

TEACHING HISTORY FROM AN ADVENTIST PERSPECTIVE:  
SOME PHILOSOPHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

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## I. INTRODUCTION

All Christian teachers who reflect on the practice of their profession in a Seventh-day Adventist school are aware of the challenge of integrating their faith commitment with their academic disciplines. They realize that "the Lord will accept as teachers only those who will be Gospel teachers."<sup>1</sup> How, then can Adventist teachers of history achieve that integration?

History has been defined as the past experience of mankind, which contributes to our understanding of the present and future. Professor Dexter Perkins, in his presidential address to the American Historical Association, asked how history scholars could be broad and deep? He felt that history teachers should be establishing patterns with regard to the past that have value for young men and women. "The history teacher should have some fundamental intellectual and moral attitude, for history in the last analysis is a point of view. . . The professor who primarily emphasizes teaching must find his rewards in the lives and achievements of his students."<sup>2</sup>

From an Adventist perspective, "the lives and achievements of his students" means the upbuilding of their characters, as Ellen White mentioned in her book, Education: "As with language, so with every other study, it may be so conducted that it will tend to strengthening and upbuilding character. Of no study is this true to a greater degree than of history. Let it be considered from the divine point of view."<sup>3</sup>

An Adventist history teacher will have different views from that of secular history teachers concerning the interpretation of historical events. His secular counterpart often discredits God's providence and considers other factors that, in his view, have determined history. A few of his Christian colleagues will with equal assurance, attempt to point out just where the hand of God is to be discerned in

history.<sup>3</sup>

It is the purpose of this study to introduce the basic concepts underlying an Adventist perspective on history and suggest several methodological approaches. While Adventist history teachers need to respect the integrity of the subject of history - because teaching history is not teaching religion - it is also their responsibility and privilege to allow their faith to influence their teaching. Accepting the responsibility and privilege, an Adventist history teacher should introduce Christian beliefs in all courses of history.

## II. ADVENTIST PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION FOR THE TEACHING OF HISTORY

Although there are many conflicting philosophical views concerning history, every Christian history teacher needs to have a clear philosophy of history compatible with his worldview and religious beliefs. "If the teacher has no consistent philosophy of history, students will soon detect that they are being guided aimlessly through a maze of historical facts, dates, names and events that have little meaning or value either to them or to the teacher."<sup>5</sup>

What is the Adventist philosophy of history? Faithful Adventist historians will take into account God's revelation through the Scriptures and also through the writings of Ellen G White. Ellen G White's philosophy of history is based primarily on the great controversy between two universal antagonistic forces -- the forces of righteousness under the leadership of Christ and the forces of evil under the leadership of Satan. This basic idea is the fundamental unifying concept that Mrs. White employs in her historical writings.<sup>6</sup> Her theological approach to a philosophy of history is in harmony with the revelation given by the Lord in the Bible.

### 1. The Great Controversy: A Historical Theme

People are aware that conflicts and wars have existed throughout history. In the article, "The Lessons of History," by Will and Ariel Durant state: "In the

last 3421 years of recorded history only 268 have seen no war."<sup>1</sup> A Christian history teacher will understand these various conflicts and wars as directly or indirectly related to the great controversy. The following conflicting themes have been developed in the writings of Ellen G. White: (a) The controversy between truth and error.<sup>2</sup> (b) The controversy between good and evil.<sup>3</sup> (c) The controversy between righteousness and sin.<sup>4</sup> (d) The controversy between the religion of the Bible and tradition.<sup>11</sup> (e) The controversy between the law of God and the laws of men.<sup>12</sup> (f) The conflict in the human heart.<sup>13</sup> (g) The conflict against God's children.<sup>14</sup>

Besides considering evidence of the great controversy, a history teacher needs to emphasize the main issue of this controversy, a rebellion "against God's law, which was begun in heaven and will be continued until the end of time."<sup>15</sup> Thus the students will see that the law and obedience to the law is the central issue in the great controversy. This controversy will ultimately end when the character of God is reproduced in the lives of His people. When Jesus comes to earth for the second time the history of the world will end. There will be peace and harmony throughout God's creation, and all creatures will declare that God is love.<sup>16</sup> History students not only should know the concepts of the great controversy, but also must understand where they stand in relation to that controversy. Ellen White writes of this in the book Education:

