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# Teaching Denominational History: A Survey of US Adventist Colleges and Universities

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## Teaching Denominational History: A Survey of US Adventist Colleges and Universities

Researching and teaching church history is fraught in the best circumstances, but when sectarian schools want to include their tradition's heritage as part of their general education program, it provides a great opportunity for the Christian historian/professor to contribute to their institutions. Such courses can easily fall into a feel-good exercise, reinforcing all the good old stories without finding ways to increase critical thinking about one's denominational identity. How can the Christian historian participate in identity-formation, an appreciation of their tradition's past, while teaching students how to analyze and think critically about the changes over time within their church? In researching for this paper, I was reminded by Mark Schwen, channeling Thomas Haskell, that the historical discipline requires that its practitioners "abandon wishful thinking, assimilate bad news, discard pleasing interpretations that cannot pass elementary tests of evidence and logic, and most important of all, suspend or bracket one's own perceptions long enough to enter sympathetically into the alien and possibly repugnant perspectives of rival thinkers."<sup>1</sup> This paper looks at the situation within the Seventh-day Adventist universities in the United States, assessing what the greatest challenges seem to be in teaching SDA heritage, and pointing the way toward some of the hard conversations and pedagogical tasks that are required for more consistent education within the denomination.

The Association of SDA Historians meets regularly and almost all of our meetings involve some sense of self-criticism as well as "angsty" ruminations on why we aren't more influential in our denomination. Those who research in Adventist history proper (while not the majority of us) still find themselves writing primarily for their fellow scholars. We do realize that one way we could expand our "publics" is to think about the opportunities we have in teaching denominational history within the Adventist university system. There are 106 institutions of higher learning accredited by the SDA church worldwide. Increasingly our colleagues from outside the US are participating in these conversations and helping to shape what Adventist history looks like from this global perspective.

However, it helps to start at home, and this study will focus on the North American context. In each of the 9 traditional undergraduate institutions run by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the United States, some form of denominational history is taught. Over 90% of the undergraduate students at these schools are Adventist, so these courses are in many ways teaching students about themselves, rather than introducing them to an institutional heritage they don't share. It has become clear, however, that there are increasingly divergent approaches to this history and no consensus on the purpose of teaching the class. In some schools it is taught for religion credit, in some it receives a HIST designation. Few students are required to take it outside of theology majors, and it appears that the needs of this particular group have driven much of the pedagogy. The Association of SDA Historians has increasingly become committed to finding ways to shape the denomination's self-image and education regarding its past. But there is widespread ignorance regarding to what extent, in the most obvious educational setting, our universities, we are doing anything like historical education.

While I don't do research on Adventist history or even nineteenth/twentieth century history, I chose to try to contribute to my fellow denominational historians through providing them with the data about what is going on in our schools. Until recently there has been a lot of assumptions regarding what is going on, but not much summarization of the facts. The research

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Schwen, "Faith Seeking Historical Understanding" in *Confessing History*, John Fea, Jay Green, and Eric Miller eds. (Notre Dame, University Press, 2010), 34.

I did involve calling professors or administrators in all 9 schools (as well as our three medical colleges). I tried to speak to the person who taught classes in Adventist heritage regardless of the department, but I also tried to talk to someone in the other department (whether theology or history) just to see how they felt about things. The research is very “soft”, but more than we’ve had on this subject and the concerns this survey engendered seem to me to reflect the issues and questions of the historical profession more generally.

**Discipline Boundaries: what purpose does teaching Adventist history serve  
and who should do it?**

Only in 3 of the 9 schools was a class known as Adventist Heritage or History taught in the History Department or for HIST credit, although in two of the schools where it was taught in the theology department, the professor had also done graduate work in history. Eight of the nine historians I surveyed felt strongly that denominational history should be taught by someone trained in history. The historians used phrases like “historians are more objective and open to diverse ideas”, “historians don’t study history as a form of apologetics”, and some said that since mostly theology/religion majors take this class, having someone outside their department teach it was freeing for them—they didn’t have to worry about whether their orthodoxy was being questioned. One historian did say that denominational heritage was too important to hive off into one department and should show up in lots of different subjects, not just history.

Only two of the theologians were as territorial. Those two said that historians tend to secularize and are less clear on the significance of the history they are studying. One said that “why?” questions are best answered in religion classes and that the focus of church history should be on the rationale and not just what happened. However, most of the theologians felt that the perspective of taking theological and religious developments seriously was one that devout historians could have as well as theologians and so Adventist perspectives could be communicated by historians effectively.

