before moving to the University of Notre Dame, has critiqued the secular critical approach to history because of its usual manner of reducing religion to

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contrary evidence or testimony, evidences of untrustworthiness, and evident bias or specific motives to deceive.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

purely secular, non-transcendent categories. Critiquing the kind of philosophical approach that Numbers' brought to his study of Ellen White, Gregory writes that "religion *has* to be reducible to some combination of humanly constructed phenomena, because there is nothing else for it *to* be." Having denied a possible category of divine inspiration, visions then cannot be anything other than one's socially constructed desires and ambitions visually invoked in some kind of self-hypnotic trance.

This use of only secular categories, Gregory notes, is itself a faith approach. As he puts it, "the reductionist study of religion has paradoxically produced a new form of confessional history--a *secular* confessional history."<sup>12</sup> There are two problems for the Christian historian with this secular confessional history that, under the guise of neutrality and objectivity, actually promotes "a metaphysically naturalistic, materialist and atheistic approach to religion."

First, it prevents historians from understanding religious people on their own terms. If religious people are motivated by religion, and there are good evidences that they are, as especially seen in martyrdom, then we will never understand them, or "get them right" historically if we reduce those beliefs to something else. Second, we have merely replaced one faith system with another, one that tends to be under-examined and less critically held than other faith systems. This is because secular faith has so permeated the academy that it is taken as background reality, just the "way things are."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Brad S. Gregory, "Historians' Metaphysical Beliefs and the Writing of Confessional Histories," *Fides et Historia* 43:2 (Summer/Fall 2011), 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

There is a third problem with this secular confessional history for Adventist historians that Gregory does not mention. Because of our relatively recent origins, and prophetic heritage, supernatural events and categories are much closer to our working world than for most historians. To eschew supernatural causation is to make it almost impossible to work as believing historians on the history that should be nearest and dearest to us, our own church. It is in many ways it is especially incumbent on us to, as Adventist Christian scholars, to articulate a principled pathway that allows us to speak both to the academy as scholarly historians, and to our church as faithful historians.

Thus far I have been most concerned with the threat to Adventist history and identity by the secular confessional left. But there is an equally problematic threat from an uncritical, fideist, confessional right. Uncritical fideism threatens to unmoor the Church's history from that of both larger Christian and western history, and to place it in a kind of alternate historical reality to which non-Adventists have no connection. This may heighten our collective sense of uniqueness and special identity, but it will severely hamper our outreach and apologetic efforts.

If allowed to flourish, fideist history will cause us to lose common ground and bridge-building contacts with outsiders. We are already seeing this kind of "special, insider history" gaining ground in conservative circles of the Church. Videos and DVDs of conspiracy views of history filled with fantastic and absurd claims about history being controlled by tiny elite groups such as the Masons, the Illuminati and Jesuits have a cult-like following in certain church circles.



This problem of fantastic insider history is not unique to the Adventist church, but has plagued the church ever since the gnostic gospels stories of Christ animating clay birds and punishing playmates. The miracles of the martyrs and saints of the early church and Middle-Ages contained much that the Protestant reformers recognized to be fantastic and fictional. Of course, they sorted these stories out by religious affiliation, or doctrinal orthodoxy. If you held to false beliefs, then your stories must not be true. But the modern Christian views these criteria as a form of special pleading, and allows that God can work, indeed must work, through imperfect, doctrinally errant, human beings.

So the challenge remains, what philosophy of history can Adventist historian maintain that will allow for the possibility of genuine miracles and inspiration, but will maintain principled boundaries against fantastic and fideist histories that isolate the church from the real world and open its members to deceptive teachings? Is there any one approach that can accomplish this goal? Or may it be necessary for Adventist historians to use a complementary array of philosophical approaches, depending on for whom they are writing? The remainder of this paper will attempt to set out a spectrum of approaches that are available for Adventist historians to consider as they carry out their work.

## **B. Approaches to History**

We have already discussed two opposite, yet related approaches to history, the secular confessional approach and the fideist confessional approaches. Both of these views can be described as “closed” in important ways. The secular

confessional approach is closed to the possibility of non-material causes. This itself is a metaphysical, faith position. Further, those holding this position are often closed to the idea that religious ideas and beliefs can be causative at all. The secular approach often reduces religion and religious beliefs to politics, economics, social class, or other secular criteria.

