

IX

THE ODDITY OF THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS

My readers in Great Britain may wonder why I should include *The Seventh-Day Adventists* in these chapters. This American-born faith is almost unknown among us, they may say, and its influence on our religious life is negligible. It may be, however, that we underestimate the appeal which an odd religion like this may make to people in these days when so many have little religious training, and are not educated 'in a sound faith.'

The following paragraph appeared in *The Scotsman* of 19th November 1946 :

'Inability to keep the Sabbath if he were to serve with the Forces was advanced by a young student as grounds for exemption from military service at a meeting of the Scotland Region Appellate Tribunal held in Parliament House, Edinburgh, yesterday, when he appealed against the decision of a local tribunal that he should serve with a non-combatant unit. The appellant¹ told the tribunal that he was a member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, which kept Saturday as the Sabbath. He agreed that logically no orthodox Jew should join the Army. Asked whether as a doctor he would attend a patient on Saturday, he replied, "Yes, I would. That is a work of mercy." Speaking on his behalf, his father said that members of the Church were prepared to do what they could,

¹ I omit the name of the appellant in courtesy

provided they could keep the commandments. His son intended to become a medical missionary. The tribunal, under the chairmanship of Sir George Morton, K.C., decided to uphold the decision of the local tribunal.'

This chance excerpt may show that the Seventh-Day Adventists are not as unknown among us as we may imagine. In any case, they still exercise a considerable influence in the United States and the Dominions. When they celebrated the fiftieth year of their missionary work, the following appeared in one of our newspapers. 'Those who are interested in the evangelistic, educational, and other philanthropic activities of the Seventh-Day Adventists, will be glad to know that in America they are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the missionary work of their denomination. In the last twenty-three years they have sent out 2,292 missionaries, of whom 1,335 sailed for foreign fields during the last decade. Work is now being done in 194 languages.'

Of course I cannot vouch for the accuracy of these figures. Moreover, we should remember an important point—the term 'missionary' among the Seventh-Day Adventists does not mean exactly what it means with most other churches. In Scotland, for instance, we have to train and educate our missionaries through a long and exacting course of study and preparation. But every member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, after a short course of training, is expected to be an agent and evangelist of their faith; and it is his duty to proclaim his message, in and out of season, to any and all. In this perhaps they might well prove an inspiration or rebuke to most of us. In this particular at least they are certainly nearer to the practice and

passion of the early disciples than we often are. Unfortunately many of us have lost this *personal* outlook on the duty of evangelization. We so often pay for others to do our aggressive work—even if we remember to do that!

If then we assume that these figures, which I have quoted above, are correct and in any way official, we are forced to ask ourselves who and what the Seventh-Day Adventists are. Moreover, in addition to this, their creed raises a point of some small interest which has cropped up again and again in the history of the Church, especially among those whom we may justly call literalists.

I

The origin of this Church dates back to the year 1831, when in the United States of America a man named William Miller announced that he had discovered from Bible prophecy the exact year and day when Jesus would make His Second Advent, and the end of our world would come. Miller was born at Pittsfield, Mass., in 1782, but was reared and educated at Low Hampton, N.Y. He was a farmer by profession, and had only the ordinary advantages of a country school education. He became an active member of the local Baptist Church, and began to study the Bible with great application, but with little historical knowledge or critical judgment.

In spite of a hundred other similar predictions made throughout the past centuries—all of which were falsified—thousands of simple people accepted him as a 'prophet,' and believed his predictions. Like all the others who have made similar calculations—similar, but always so startlingly different—Miller based his

conclusions on the obscure books of *Revelation* and *Daniel*, which he interpreted in a literal and arbitrary fashion. For the Second Coming he fixed on the year 1843. Later, however, alleging that he had made a mistake in his arithmetic, he changed this to 1844. He did not see, poor man, that his alleged 'mistake' in arithmetic did not matter; it was *arithmetic itself*, in any form, as applied to prophecy, that was the only mistake!

In that year, 1844, according to his own startling words, 'the door would be shut,' and there would be no more room for repentance—a terrible weapon of fear to the minds of simple or superstitious people! He and the Seventh-Day Adventists after him, asserted that the 'Day of Mercy' was finished, and no-one thereafter could either be converted or saved. What a ghastly message to preach in the name of Jesus Christ! And what a travesty of the grace of God!

