

# CAN EDUCATION BE BOTH “HIGHER” AND “ADVENTIST”?

BY FRITZ GUY

**“Adventist education” is not simply schooling that is initiated, supported, and controlled by the Seventh-day Adventist community of faith; it is an education that communicates the Adventist heritage of belief, values, and spirit—the Adventist story, the Adventist view of reality, the Adventist way of life, the Adventist sense of mission.**

**C**an education be both “higher” and “Adventist”? The answer is Yes, but only if we make the necessary effort and investment. Before I try to explain this answer, however, I need to talk about the question. Let’s begin by unpacking its key words.

“*Higher education*” is not simply education in which students enroll after completing high school. Nor is it merely training for a vocation, however technologically sophisticated. It is preparation for and introduction to intelligent, responsible living. So it must include an understanding of (1) the various facets of humanness (one’s own and human existence in general), (2) the natural order that forms the context of our humanness, as well as (3) the possibilities and limits of human knowledge. Higher education must teach critical and constructive thinking. In the students’ areas of major concentration, it should initiate them into the ongoing scholarly conversation.

In important respects, higher education is countercultural.

Though it functions in a media-conditioned mass culture of groupthink (or nonthink), it emphasizes individual responsibility and intellectual rigor. In a culture of conspicuous waste and noisy superficiality, it emphasizes ecological responsibility and quiet self-respect. In a narcissistic, amoral culture of immediate gratification, sensationalism, and violence—in which everything seems negotiable if the price is right—it emphasizes the life of the mind, long-term goals, and personal loyalty.

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the clearest expression of what God is, what God does, and what God wants; (2) the Sabbath as a gift of sacred time; (3) the future as the fulfillment of the Advent hope; (4) the multidimensional

unity of the human body, mind, and spirit; and finally, it nurtures a commitment to serving God through a life of integrity, courage, inclusiveness, compassion, and helpfulness.

Adventist higher education exists simultaneously in two worlds—the community of scholarly disciplines and the community of Adventist faith. Unlike secular higher education, Adventist higher education does not have the option of existing only in the academic world. Nor does it have the option of existing only in the world of the church. In its dual citizenship lies the uniqueness, challenge, and value of Adventist higher education.

Moreover, Adventist higher education must be—simultaneously—fully *Adventist* and truly *higher*. It cannot be somewhat “Adventist” and somewhat “higher,” nor “Adventist” in some aspects (say, by requiring religion courses and a prescribed lifestyle) and “higher” in others (say, in its mathematical, scientific, and historical scholarship). In its entirety, it must be *both* authentically “Adventist” and truly “higher” *at the same time and all the time*.

### Not an Easy Task

Providing this kind of education is not easy. Indeed, to many people, the very idea sounds suspiciously like an oxymoron. On the one hand, the practice of religion by its very nature entails a wholehearted faith commitment to a transcendent, ultimate Reality and Authority that is “from everlasting to everlasting” (Psalm 90:2, KJV). On the other hand, the task of higher education is to introduce students to, and equip them for, critical investigation carried out in a spirit of open and-disciplined inquiry.

Furthermore, anyone who has studied intellectual and religious history may rightly feel doubtful about the feasibility of religious, and especially denominational, higher education. There is plenty of evidence, both ancient and recent, to suggest that religious conviction often leads to obscurantism. Religions have frequently opposed new understandings of truth resulting from increasing knowledge (just ask Galileo!). Even a secular quasi-religion like communism is notorious for its ideological rejection of evidence. When a new idea comes along to challenge traditional religious wisdom, the most common reaction is not to ask whether the idea is supported by adequate evidence and valid reasoning,

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but whether it is compatible with what the community already believes.

**C**onversely, the pursuit of knowledge that is the *raison d'être* of higher education has often paralleled the secularization of religious institutions. The most illustrious examples are Harvard University (founded in 1636 to provide education for the clergy and named in honor of a clergyman) and Yale University (founded in 1701 by 10 Connecticut clergymen). One can, of course, also cite counter-examples, such as the University of Notre Dame (founded in 1842 by the Fathers of the Holy Cross and still self-described as a place “where the Catholic Church does its thinking”) and Calvin College (founded

in 1876 by, and still closely affiliated with, the Christian Reformed Church). But the weight of evidence is clear. Furthermore, students seem to have been more likely to lose religious faith during the course of their higher education than to find it.

### Not an Oxymoron

Nevertheless—and fortunately for those Adventists who are serious about both their religious beliefs and the individual and collective quest for knowledge that is the soul of higher education—the idea of Adventist higher education *does* make sense. It is not an oxymoron, and here is why:

- First, religion's proper intellectual function is to provide perspective, not isolation. Religion furnishes a set of values that motivate and focus the search for truth. It helps to interpret the results of that search rather than prejudicing the search or prescribing its outcome.