The fideist approach, on the other hand, is closed to using critical methods on the “insider” community, whatever it is, whether Catholic, Protestant, Mormon, Adventist or other. It is also often closed to the possibility of non-material causes in “outsider” communities. Hence, many Christians who believe in the miracles and resurrection of Christ believe that Joseph Smith and his stories about ghostly visitors and golden plates are a fraud, because Mormon’s theology is, they believe, heterodox. Catholics and Protestants tend to disbelieve in the miracle stories of each other, much for the same reason.

The obvious weaknesses of these two extremes make them inappropriate for use by Christian historians seeking to be faithful to their profession, which is an exploration of God’s second book, and their faith in a God, who is the Creator and Sustainer of all His children. So let us set up a spectrum of views, with these two unacceptable, closed confessional alternatives at either extreme. What options might we have in the middle of this spectrum of views? I would propose at least three. I will call them open critical, apologetic, and critical confessional. The below chart places them in relation to each other and the two previously discussed extremes.

General Revelation ----->Special Revelation

1. Closed secular confessional	2. Open Critical History	3. Critical Apologetic	4. Critical Confessional	5. Closed fideist Confessional
Numbers, <i>Prophetess of Health</i> ; Brodie, <i>No Man Knows My History</i> ; Joseph Smith <i>Biography</i>	George Marsden, <i>Jonathan Edwards</i> ; Mark Noll, <i>America's God</i> ; Brad Gregory, <i>Salvation at Stake</i>	Bushman, <i>Rough Stone Rolling: Joseph Smith</i> ; Gregory, <i>The Unintended Reformation</i> , F.D. Nichol, <i>Answers to Objections</i>	Noll, <i>Christ and the Life of the Mind</i> Marsden, <i>The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship</i> Adventist Classic Library Series, careful denominational history and mission books.	Butler's <i>Lives of the Saints</i> ; conspiracy versions of history; Protestant and Catholic fantasy stories of Warburg Castle; careless denominational history and mission story books.

This should not be seen as a spectrum moving from secular to religious, as though more religiously committed people will work on projects toward the right side. Rather, as one moves from the left side of the chart to the right, one moves from the world of general revelation to special revelation. Christians care about both avenues to truth, and should found working in any of the categories, except the two extremes. The further one is left, the more likely it is that one's writing will speak to Christians of other churches and larger society.

As one moves right, one's writings will become more and more for the edification of the Christian community, and then especially for one's own church or denomination. I will briefly describe each of the three middle positions, and then conclude with a brief discussion of how Adventist historians can use these categories to most effectively use their skills and talents to both reach the world and edify the church.

To help explore these different views of history, I will draw on a visit that I took to Wartburg Castle in Eisenach, Germany, which is associated with some dramatic historical events. The Wartburg Castle is the spot where Luther was secretly protected for the year following the confrontation at the Diet of Worms. In Luther's day the Castle was already ancient, and was connected with other well-known figures of history. The most prominent was probably St. Elizabeth of Thuringia, a wife of the Castle ruler who died at the young age of 24. Before her death, however, she developed a widespread reputation for acts of kindness, charity, and even healing, which led to her being sainted after her death.

One legend has it that she was discouraged by her husband from taking food to the villages, but she persisted in the practice. One day she was traveling down to the town with food under her cloak, and she unexpectedly met her husband returning from a hunting trip. He asked her what she had under her cloak, and she wordlessly moved it aside, revealing a bunch of roses. Some accounts have this happening in winter, making it all the more startling and miraculous. The husband is so impressed with this miracle, it is reported, that he repents of his stinginess, and supports his wife in her acts of charity. The event has been memorialized in a huge painting on the walls of the City hall of Eisenach.

Of course there are also legendary stories connected with Luther and the Wartburg. One famous one has that one day as he was writing, translating the Bible into German, that he was distracted by the devil, and threw an inkpot at him across the room. The pot hit the wall, and shattered, leaving an inkblot on the wall, which some claim could be seen there until very recently. Other stories became associated

with Luther, especially after his death, including the claim that walls upon which his picture were hung would not burn.

Now, these two stories would be treated in rather predictable ways by the extreme categories on the left and right. The secular confessionalsists would reject them all without needing to examine documentation or evidence, as they all violate the rule against material causes. Perhaps they would be open to the possibility of an inkblot on a wall coming from a thrown ink pot, but the larger story surrounding it would be rejected, or at least recast as a playing out of Luther's internal paranoia. But food becoming roses and supernatural healings would be rejected, not because of poor documentation or sources, but just because these things could not, and cannot, happen.