It is interesting to notice, in the by-going, how a belief like this may affect simple people—and let us remember the Americans of that day were level-headed, even 'hard-headed.' The following quotation from the Rev. D. M. Canright, who was himself formerly a member and elder of the Seventh-Day Adventists, gives a short account of some of the social effects of this wild preaching. 'Millerism for about four years in a few states created a great excitement. Churches were divided and broken up; pastors left their flocks to lecture on "time," while argument and strife were the order of the day. As the time set drew near, in thousands of cases, the Adventists not only left their work and their business, but gave up their property. Crops were left ungathered, goods were distributed freely, so that many who had been well-to-do were left penniless. After the

time had passed, these people were destitute, and their families suffered. Many had to be arrested and put under guardians, to protect their families. Then the wildest fanaticism broke out here and there, which brought disgrace upon the very name of religion. Many said that the Lord had come ; probation was ended ; it was a sin to work ; all property must be held in common ; all the churches were apostate, Babylon, etc. Some went into despair, and hundreds into doubt and infidelity—just what might have been expected. The glorious doctrine of the Second Advent was covered with shame. Satan rejoiced, while the cause of Christ was greatly injured.’¹

As has always happened with these predictions, this special one ended in the usual fiasco. Nothing happened, and God’s great world went on in His own good purposes. The only person who came out of the wild craze with any credit was Miller himself, the unfortunate author of it all. He very humbly acknowledged his error and expressed his regret publicly for his foolish prophecies. He afterwards wrote these words : ‘ On the passing of my published time, I frankly acknowledged my disappointment. We expected the personal coming of Christ at that time ; and now to contend that we were not mistaken is dishonest. We should never be ashamed frankly to confess our errors. I have no confidence in any of the new theories that grew out of that movement, namely, that Christ then came as the Bridegroom, that the door of mercy was closed, that there is no salvation for sinners, that the seventh trumpet then sounded, or that it was a fulfilment of prophecy in any sense.’

¹ *Seventh-Day Adventism Renounced*, by D. M. Canright, p. 72

Notice a part of Miller's last sentence, for it is important. He says, '*I have no confidence in any of the new theories that grew out of that movement.*' This is worth noticing, for the Seventh-Day Adventists were the direct result of that movement. Though Miller, the author of the crusade, gave it up in sorrow and repentance, others carried it on—chief among them being Ellen Harmon, afterwards known as Mrs. White,

Meanwhile let us admit that Miller's honesty is unquestioned. No-one need quarrel with him for expecting the Lord's Return, though one instinctively shivers at all these irreverent attempts to fix times and seasons. But the man was quite honest and sincere in his belief. As soon as he saw clearly, not only that his calculations were wrong, but that *he was wrong to calculate at all*, he openly expressed his regret and repentance, and went back, let us hope, to plough his farm with more knowledge and discretion than he had shown in ploughing through the prophets.

2

Chief among those who were influenced by Miller's preaching was a young girl of about eighteen years of age, Ellen Harmon, afterwards Mrs. White. She was almost wholly uneducated, so much so that her later 'divine revelations' had to be carefully edited in matters of grammar and syntax. She was sickly, anæmic, and highly hysterical. She tells us quite naïvely that she had been seriously injured in the face and head as a young girl, and since then had suffered constantly from fainting and epileptic fits. Joining Miller some time in 1841-44, she was greatly moved by his wild Adventist ecstasy; but when her leader humbly retracted his foolish predictions, she not

only carried on the enthusiasm, but added so-called 'revelations,' given to her during her fainting fits, to support her teaching. She had these trances and 'visions' with astonishing frequency, and produced a revelation almost by order, whenever she needed to keep any unruly people on the chain. I may not possess my natural share of human credulity, but what amazes me is how her thousands of followers, then and since, have believed that 'the very voice of God,' as she claimed, spoke through her crazy visions. Her 'Testimonies,' as they are called, are believed to be the only true exposition of the Bible, and are equal in inspiration to that of the Apostles. '*It is God,*' she says, '*and not an erring mortal who has spoken.*' Generally, we confine a person with these grandiose delusions within an institution; but I begin to despair of a multitude of my fellow-fools when I discover that an epileptic visionary like this woman, whose revelations so often contradict each other, and whose countless predictions have been obviously falsified, can yet drag thousands of people after her as if she were *the very voice of God.*

From long years of acquaintanceship Mr. Canright speaks of her thus: 'I long studied Mrs. White to determine for myself her real character till her case is clear to my own mind. Naturally religious, young in years, uneducated, sickly, she was carried away in the Millerite excitement of 1840-44. Her fits she accepted as the power of God. Encouraged and sustained by her husband, this thought grew to be a reality to her. A careful study of her writings shows that each year she has become a little stronger in her claims of inspiration, till now she asserts that all her utterances, even in a letter or a sermon, are inspired. She claims that her

dreams, her impressions of mind, are all the voice of God to her. She devotes thirty-eight pages of her *Testimony No. 33* to vindicating her own high inspiration. Probably she has some way of fixing up her mistakes, contradictions and deceptions satisfactory to herself. So now anything she can learn in any way, any impression of mind, any thought clear to herself, is the Spirit speaking to her. I have no doubt she believes it. She is more deceived than her followers; for many of them privately doubt her inspiration while publicly defending it.¹