In interviewing the professors who teach these courses and the heads of the departments in which they are taught, I found that there were tensions between the theological and ecclesiological goals of the religion departments and the educational and analytical goals of the historians. In at least three situations there had been outright hostility on the part of one department or the other regarding who was teaching the class and what their perceived “agenda” was in teaching it. At my own institution, church history is taught in the history department but denominational heritage is taught in the school of religion and that goes back 30 years to a big dust up in which people in both the school of religion and the history department lost their jobs.

**Tactics for teaching: Who is taking the class  
and at what level are they being taught?**

One way for historians to assess the extent to which they can shape their church’s understanding of its past is through the number of people in their denomination who take courses such as this. While only a minority of Adventists attended SDA colleges and universities, these are disproportionately represented in the leadership of the church. So the general education religion requirements are deeply influential in how many people get this sort of historical perspective. Only 2 of the schools had a heavy institutional requirement for denominational history. At my own school, at least 1/3 of the students take Adventist Heritage. So there is a huge opportunity here.

However, at most schools it is just theology, education and sometimes history majors who take this class. The history departments who teach it are most likely to teach it at an upper division level and this seems to impede the number of students who take the course. At one school the history department teaches it at an upper division level and so the religion department has started to offer it at a lower division level, with perhaps obvious results.

Lower division courses tend to focus on easier readings and have assignments like reading some primary sources or watching films, while the upper division courses have the students focus (almost always) on some controversial item and write a paper on it in addition to doing a wider range of reading.

### **Scope of the Class: Or how content reveals purpose**

While most of the people teaching the class said they wanted it to be about our denomination's history and the church in general, the chronological spread, the focus of the assignments and the sort of readings required clearly demonstrate a commitment to looking at the nineteenth century US origins of the church. Those who use the traditional Adventist undergraduate textbook *Lightbearers to the Remnant* by Richard Schwartz were more likely to include some twentieth century institutional develop and a bit on the global spread of the denomination. However, this was never more than 20% of the syllabus time. The one exception to this was our historically black college, Oakwood, where the textbook used (written by one of the historians in the department) not only heavily focuses on the twentieth century, including African-Americans (who are more than 30% of Adventists in the US), but has a strong international flavor as well.

Another clear emphasis that wasn't formally articulated by the professors I interviewed was a focus on the life of Ellen White, one of our founders and prophetic leader of the church until her death in 1915. Most of the classes included some sort of biography of her or focus on her writings and life. While many of the schools have an entire class on Ellen White, usually taken by theology majors, most of the professors who teach Adventist History expressed a concern that their students would not otherwise know anything about White or understand her role in the church unless they focused on her. This focus seems to contribute to a chronology for the class that mostly winds up at World War 1, with some time for twentieth century "trends and controversies" at the end of the term.

The readings and chronology demonstrate less a concern with the development of the church to the present day or the practice of Adventism around the world, and more a focus on beginnings and the life of the founder.

### **My Observations and Questions of My Peers Based on this information**

I did this survey and then presented the results at a conference in Washington DC in January 2014 of scholars who are largely responsible for the teaching of SDA history. As an "outsider", I just laid out the following observations for them and offered some analytical questions for discussion. It turned out this information was very welcome. Many of the professors did not in fact know what was going on in other schools.

#### **Observations:**

1. People think students don't/can't read as much as they used to and so are assigning Knight instead of Schwartz because of brevity. This means that students aren't reading the work of professional historians unless articles or bits of Schwartz are assigned alongside Knight.

2. Ellen White and her writings are included in all but one of the classes I surveyed—Sometimes the same people teach a class that focuses on the church and that focuses on Ellen White, but it seems as if people are worried if they don't cover her and how to read her writings in this class they won't have a chance to do so and so that shapes the content of the class.
3. It seems important what the relationships are between the historians and theologians in any given institution—how much trust is there, how much understanding about what is being taught in which classes
4. Historians tend to use Schwartz more and those who use him tend to focus more on global issues.
5. All the professors I surveyed articulated as one of their goals that they wanted their students to develop an appreciation of their church's history. Most of them thought that this could happen whether taking the perspective of the development of beliefs or a more strictly contextual and historical approach. They all thought that context mattered.
6. Many professors expressed a sense of tension regarding what the goals of the theology/religion majors were and what historians might want to be doing, even as they thought there didn't need to be such a tension.
7. Most classes seem to include controversies or issues as part of their curriculum. If they include anything in the twentieth century at all, it was divisive items such as race relations in the US, the equality of women, and a couple key moments in the last century where theological conflict seemed that it might split the church.