The fideist confessionalist would approach these stories differently, but predictably, depending on their faith commitments. The Catholic fideist would by in large embrace the stories about St. Elizabeth, the Catholic saint; Protestant fideists would be very open to stories of the miraculous about Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer. Given a venerable tradition in denominational sources, many fideists would accept the story of their religious tradition without much, if any examination, and reject that of their opponents as obvious fables. But what about the other groups?

### **1. Open Critical History**

This category uses the tools of critical history, but would remain open to the possibility of non-material and even transcendent causes, but without making particular claims of such causes in particular cases. This is much like what Grant

Wacker, former president of the American Society of Church History, describes as a “principled agnosticism.” This allows the historian to say “I am not sure exactly what happened, but the claim *might* be true, and unless there is an obvious reason to discount the witnesses’ testimony as dishonest or deluded, I am content to leave it that way.”<sup>14</sup> This approach would involve a certain amount of reporting, rather than necessarily seeking ultimate explanations. It is open to allowing for mysteries that the tools of history cannot grasp, and doesn’t then try to draw a complete history as if those mysteries did not exist or were not possible.

This approach allows for what Wacker calls a “belief inflected” approach to history. Because the transcendent is left at least open, then the historian is able to take religious beliefs seriously, both her own, as well as those of historical actors. Again, this category does not make claims about what religious beliefs might be true. Rather, it argues that people hold religious beliefs and pursue them in way that impacts their own decisions, as well as the society they live in. Religious beliefs do not become reducible to other concerns, such as political, economic, racial or social.<sup>15</sup>

In approaching the stories of St. Elizabeth and Martin Luther, the Open Critical historian would examine the age and provenance of the stories regarding the miraculous events, and decide as a historical matter whether there is reliable evidence to support the historicity of the stories. Ultimately, however, she will not

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<sup>14</sup> Grant Wacker, “Another Tool in the Toolbox: Uses (and Misuses) of Belief-Inflected History,” *Fides et Historia* 44:1 (Winter/Spring 2012), 74.

<sup>15</sup> One of the best collection of essays exploring the importance of taking seriously religious beliefs in the history of ideas is Alister Chapman, John Coffey, Brad Gregory, eds. *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

be so much concerned with passing judgment on them, as to whether they did or not occur. Rather, the focus will be on the beliefs and motives of those passing them along, how they help us understand the religious mind-set and beliefs of those that originated them as well as those that spread them.

This category of history creates a greater chance for historians to approach historic religious actors with sensitivity and understanding and cause them to be more open to the impact that religion qua religion can have on larger society. Many of the books on religious history by Mark Noll, George Marsden, and Nathan Hatch fall into this open critical category. They discuss and analyze the impact of many religious people and events connected with claims of the supernatural, such as the Great Awakenings, accounts of conversion and revival, and even claims of miraculous healings and visions. They generally do not pass on the historicity or factualness of these claims, either positively or negatively, but rather examine the impact and influence on larger society of those that did believe in them. Their “openness” on the issues of supernatural, however, causes them not to “have” to come up with or manufacture some natural, material explanation for all events.

All these authors have been lauded by secular publications and historians as providing powerful insights into America’s past, both religious and cultural. Their work has been reviewed in a broad array of secular journals and publications not only favorably, but often to great acclaim and praise.<sup>16</sup> Marsden’s biography of

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<sup>16</sup> For reviews of Noll’s *America’s God*, see *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 108, No. 4 (October 2003), pp. 1144-1145; *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (Sep., 2004), pp. 595-597; *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Spring, 2005), pp. 651-652; *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 61, No. 3 (Jul., 2004), pp. 539-544; for reviews of Hatch’s *The Democratization of*

Jonathan Edwards won the prestigious Bancroft prize awarded by Columbia University for the writing of American history.<sup>17</sup>

In these works Noll, Marsden and Hatch have not made bold claims of theological or spiritual truth or otherwise taken risks that would antagonize the prevailing secular critical culture in the academy. They have stayed close to the evidence and made only factual claims that secular historians could either readily agree to, or at least not object to in principle. Their religious perspectives have almost entirely been given over to helping frame the historical questions to ask, providing insights into the religious motivations of people in the past, and otherwise seeing religion as an important part of the historical story. This is close to the position that Gary Land seems to advocate for religious historians, when he proposes that Christian historians should pay close attention to the “Christian understanding of man and ethics,” as well as “the significance of the Christian religion.”<sup>18</sup>

In principle, however, all these things could be done by non-religious historians. Perry Miller and the *New England Mind* is a good example of an agnostic historian using this approach to uncover religion as an influential category in history.<sup>19</sup> But still, the practical reality is that a deep commitment to the closed

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*American Christianity*, see *American Studies International*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (October 1991), pp. 113-114, *American Studies International*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (October 1991), pp. 113-114.