The student should learn to view the word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its grand central theme, of God's original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption. . . He should see how this controversy enters into every phase of human experience; how in every act of life he himself reveals the one or the other of the two antagonistic motives; and how, whether he will or not, he is even now deciding upon which side of the controversy he will be found.<sup>17</sup>

History can "actualize value-potentials inherent in human existence."<sup>13</sup> Every student in every Adventist history class should understand and realize that in every action he/she performs, good or evil, he/she supports Christ or Satan in the great controversy.

## 2. The Creator, God of History

If the great controversy serves as the underlying philosophical historical premise then it cannot be separated from the concept of God as the Creator of History or, stating it differently, the Creator as the God of history. The Bible, the most ancient and comprehensive history in existence, presents God as immanent and transcendent, who created and sustains the world. This view is reflected in a number of Biblical passages: "Who [God] being the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His person and upholding all things by the word of His power" (Hebrew 1:3). "In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind" (Job 12:10). "For in Him we live and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring'" (Acts 17:28).

These Biblical passages show that God is in all historical events, for it is by His sustaining power all life and events continue.<sup>14</sup>

In the annals of human history, the growth of nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as if dependent on the will and prowess of man; the shaping of events seems, to a great degree, to be determined by his power, ambition, or caprice. But in the word of God the curtain is drawn aside, and we behold, above, behind, and through all the play and counter play of human interest and power and passions, the agencies of the All-Merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will.<sup>15</sup>

### a. God Works in History

"The Christian understanding of history is that it is through the Holy Spirit which is God Himself that God continues to work in history."<sup>16</sup> In this activity, He is involved in social and national affairs. He directed the history of Israel, became

incarnated in history, and established the church to continue His work.<sup>23</sup>

The result of God's work in history not only can be seen in the time of Israel and in the time of Christ, but also in the present by the growth of Christianity in individuals, in groups and society at large. From time to time the Lord has sent His people to witness of His abundant love to the world. The works of Paul, Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley and Ellen G. White show how God uses people throughout history. This should be an encouragement to every student of history. It shows that they too can be used by the Holy Spirit to work for Him.

#### b. God's Providence in History

The concept that the Creator is a God who works in history relates to the concept of God's Providence in history. Karl Barth defines the doctrine of providence as follows:

The Doctrine of Providence deals with history of created beings as such, in the sense that in every respect and its whole span this proceeds under the fatherly care of God the Creator, whose will is done and is to be seen in His election grace and therefore in the history of the covenant between Himself and man and therefore in Christ.<sup>24</sup>

Adventists believe in God's providence and acknowledge God's sovereignty in history. However, every Adventist history teacher must recognize his own limitation. "Apart from what revelation reveals, he (the history teacher) should not claim knowledge of God's intervention."<sup>24</sup> In many events of history, we can only speculate because we do not know how God's sovereignty and humanity will interface.

The foundations of an Adventist philosophy of history can help students as they develop their own personal identity. No longer will they need to ask, "Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?" The Adventist philosophy of history will give direction to their lives, satisfy their questions, and inspire them with the conviction that they have an important role in the great controversy between

righteousness and evil.

### III. HISTORY CONFIRMS THE FULFILLMENT OF PROPHECY

One teaching history from an Adventist perspective must then accept the fact that many historical events are a fulfillment of prophecy. These fulfillments can be used to strengthen the students' faith in God and the Bible. In this way Ellen White's statement that education should produce people who "can stand for the right though the heavens fall"<sup>65</sup> can be accomplished.

Although we know that not all historical events have been prophecized by the Bible, we know in a general sense what has happened and what will happen to the world.

#### I. Fulfillment of the Biblical Prophecies

The Bible reveals how Satan has worked through various nations to try to exterminate God's people. These nations include Egypt (Nehemiah 9:7-8; Joel 3:19), Assyria (Isaiah 52:4), Babylon (Jeremiah 51:34), Canaanites and other nations (Psalms 83:4-8), Greece (Joel 3:6), Pagan Rome (Daniel 3:24), Papal Rome (Daniel 8:21, Revelation 13:7).