My real despair about a system like this, founded as it is on someone's religious megalomania, is not that this or that person proclaimed it, but that a thousand other apparently sensible people ever believed it! After all, we cannot do much with the afflicted person except be sorry for her. But what are we to do about the thousands of simple people who so pitiably believe in her and regard her as the *voice of God*? The real tragedy does not lie in the woman, but in that multitude of credulous people who almost compel us to despair of the human mind.

By her revelations, Mrs. White has managed to found a Church whose aggressive agencies are described in the opening paragraph of my Lecture. To this Church—which alone harbours the true believers—all other Churches are as the Whore of Babylon. The charity of the Churches which claim to be the 'true believers' sometimes strikes me dumb—whether they be Mormons, Russellites, Seventh-Day Adventists, or, for that matter, certain kinds of Catholics. 'True believers' so often roundly damn all other believers and unchurch all other churches.

¹ *Seventh-Day Adventism Renounced*, by D. M. Canright, pp. 137-38

There is no need, fortunately, to say much of Mrs. White's Adventist predictions. People who fix times and seasons for God, and who set dates for the promised Coming of Jesus, always seem to me to be hopelessly outside the New Testament. Our Lord foretold His Own Coming as the great hope of the Church and the Kingdom, and earnestly asked His people to 'watch and pray.' But on no occasion did He ever hint that His advent was a matter for our *speculation* or *computation*. Indeed, He admitted frankly that days and dates were actually beyond His own knowledge. In what way, I wonder, can the servant be greater than his Master?

I have been challenged regarding a statement I made that 'prophecy is not prediction.'¹ May I refer to it here? I believe with any fellow-Christian that prophecy is *forthtelling*, but is not *fore-telling*, as if the prophet were giving a map of the distant future. All Adventist systems that deal in specious verification of events, the fixing of times and dates, and the identifying of 'Beasts' and 'Angels' and what not, are certain to fail. On the one hand, I cannot help thinking that they profess to know more than their own Lord; and on the other hand, since they are based on time, *time itself will kill them!*

I think, then, that we may leave Mrs. White's Adventist predictions alone. In any case, they have miserably failed. It may be that there is always something in the innate ecstasy of Christianity which may keep throwing up queer systems like this. But, on the other hand, there is also something in the equally *innate sanity* of Christianity which will reject them as pagan, and essentially irreligious.

¹ See Chapter XII, 'Anglo-Israel' and Chapter X, 'The Millennium'

But Mrs. White was not only a predictive Adventist of this sort : she was especially a *Seventh-Day* Adventist ! Here we meet what is most typical of her creed—to me the tragedy of a pathetic Legalism.

Before her day many people have asserted that the Christian Sabbath should not be observed on the first day of the week, but on the seventh day, i.e. the ancient Jewish Sabbath.

Whenever it has cropped up in the past, one can perhaps understand in a small degree this narrow legalistic point of view. In the first place—‘as was His wont’—Jesus Himself constantly honoured and used the Seventh Day during His ministry as the day of special worship. In the second place, the early Christians in Palestine, and everywhere among Jewish settlements, continued to use the official Jewish Sabbath as their day of rest and praise. Thirdly, the Apostle Paul, as we learn from many passages, honoured the Jewish Sabbath whenever he visited any scattered colony of the Jews. And lastly, there is no record in the New Testament of any definite command or decision to change the Christian Sabbath from the seventh day of the week to the first.

In fact the two days persisted side by side for some generations, the seventh day being observed among the *Jewish* Christians, especially in Palestine, and the first day among the *Gentiles* all over Europe and Asia. As the Gentile Christians of the Roman Empire grew more and more in numbers and power, and the Jewish Christians less and less, gradually the Christian Sabbath became more and more the First Day of the week, until it became universally

accepted. And in time, everyone felt that it was the only fitting day for the Christian day of worship : for Christ's resurrection was on the first day of the week, that day of God's victory which meant a new life for the world.

But Mrs. White went beyond all others in supporting her belief. She employed her easily arranged and most convenient 'revelations' to prove that the only true Christian day of worship is the seventh day, and that all who neglect this truth are sinners. God revealed to her, in one of those fainting-fits so pitifully regarded by any wise doctor, that the whole of Christendom had sinned in this matter. According to her 'vision,' this Seventh-Day observance is the crucial thing that makes a man a Christian.