<sup>17</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bancroft\\_Prize](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bancroft_Prize)

<sup>18</sup> Land, 97.

<sup>19</sup> Still, it took a religiously sensitive Harry Stout to see the continuities in New England culture where Miller had only seen endings and discontinuities. Stout's *The New England* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1986), showed that the New England Puritan mind persisted if one looked for its influence on more spiritual



system of only material causes generally causes one to try to fill in blanks on the historical map with material, secular explanations, no matter how unlikely the fit. (A knock on the head or self-induced hypnotic visions caused a sickly young lady with a third-grade education to become the most widely-published woman author in history and the founder of the most widespread Protestant medical system in the world.) An overtly skeptical approach makes one more generally suspicious of alleged religious motivations. Every preacher is a likely, or at least potential, Elmer Gantry, every visionary a budding pious swindler, all seeking to advance fame, fortune, or political ambition under the guise of religion.

But of equal importance, the success in the secular academy of Marsden, Noll, Hatch and others writing from religiously sympathetic perspectives has been obtained even while they wrote books of a far more religiously apologetic and even confessional nature. Land does not seem to acknowledge these categories in his article, and as Adventists we need to be aware of these possibilities. It is to these more profoundly religious categories that we now turn.

## **2. Critical Apologetic**

The Critical Apologetic category differs from the Open Critical view perhaps more in tone than in substance. It is a Critical view with an agenda to argue for the existence and importance of non-material causes, motives, or categories. The Open Critical view leaves open the questions of non-material cause, and generally does not seek to advocate or speculate what those non-material causes might be. The

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matters, and asked questions about not just mind, but spirit and soul. Could an atheist have done this as well? Possibly, but one tends to be more sensitive to historical possibilities that are real in one's own life.

Critical Apologetic, by contrast, engages the non-believer or skeptic in an argument for the existence of non-material causes and motives, and perhaps even a particular kind of non-material cause, e.g., an intelligent designer, or the Holy Spirit, or a vision-giving angel.

But the apologetic argument is made using only observations and evidences open to all, without reliance on the authority of any sort of special revelation, like claims of scripture, or visions, angelic voices, or faith experiences. This is what separates it from the third category, the critical confessional, which makes arguments and claims from the category of special revelation itself.

The critical apologist still examines sources critically, and only uses evidence and arguments open to scrutiny by outsiders and non-believers. But it uses these evidences and arguments to support larger claims about a spiritual or non-material world, or the comparative worth of a confessional cause. One form this category takes is the insider perspective—seeking to reveal the internal experiences of believers in order to understand them, not to question the authenticity or factuality of the historical claims of the religion.

A recent example of this “experiential” writing with apologetic flair is Richard Bushman *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*. Bushman, a former professor of history at Columbia University, is a practicing Mormon, who in his *Rough Stone* attempt to write for both Mormons and outsiders. As he put it, it is not that the reader must “believe,” but that the aim of the book is to explain “to a reader what it was like to believe.” In doing this, he avoided “injecting naturalistic explanation that reduces Smith’s extraordinary experiences to commonplace psychological

happenings.” He offers a sort of division of labor; “others can offer explanations; I provide understanding.”<sup>20</sup>

Bushman defends his approach, in part, on the grounds that to reject Joseph Smith’s supernatural stories is to reject an understanding of millions of Mormons who have guided their lives by them. This seems perhaps an inadequate justification, however, to support an “insider” perspective history. Bushman is not studying the history of Mormon belief about Smith, or the mindset of Mormonism generally, but the life of Joseph Smith himself.