The first coming of Jesus was a historical event that was foretold by Old Testament prophets. These prophecies included His coming (Deuteronomy 18:15), His birth (Isaiah 61:1), His trial and crucifixion (Isaiah 53:7, Psalm 22:18), and His burial and resurrection (Psalms 16:10).

Adventists are familiar with the prophecy of Daniel 2 concerning the history of nations. The Adventist history teacher can give detailed explanations about the rise and the fall of kingdoms (Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome) in harmony with the prophecies of Daniel 2. The fulfillment of Daniel 2:42-43 concerning "iron is not mixed with clay" can be explained by the fact that Charlemagne, Charles V, Louis XIV, Napoleon, Kaiser Wilhelm and others who tried



to unite the broken fragments of the Roman Empire failed. Even marriage and intermarriage of royal ties have failed to strengthening together the shattered kingdom. None have succeeded.

The history of nations as found in Daniel 2 has been related to Daniel 7 in which the history of the AntiChrist is related to the Papacy. Adventists are also familiar with the belief that Daniel 7 has been related with Revelation 17 and the United States of America is symbolized by the second beast of Revelation 17. Adventist history teachers could describe the role of the Papacy and the United States in world history. Students can be led to see God's hand in the fulfillment of prophecy.

Since the second coming of Jesus will end the world's history, it is the privilege of Adventist history teachers to prepare students to be ready for the second coming of Jesus and help them have a proper perspective in interpreting current world events in the light of Scriptural prophecy. As we consider current events it is clear that the following prophecies are being fulfilled: (a) Political conflicts (Matthew 24:6,7), (b) Conflicts between capital and labour (James 5:1-3), (c) Natural disasters (Matthew 24:7), (d) Progress of scientific knowledge (Daniel 12:4), (e) Social conflicts (2 Timothy 3:1-5), (f) Persecution of God's people (Matthew 10:16-25; 24:10), (g) The increase of Papal power (26), (h) The emergence of Protestant America (27), (i) Unity between Catholics, Protestants and spiritualism (28).

## 2. Prophecy as Foreknowledge

The belief that God prophesied historical events has resulted in some dubious understandings relative to predestination. Some history students may question God's wisdom if every historical event is taught as the fulfillment of prophecy. He/she may wonder if man has the power of choice.

It is the responsibility of the history teacher to explain prophecy's role.

"The element of prediction in prophecy was designed to afford a view of the things of time in the light of eternity, to alert the church for effective action at appropriate times, to facilitate personal preparation for the final crisis, to vindicate God and to leave man without excuse in the day of judgment, and to attest the validity of prophecy as a whole."

In His omniscience God has seen "the end from the beginning" (Isaiah 46:9) and Jesus Himself has declared: "I have told you before it came to pass, that ye might believe" (John 14:29). Prophetic revelation has never meant predestination, because God does not interfere with the free exercise of man's will (Ezekiel 13:31, 32; 33:11, 2 Peter 3:9. (7) In fact, the promises and predictions sent through the Old Testament prophets to literal Israel were to be fulfilled on condition of obedience and loyalty. Some prophecies were not fulfilled because Israel rejected God's plans. This is evidence that God still gives man the power of choice. Therefore, prophecy is not the same as predestination.

The Christian philosophy of history and its relationship to prophecy are of utmost importance and should be introduced to our history students for several reasons: (1) Fundamental to prophetic interpretation is the conviction that God is guiding the course of human affairs. It is interrelated with the present. While it may be difficult to explain the reason for certain events, the students' confidence in divine providence remains firm. (2) Prophetic interpretation sustains the Church, of which the student is a part, in the midst of political and economic crisis. (3) Prophetic interpretation directs students' attention to a future bright with promise.<sup>36</sup>

#### IV. RELEVANCY OF TEACHING HISTORY

Adventist teachers of history should carefully consider ways of making their subject pertinent to the lives and interests of the students. History students will not show much interest and enthusiasm for history classes unless they see in them

something worthy of their involvement.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the teacher's concern should be to adjust his material to fit the needs and aspirations of the students, while satisfying the objectives of the course.