### **Final Questions/Issues to raise:**

1. Is there a difference between Adventist Studies/Beliefs and Adventist History? Is the purpose of this class to provide a history of Adventist beliefs, or the practice of the church?
2. What about global perspectives? If the goal is to understand how Adventists got started (Adventist Origins?), is it okay to just focus on the US? Do we need to think about missions and how Adventism changed over time and place?
3. There does seem to be a sense that historians might not be focusing on a celebration of what God has done in our church's history. Is this true of us? If so, why? What kind of conversations can theologians and historians have regarding how we look at the evidence of history and what that says about our views of how God works in the world? If we do think God is working in history, how can we articulate this to non-historians, church leaders, and theologians? Is there such a thing as objectivity in teaching Adventist history? Do we want this?

### **Conclusions**

The result of this conversation at the ASDAH conference was that it was agreed that the dozens of Adventist universities overseas also need an approach to Adventist heritage that includes their stories. There was the recognition that trying to write a one-stop-shop textbook may not answer the concerns of all the diverse universities and would make few people happy. However, there was a call for making collections of primary documents for students to use easily in these courses (no such collection seems to exist for undergraduates), and for writing at least a few more accessible histories of the twentieth century that include more social history. It is also clear that there needs to be narratives of missionary activity which are written from the perspective of the indigenous Adventists rather than from an institutional, top-down approach.

It seemed too risky for the attendees to really address the issue of controversy between theologians and historians, and the role of providence in denominational history. There was an acknowledgement that perhaps historians should make their denominational loyalty more explicit both in and out of the classroom so that what they are teaching is seen in the context of loving their church. It was also mentioned that more interaction between these departments within schools and more interdisciplinary professional conferences might work toward building trust and enriching our teaching, research and writing.

Finally, and most exciting for the historians present, the denomination's global vice president for educational accreditation chaired our panel and was surprised to hear that people are approaching this class from the perspective of doctrinal development. She expressed concern about this—pointing out that the denomination already requires Gen Ed religion courses on doctrinal matters and that this sort of course should be a genuine history course using historical tools to study our church's past. She conceded that the accreditation body hadn't considered the implications of whether the class was taught for religion or history credit and whether people with historical training were teaching it. This understanding may shape future conversations with our denominational accreditation body—with, we hope, more possibilities for Adventist historians to have space to contribute to the church.

It is hoped that this assessment within one church tradition can benefit the large community of Christian historians. We may all walk the line between seeing our church history as a source of inspiration and identity while also approaching it with more of the methodologies of analysis and an attempt to be even-handed in assessing successes and failures. But it does seem to come down to a question of why are we teaching these classes. What do we want to accomplish? In the Adventist context, it seems that the focus on theological origins rather than something like missions or social history has led to the historians being viewed suspiciously from time to time. It appears that a greater focus on the more recent period of history and our church around the world could both engage our students and open up space for historians to do their work in a way that it isn't currently being done—we can fill a niche and avoid conflict at the same time. There seems to be excitement building within our scholarly community at the recognition that we could use our students to collect oral histories, and to focus on Adventists outside North America in ways that will really enrich our church and inspire loyalty and gratitude for our fellow believers in different times and places.

So in addition to historical study requiring hard thinking and assimilating the bad news that Mark Schwen reminded us of in my opening quote, an approach that is more social and global would allow us to contribute to William Katerberg's vision: that historians should be less concerned than they are with objectivity as such and that Christian historians especially, whose calling is to love our neighbor as ourselves, ought to be thinking about the people in the present, about the practical, useful element of our scholarship, rather than merely getting the data and chronology and evidence right. Those things should happen, too, of course, but faithfulness to our Christianity (we might say even our denomination) will mean that we seek to encourage loving relationships, between people now and between the past and the present.<sup>2</sup> Rethinking the purpose and extent of the requirements of our Gen Ed denominational history might allow Adventist historians to both teach good thinking and to be responsive to the contemporary needs of their students and the church.

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<sup>2</sup> *Confessing History*, p. 121