In setting out Smith’s story as he does, assuming the truth of claims of miracle and supernatural, Bushman engages in an apologetic for Smith’s view of the world, or at least a defense of Smith’s conduct and actions given in light of his belief that these things happened. Again, the reader does not have to believe, but he is asked to suspend disbelief, so as to understand, and ultimately empathize. This, it seems to me, a kind of apologetic, and has been noted as such by others.<sup>21</sup>

Bushman’s work, it seems to me, opens the door to undertaking a similar project on Ellen White, that that would introduce her to a much wider audience in a sympathetic, yet accessible way.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, “Mormon History Inside Out,” *Fides et Historia* 43:2 (Summer/Fall 2011), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Author Larry McMurtry says that in reading Bushman, it is difficult to determine “where biography ends and apologetics begins.” Larry McMurtry, “Angel in America,” *New York Review of Books*, November 17, 2005, 35-37.

<sup>22</sup> Bushman’s book was critically, yet favorably, reviewed in the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *New York Times Book Review*. Jane Lampman, “He founded a church and stirred a young nation,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 17, 2005; Walter Kirn, *New York Times Book Review*, January 15, 2006, 14-15.

F.D. Nichol, the Adventist editor and author, engaged in a related practice in portions of his book *Answers to Objections*. This book dealt with various negative claims and objections to Adventism, and attempted to answer many of them on reasoned, rational grounds. Did many of the Millerites go insane? No. Did they make ascension robes and wait on hilltops? No. Did they plant crops and fail to harvest them, losing them to winter weather? No. All the answers are taken from historical records, such as newspaper stories and other public reports. Nichol attempts to put in a favorable light, using standard historical evidence, stories about religious believers and their beliefs, in an attempt to put those believers and beliefs in a favorable light for apologetic purposes.<sup>23</sup>

Another recent example of this kind of apologetic from the Catholic side of the aisle is Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation*. In this book, Gregory uses material, standard, historical evidence to make rather massive claims about historical causation regarding the impact of confessional, doctrinal beliefs on society. There is no evidence that Gregory examines and considers that takes special faith or belief in non-material causes or categories (well, apart from the importance of ideas in history, but ideas are not generally considered somehow inherently transcendent.) But the burden of his work is to argue that the confessional belief system of Protestantism, which is not reducible to material categories or causes, has had a major and negative impact on the development of modern, western civilization—essentially causing, among other maladies, the hyper-materialistic, individualistic, consumeristic capitalism that is eroding both the

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<sup>23</sup> F.D. Nichol, *Answers to Objections* \_\_\_\_\_.

modern human spirit and the ozone layer, threatening both human and environmental catastrophe.

The implications of Gregory's work, both unstated and stated, is that various values of the medieval Catholic church, in regards to human nature and society, the value of the sacred and transcendent within the material world, and the importance of solidarity over individualism, would make the world a better place. Gregory's kind of argument is more than "open" to the possibility of transcendent categories and causes, but wants to argue that a particular set of transcendent values and categories is better than another set in real world functioning. Perhaps Marsden's book *Jonathan Edwards* and Noll's book on *America's God* implicitly make similar kinds of claims, yet the purposes of their books is primarily to tell the story of an individual and a historical era, and not to make a larger argument about the state of our world in relation to transcendent values. If their books accomplish this to some degree, it is a secondary goal and result. With Gregory, it is the reason for the book, as shown in the title, thus making it more reflective, in my view, of the Critical Apologetic rather than the Open Critical category.

How would the Critical Apologetic deal with the issue of St. Elizabeth's Roses and Martin Luther's inkblot? Well, there would probably be a more aggressive examination of the documentary and evidentiary sources underlying both events. What are the age of the first accounts: contemporaneous with the events, years later, or even centuries later? When did they arise: at a moment of canonization or confessional strife? But they would not be ruled out *ab initio* because of the miraculous nature of the stories. But neither would they be accepted because they

represented the correct theological or confessional categories. Rather, the Critical Apologist would, beyond the methods of critical history, use reasoning from general revelation to assess certain transcendent claims.

Perhaps Occam's Razor, the principle of causative simplicity, would cause one to suspect that both God and the devil had more efficient ways of accomplishing their purposes than turning good food into roses and lurking in room corners and dodging inkwells. But is there no place for Christian historians to assess the truth or falsity of historical events based on what they believe about the Bible? Must they remain forever mute about the likely truth or falsity of historical events that are not subject to the tools of critical history itself? This is where the third category of Critical Confessional comes in, where the historian puts on a theologian's hat.