1. The Principle of Cause and Effect

"The teacher must make the past live and speak to the students today as the voice of experience through the principle of cause and effect."<sup>32</sup> This principle is applicable to everybody, including the lives of teachers and students; "an effect" will happen because of a certain "cause." This demonstrates the important concept that "history reveals the accountability of persons as responsible agents in relationship to God as well as to nature and other persons."<sup>33</sup>

In His wisdom God has given power, ability, authority and talent to human beings; therefore they are accountable for any gift received from Him. The Bible and Ellen G White states that blessings, even prosperity, will be the result of using God's gifts in accordance to His plan. She wrote,

"Atheists, infidels and apostates oppose and denounce God's law; but the results of their influence prove that the well-being of man is bound up with his obedience of the divine statutes. Those who will not read the lesson from the book of God, are bidden to read it in the history of nations."<sup>34</sup>

History teachers need to challenge their students to reflect on the whys and hows, the successes and failures recorded on the pages of history. The teacher also needs to lead the students to the conviction that every human being is accountable for any gift or talent received from God.

2. Lessons from Biographies

History includes the biographies of thousands of human beings who have lived before us. The Adventist history teacher can extrapolate vital lessons from these biographies, to strengthen the character of students. Ellen White says, "Let the pupil study the lives of such men as the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther, as

Moffat and Livingstone and Carey and the present daily-unfolding history of missionary effort."<sup>35</sup>

Biographies of such people may spark a sense of mission in the lives of students and lead them to labor for Him. "The lives of men whom God favored and to whom He entrusted great responsibilities, are both for encouragement and warning for us."<sup>36</sup> The study of history not only can be a warning and reminder of man's follies and faults, but also an encouraging remembrance of God's love and His promise that He will guide us in the future as He has lead His people in the past.

### 3. Moral Lessons from History

Much of human history may allow teachers to draw moral lessons. William J Bennet, former United States Secretary of Education, stated that in order to foster moral development, "we have a wealth of material to draw on from our literature and history--material that virtually all schools once taught, can be taught in our regular literature and history courses."<sup>37</sup> Some moral lessons that can be taught from history include honesty, faithfulness, respect for the law, and persistence. For example, honesty can be taught by studying about the life of young Abraham Lincoln, and about how he walked three miles to return six cents.<sup>38</sup>

Ellen White also mentions moral lessons that can be learned through the study of history. She mentions the lives of Alexander, Caesaer, Napoleon, Hume and Voltaire, which show the danger of indulgence and the importance of childhood education in the development of future life values.<sup>39</sup> There are many other moral lessons that can be drawn from history, all of which can give the students spiritual insight from historical and biographical events.

## V. METHODOLOGY IN TEACHING HISTORY

Methodology is no less important than the content. In fact, methodology in

teaching history is essential in order to maintain students' interest in the subject, stimulate their motivation for learning, and implement historical lessons in their daily life. Good study materials with poor methodology will discourage the students in their learning experience.

### 1. Practical Syllabus

Teachers need to prepare a practical syllabus that is simple but complete. The syllabus should include course objectives, course content, an assignment schedule, method of evaluation and a bibliography. The syllabus also must show clear course requirements, assignments and a study guide. The course schedule should include dates, topics, text assignments and additional references for each lesson. The schedule for mid-test, final test, and a term paper if applicable also must be seen in the class schedule.

To be of greatest usefulness the study guide should preferably be in outline form and consist of carefully prepared thought-provoking questions,<sup>40</sup> followed by major discussion points, also in the form of thought provoking questions. It is appropriate at the end of each section to have a special recapitulation subsection, so that the students can have the main thought of each section reinforced.

### 2. Proper Outlining

Students will learn much better when they become proficient in making usable outlines in their study of history. In some cases teachers can distribute a study outline as a hand-out. This is better than nothing. However, it is better if the teacher draws an outline on the board or overhead projector and explains why certain procedures are used in outlining. It will take more time, but will be rewarding because outlining is really the process of analyzing history to determine the main concept. This kind of procedure will stimulate and promote individual thinking in terms of historical concepts, in harmony with the aim of education

which is to develop thinkers.