She bases this on a curious distinction that may either make us smile or groan. In the first place, she agrees with all other Christians that the ancient 'Jewish Law' was abolished by Christ. But she divides that law arbitrarily into two, the *ceremonial* law and the *moral* law. The ceremonial law she calls the 'law of Moses' ; the moral law, as given in the Ten Commandments, she calls the 'law of God.' She claims that the Ten Commandments are the only law of God in the strict sense.

Now, so she argues, since the observance of Sabbath on the seventh day occurs as one of the commandments of the 'moral law,' and since, further, it was only the ceremonial law and not the moral law which Christ abolished, therefore the observance of Sabbath on the seventh day stands unrepealed and wholly obligatory on the Church of Jesus. As a consequence, since the observance of Sabbath on the seventh day is a moral commandment, all Christians who have observed the

first day of the week, our so-called 'Lord's Day,' are hopelessly lost.

After this, I believe that the angels can weep.

As this point has cropped up again and again in the history of the Church—though fortunately never as something on which to found a divisive denomination—let us consider the question for a moment.

(i) Her distinction between the 'ceremonial' and the 'moral' law in the Old Testament is entirely illusory. That the one is the 'law of Moses' and the other the 'law of God' by contrast, is pure imagination on her part, so far as the words of the Bible are concerned. Regarding the 'ceremonial' law, we read, 'And Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord, and all the judgments: and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the Lord hath said will we do.'¹ Thus the Bible makes no distinction between ceremonial and moral law, as if the one were any more or any less the 'law of God': both are called equally 'the Words of the Lord.'

(ii) Even were there such a distinction in the mind of the Old Testament as she suggests, can we mention anything that is just so much a matter of *pure ceremonial* as the observance of any one special day for Sabbath rest and worship? Surely it is obvious that the only religious issue in the matter is that men should have some day of rest and praise. It is merely a question of gracious convenience which day is chosen for universal observance. We are not legalists, like the Jews; and we are certainly no longer 'under the law.'

(iii) If we read Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, we shall find that all early peoples actually regarded so-called 'ceremonial law' as more sacred, holy, and God-given

¹ Exodus xxiv.3

than what we generally call 'moral law.' At first it may seem odd and almost incredible to us that the observance of a *ceremony* should be regarded as more binding and sacrosanct than a law of ethics or conduct. But Frazer shows clearly how this came about. The only way in which primitive people could be held to ideals of conduct was by impressing on their minds the sacredness of their ceremonial rites. Only this can explain how, in early religions, matters of 'taboo' were regarded as much more important and sacred than mere sins of conduct. The people were held to the moral ideas of their religion mainly by the sacredness attached to all sorts of rite and ceremonial. Thus there is not a single religion of early days which does not impress upon its people that its ceremonial rites are the only means of salvation, and that they are the 'word of God' to the nation or tribe. The Jews, in their respect for their ceremonial law, were no different from others; to them, as shown in the Old Testament, the ceremonial and moral laws were equally the 'Words of the Lord.' If you abolish the one, you abolish the other.

4

We know that from the earliest days of the Christian Church, the 'first day of the week' was openly regarded as the Christian Sabbath. This was based on two clear points:

(i) It is the Christian contention that all the laws and customs of the old Jewish system were abolished in the full revelation of Jesus Christ. In the apostle's phrase, Christians are no longer 'under the Law,' any former Law of the ancient system, but are under Jesus Christ, who has abolished the letter of the Law by

fulfilling its spirit perfectly. This does not mean that we have no Law, but only that we have a *new Law*, a Law bigger, greater and more wonderful than all the laws given to Israel under Moses.

For instance, under the law of Moses, there were minute and detailed instructions about a man's relation to his neighbour. He must treat his neighbour thus and thus, in this good way and in that. But this particularizing treatment of detailed precept is superseded by Christ's nobler and greater instance of neighbourly duty in the parable of the Good Samaritan, with all it entails. This is not *lessening* the moral law, but deepening it, enlarging it, making it universal and spiritual. The lesser law is not discarded, it is only comprehended and perfected in the greater. Jesus, as we say, freed us from 'the shackles of precise commands,' and gave us the finer compulsion of the perfect ideal. Thus instead of narrow enactments and limiting commands, He gave us boundless directive principles, not so much exhaustive details as limitless horizons and perfect ideals.