- Second, religious commitment is compatible with intellectual effort and increasing knowledge. It is part of our Adventist educational psyche that students should be taught to be "thinkers, not mere reflectors of other [people's] thought."<sup>1</sup>

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Searching for truth is somewhat like building a marriage. To be truly committed to one's spouse means to embrace the reality beyond one's current perception. We fall in love with our present image of another person because that image is all we have. The reality is always broader and more complex than we presently perceive, or ever will. And reality is not static. Each person, over time, will change, not only physically, but also emotionally and spiritually. Marriage means embracing the complete reality of one's spouse, including the parts of reality that one does not yet perceive or that are not yet actualized. We must, therefore, commit ourselves to a person we know only partially. Herein lies the risk of personal commitment. At best, this fundamental difference between image and reality makes marriage difficult; failure to recognize the distinction can lead to disillusionment and disaster.

Similarly, a commitment to God and to His truth means commitment to a reality that extends beyond our present understanding. To be committed to Truth is to be as committed to as-yet-undiscovered truth as to the truth that is already (but only partially) known.

Adventist higher education combines profound religious conviction and vigorous intellectual openness with a willingness to be guided by the weight of evidence, wherever it leads. It means commitment, by both faculty members and students, to the continuing pursuit of truth—an intellectual adventure that will certainly challenge present convictions and require their revision. This is the broader meaning of the early Adventist notion of "present truth"—a concept that is potentially disturbing and therefore often ignored.

Usually, this change in knowledge and understanding involves the natural order, but sometimes it includes specific religious beliefs as well. We usually invest more of ourselves in our religious beliefs than in our scientific opinions, so changing the former usually involves more resistance and greater trauma than revising the latter.

We cannot always predict or prevent such seismic shifts, nor can we ensure that they will be painless. However, we can understand such change in a way that enables us to live with it. The qualities "higher" and "Adventist"—and the church and academic worlds they represent—are not the opposing ends of a one-dimensional line, so that the closer we get to one, the farther we are from the other. They are, instead, the perpendicular *x* and *y* axes of a two-dimensional graph, so that we can move toward the maximum in both directions at the same time.

### Why We Do It

Our church provides education that is both "higher" and "Adventist" because we take seriously some fundamental components of Adventist life and thought. The doctrine of creation, for example, legitimates and motivates the religious pursuit of "secular" knowledge because it affirms the goodness of created reality. Investigating this reality is therefore a proper human activity, and understanding it is an appropriate objective. In the Garden of Eden, the locus of temptation was not the "tree of knowledge" but the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil." As Arthur Holmes emphasized a generation ago, "all truth is God's truth."<sup>2</sup> In those cases where "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing," it is not the knowledge that is dangerous, but its littleness.

The doctrine of creation also affirms the ultimate coherence of truth. In principle, everything that exists constitutes a universe rather than a multiverse. If God is the ultimate Source of all creation, then everything He made is ultimately related to everything else, and in the end, everything makes sense even if we cannot recognize how. At its best, religion is radically ecological: It connects every individual with the totality of reality.

The closely related doctrine of human existence further legitimates and motivates intellectual achievement. Reality is knowable and understandable in principle; and humanity is commissioned to know it, to understand it, and to relate to it intelligently and responsibly. The human mind cannot know *everything* about anything, but it can know *something* about many things. It should therefore be constantly about the business of knowing, under-

standing, and interpreting as completely and accurately as possible the reality it encounters both outside and inside itself.

Human beings were created in the “image of God,” but little less than deity. They were given authority over the works of God’s hands and everything was put within their domain (Genesis 1:26, 27; Psalm 8:5, 6). This means that human beings are capable of, and accountable for, not only what their senses perceive and their instinctual responses, but also their abstract rationality, scientific curiosity, and intellectual creativity. Knowing, understanding, and interpreting are implicit in the mandate to “rule over” other kinds of reality (Genesis 1:26). For the “ruling” to be responsible, it must be intelligent.

God and humanity share the ability to think. We can think about God, about the world, and about ourselves—and we can think about thinking. Because of this, our human reality is less like the reality of squirrels, cows, and chimpanzees and more like the reality of God. The more we know and understand, the more clearly and creatively we think, the more we fulfill God’s intention for humanity, created in His own image.

So the expansion and extension of knowledge that is the mission of higher education need not be regarded as an enterprise that is *hostile to*, or even *outside of*, Adventist faith. Indeed, such expansion and extension can be seen as a *dimension* of our faith. It is not God’s truth but human error that is threatened by investigating, knowing, understanding, and thinking.