### 3. Instructional Techniques

It is common in teaching history for the teacher to tell stories. As a result, a good story teller is considered a good history teacher, while a poor story teller is considered a bad teacher. However, it is important that a history teacher use several different ways of teaching. Aside from giving lectures in the classroom, a history teacher can use discussion groups, problem solving, team teaching, guest lectures on specialized topics, lecture-discussion, seminar methods, individual and group reports, documentary films, and field trips to historical locations. The use of visual aids such as historical maps can help students see where and how events took place.

In teaching history, the Socratic method is appropriate. In every approach the proper use of questioning by the teacher will often spell the difference between success and failure. The following suggestions are given by Victor R Lebedoff for better history teaching: (a) Let fact questions always lead up to a thought questions and encourage students to think out answers to problems. (b) Answer a student's question by a question that will encourage the student to search further evidence to clarify his thinking. This technique will refine student's thinking and elicit pertinent evidence.<sup>41</sup>

### 4. Testing and Grading

Most history students complain before examinations because of the quantity of material to remember in their thick textbook and full notebooks. These complaints may reach the point of "hating history." Therefore, one effective way to encourage students to study regularly rather than cram for big final examinations is to spread testing throughout the semester by giving daily quizzes. These daily quizzes must be short, meaningful, interesting and centered on the

main theme of the lesson.

The tests should not be based on the memorization of facts. A satisfactory examination will include the following: (1) Questions identifying key individuals and their particular contribution to history. (2) Questions explaining typical terms that apply to particular developments. (3) Questions on interpretation (how and why certain event happened). (4) Questions on tracing developments or trends in history. These types of questions will give variety and make it possible to test the achievement of the various objectives of the course.

On the final examination, an essay type question dealing with the development or decline of a certain trend in history is considered excellent. This type of test measures (a) students' understanding of main concepts, (b) their ability to express their thoughts clearly, (c) their ability to find and organize material on a particular topic, and (d) their attitude and appreciation of the course.<sup>42</sup>

As far as grading, students appreciate simplicity. The percentage method of grading, i.e. A for 90% and over and B for 80% and over, is acceptable by students. They can calculate their own grades, and know what they must accomplish to reach a higher percentage. It is important to include all students' efforts in a grading system, such as attendance, reading reports, quizzes, mid-test, and final test, using a percentage system to grade.

Good materials combined with a proper philosophy of history and effective methodology in teaching and grading will be an excellent way to reach class objectives.

## VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

An Adventist history teacher is different from many of his non-Adventist counterparts, because he goes beyond facts and dates. He must have a philosophy of history which emphasizes that God the Creator of the universe is the God of

history. The instructor must believe that every happening in history is under His control. The Bible and the writings of Ellen G White give clues to an understanding of conflicts throughout history. These are a part of the great controversy that will end in the new earth when God's love will be acknowledged by the whole universe. Every student of history needs to see his/her role in history because he/she has the potential for good and evil, and is accountable for every gift given by God.

Many events in the past, present, and the future are a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. However, prophecy and predestination are not the same. Human beings have freedom of choice. Prophecy means foreknowledge, because the Lord knows everything that will happen in the future.

Every Adventist history teacher must find ways of making history relevant to the students. Within history, students can learn the principle of cause and effect. They can also learn from the biographies of people. All historical events contain moral lessons like honesty, faithfulness, respect for the law, persistence, the danger of indulgence, and the importance of childhood education.

A teacher with a Christian philosophy, relevant materials combined with the best methodology in teaching, and a workable grading system will produce the best results in teaching history. History will become interesting, instructional and inspirational. The class will also be an instrument for spiritual growth.

Teaching history from an Adventist perspective has an important function in strengthening and building the character of our students. And as teachers of history develop effective ways of integrating their Christian faith with their academic discipline, they will be able to present human history as the history of God's love.



## VII. End Notes

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