Let us take one striking example of how even the so-called 'moral law' of the Old Testament was superseded. Among the Ten Commandments there is this—'*Thou shalt not kill.*' But at best this is merely a negative commandment; for under it a man might claim to be virtuous if he had never killed a fellowman, no matter how often he had *wished* to do it, and even *planned* to do it. He might claim with confidence, let us say, that he was entirely guiltless of murder. But under the greater law of Jesus, this ancient law is no longer needed, for the Christian faith now gives an infinitely higher standard—'*If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink.*' It says,

‘Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath.’ ‘Recompense to no man evil for evil.’ In 1 John iii.15 the Christian position is thus enlarged, ‘He that hateth his brother is a murderer.’ That is, the greater commandment includes the lesser.

In the same way, the Decalogue says, ‘*Thou shalt not commit adultery.*’ Christianity does not abolish this law, except by saying something a million times deeper. In St. Matthew v.27-28 Jesus says, ‘Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery; but I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.’ Thus the ‘negative goodness’ of the Ten Commandments is gloriously changed into a positive principle of holiness within. And this is why Jesus could say ‘Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.’

The same attitude runs through the entire New Testament, ‘Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.’ Thus the old law, of which the Ten Commandments form but a special part, is for ever replaced by a more searching law, infinitely more beautiful, thorough and spiritual—the law of Jesus Christ which asks all Christians to walk in the perfect ways of God.

Thus, when the out-dated Mosaic Law was superseded, the old Jewish Sabbath, which was merely a part of it, went with it. We are no longer under the bonds of the Laws of Israel: we are under the deeper, finer, and wholly perfect laws of the ‘new commandment.’

(ii) The second point is this. Not even the Seventh-Day supporters can deny that from the earliest days of

the Church, according to our records, Christians everywhere learned to honour the first day of the week as their peculiar Sabbath or Sunday, as representing the day of Christ's resurrection and triumph. Since He rose on the First Day of the Week, that day became sacred in Christian thinking, and so in Christian worship. Three short examples of this early change will be proof enough :—(a) In the First Epistle to the Corinthians xvi.2—one of the earliest of Paul's epistles—he says to the people : ' Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him.' (b) In the Book of Acts xx.7, we read, ' And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them.' What can show more clearly than this how the Christians of the first generation made this day their day of worship and communion? (c) In Revelation i.10, John writes from Patmos, ' I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day.' Notice—the Lord's Day—no longer the old Jewish Sabbath. On such a point as this, my own judgment is clear. I would go so far as to say that even if we could prove that the disciples were wrong in giving up the Seventh Day of the Mosaic Law and substituting the First Day of the week, the day when Christ rose from the dead, then I would rather be wrong with the early Church than be right with Moses !

(iii) We live under *grace*—that free grace of Jesus which saves us from the tyranny of empty ceremonial. If we recall how our Lord treated the sacred Jewish Sabbath, when larger issues arose, what can we make of the narrow obscurantism of this sect? ' I saw that the Holy Sabbath is, and will be, the separating wall between the true Israel of God and unbelievers, and

that the Sabbath is the great question to unite the hearts of God's dear waiting saints.' That may be bad, but this is worse : ' Then I was shown a company who were howling in agony. I asked who this company were. The Angel said, ' These are they who have once kept the Sabbath, and have given it up.' Like Dante, possibly ! But is it like Jesus ?

(iv) As a last summary—*what is the bother all about ?* What has this ' legalistic splitting of straws ' to do with Jesus, or holiness, or redemption, or the goodwill of a saved life ? We live in the Spirit, and in the ' freedom ' of Christ's will for us. This whole business is settled by the great Christian proclamation—' Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the *sabbath days* : which are a shadow of things to come ; but the body is of Christ.' (Colossians ii. 16, 17.)

5

I can therefore find no ground, either in reason, Scripture, or history, for these Seventh-Day Adventists. In the first place, it is worth noticing that they have had to give up the Adventist expectations of William Miller, which gave them their only reason to be. These expectations have been belied by the simple facts of history. Even Miller, in his full statement of his repentance, wrote ' I have no confidence in any of the new theories that grew out of that movement.' That is more than enough to settle their ' adventism ' for good and all.

In the second place, they base their system on a false distinction between the ceremonial law, and the moral law of the Old Testament. It was one law ;

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and that law has been for ever abolished, abolished by being perfectly fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Lastly, we worship God not on any one day but on all days, and no one day is more sacred than another. But if we need one day for general worship, when all the people may have an opportunity for united praise and prayer, what day can possibly be so perfect as the Lord's Day, the Day of Victory? To found a church on that ancient, outlived and outdated Jewish Sabbath passes comprehension. There are so many big things worth fighting for. Why fight for a shadow?