### **3. Critical Confessional**

This category moves into the actual world of revealed theology, and will now deal with concepts and categories that are truly faith-based in nature. This can occur in at least three related ways. It may involve taking Biblical concepts and views, and using them as organizing or structuring principles for the study and understanding of history. Mark Noll and George Marsden have done this in various works. Perhaps most notably for Marsden is *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, where he used a variety of Biblical Christian beliefs, including creation, the fall, and redemption to frame a Christian scholar's view of the world and the role of a scholar.<sup>24</sup> Mark Noll does a similar thing in his *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind*, where he takes the various Christian ecumenical creedal beliefs—such as the

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<sup>24</sup> (Oxford University Press, 1997).

incarnation, the human and divine natures of Christ, the trinity—and examines their implications for Christian scholarship in both the humanities and sciences.<sup>25</sup>

Neither Noll nor Marsden use their frameworks to advocate the entry into scholarship of peculiarly Christian concepts such as miracles or prophecy. Rather, they use revealed principles as a basis to argue for the first two categories of critical scholarship, Open and Apologetic. But still, their reliance on revealed theological concepts makes these works confessional works, rather than merely apologetic.

Others go further, and use revealed principles to try to understand the possible role of God's providence and judgment in history. A couple of recent works in this area include Steven Keillor's *God's Judgments: Interpreting History and the Christian Faith*<sup>26</sup> and Dan Via's *Divine Justice, Divine Judgment: Rethinking the Judgment of Nations*.<sup>27</sup> Both of these books engage in a study of Biblical principles of God's judgments in history, and then tries to apply these principles to various historical events in American history, including the Civil War and the events of 9/11.

Such efforts make academics nervous generally, particularly modern historians, who are trying to retain respectability in a scientifically-oriented academy. Nevertheless, respected Christian scholars are treading in these waters (Mark Noll wrote the foreword for Keillor's book; Dan Via is a Professor emeritus at Duke University Divinity School). One would think that Adventist scholars, with their judgment hour message, and with Ellen White's frequent use of the category of judgment in history, would try to help frame a responsible approach to the question

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<sup>25</sup> (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: MI, 2011).

<sup>26</sup> (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2007).

of judgment and history, rather than letting zealous, but historically naïve amateurs hold the field, as is generally the case.

Finally, the critical confessional will not only exam whether historical evidence tends to support or refute claims of the miraculous, but also will evaluate those claims from a normative theological framework. In other words, it will both ask whether the documentary evidence, such as witness statements, regarding Joseph's Smith golden plates are historically plausible, in terms of source, provenance, and internal and external coherence, but it will also evaluate the claims of the story in relation to Biblical theology. Thus, one may arrive at the conclusion that non-material causes were involved, but that these were not necessarily consistent with divine intervention or inspiration. Other forces might be at work.

But this kind of critical historical and theological examination should be applied to claims from within our own circles. All denominational books, even story books and mission books not written at a scholarly level, should attempt to handle responsibly, and with a sense of critical inquiry, both historical and theological, stories of miracles and the supernatural. We need to educate our leaders and laity to avoid repeating without question as to source, provenance, and theological balance, whatever fantastic tale is attached to the name of a co-religionist.

### **Conclusion**

Adventist historians should not limit themselves merely to one type of history. I believe we should training ourselves to write in both category 4, to the community of faith, as well as some combination of categories 2 and 3, to our academic peers and general public. We have both a duty to the church, as well as to



the world, to use our training and skills to aid and edify both groups. We must be apologetic, in using the categories and methods that outsiders can appreciate, as Paul did on Mars Hill in speaking with the Athenian skeptics. But we must also speak to the church, and confess clearly our faith in Jesus Christ and His word. Christian historians also are included in Christ's admonition, "therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven." Mt. 10:32.

These audiences may need to be reached in different works. This is not a question of deceit and deception, but rather knowing one's audience. One should not assert something in one venue that one contradicts in another. Rather, the different projects should be complementary. We have examples of fine Christian scholars who have written successfully in all these categories, including Mark Noll, George Marsden, Bradley Gregory, and others discussed above. There is no reason that Adventist scholars cannot do this, and introduce our own history, and especially the amazing contributions of Ellen White to 19<sup>th</sup> century female leadership, to a broader audience.

Exploring the garden of the past in a way both helpful to the church and convincing to our exterior audiences will require a certain level of philosophical acumen. But the great tradition of Christian thought and philosophy should provide both clothing and even armor to deal with the modern, skeptical philosophies that tend to prevail in modern academia. It is a matter of mentally clothing and equipping ourselves to write history for a new, and more sophisticated, generation of Adventists.