### A Historic Commitment

The historic Adventist commitment to learning further legitimates and motivates the church’s higher education. This concern emerged in the 1850s—prior to the formal organization of the denomination (1863) and before the establishment of the first Adventist health-care institution (1866) or the sending of the first Adventist overseas missionary (1874). From 1853 to 1872, in various parts of the United States, church-oriented elementary schools were operated by individual families, groups of families, or local churches.<sup>3</sup> Then came our first college (at Battle Creek, Michigan) in 1874, the first secondary schools (at Healdsburg, California, and South Lancaster, Massachusetts) in 1882, the first school of nursing (at Battle Creek) in 1883, the first medical school (in Chicago and Battle Creek) in 1895; the first theological seminary in 1937, and the first university in 1957 (both in Washington, D.C.). More Adventist financial resources—of families, local churches, local and union conferences, and divisions—are invested in education than in any other church enterprise.

So along with the theological legitimacy and motivation provided by the Adventist doctrines of creation and humanity, the trajectory toward Adventist higher education is clearly seen throughout the church’s history—whether or not Adventist higher education has been adequately understood, appreciated, and supported.

### What It Accomplishes

Education that is both “higher” and “Adventist” is eminently

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worthwhile precisely *because* of its dual character. Intellectually and professionally, participation in Adventist higher education can be a source of excitement and satisfaction. Living in its two worlds—Adventist and academic—imbues Adventist higher education with responsibilities and opportunities in both directions.

Adventist higher education helps to prepare women and men for professional employment by the church—as teachers, pastors, health-care personnel, musicians, administrators, etc. It also helps prepare its students for successful, effective lives in the modern and postmodern world by giving them an Adventist window on the world within which they are called to witness and to serve.

Adventist higher education also helps to lead its community of faith into a clearer, deeper awareness of what it means to be a witness, an agent, and an evidence of God’s grace in the contemporary world. The commitment to discovering new things includes the area of religious—and specifically Adventist—knowledge. As we have known for more than a century, “There is no excuse for anyone in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error. The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation.”<sup>4</sup>

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And by way of contrast, “Whenever the people of God are growing in grace, they will be constantly obtaining a clearer understanding of His Word. They will discern new light and beauty in its sacred truths. This has been true in the history of the church in all ages, and thus it will continue to the end.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, Adventist higher education must facilitate theological and spiritual growth in the church. The community of faith as a whole may not be convinced of, much less be enthusiastic about, the need for this growth; but it is real and continuing. Adventist higher education has a responsibility to provide theological and spiritual energy and leadership.

At the same time, we must face the ongoing possibility that the increasing knowledge and understanding facilitated by Adventist higher education will call into question one or another of the beliefs of the community of faith that founded it, nurtured it, and continues to support it. The risk is as potentially serious and

dangerous in our time as it was in Galileo's—and as unavoidable.

### Responsibilities and Opportunities

In addition to its responsibilities and obligations to the church, education that is truly “higher” and authentically “Adventist” has responsibilities and opportunities relating to the secular world, so it must engage in serious scholarship that contributes to human knowledge and understanding. The current concern in the academic world that too much emphasis has been placed on research and too little on teaching may well be justified in regard to some major public universities. This concern does not, however, justify a failure on the part of smaller, church-related colleges and universities to involve themselves in the discovery, interpretation, integration, and application of truth.

In Adventist higher education, every university and college, every department and program, needs to address the question, What are we doing to increase knowledge in our discipline? It is not enough simply to keep abreast of the developments within our

specialties and to transmit them to our colleagues, our students, and even (in some cases) to the community of faith. We all need to be involved, in one way or another, in helping to advance human knowledge.

This kind of scholarly activity is not *in competition with* good teaching; it is *necessary for* good teaching.

Sometimes, a professor's scholarship will focus on an explicitly Adventist conviction or concern—this is a particularly exciting opportunity for intellectual creativity—and sometimes, it will reflect his or her own intellectual or

professional interests. But always, Adventist higher education will be stirred (that is, both disturbed and stimulated) by the suggestion that “Christian scholarship will be a poor and paltry thing, worth little attention, until the Christian scholar, under the control of his authentic commitment, devises theories that lead to promising, interesting, fruitful, challenging lines of research.”<sup>6</sup>

Never, however, will an Adventist perspective lead researchers or administrators to deny or distort factual evidence that seems to contradict their point of view. Here, especially, Adventist higher education must remember that “all truth is God's truth” and that in the pursuit of truth, moral integrity takes priority over traditional orthodoxy. Adventist higher education—and every individual teacher—must “stand for the right though the heavens fall.”<sup>7</sup>

### Working Together

Adventist higher education was established through the efforts of various church organizations—chiefly the union conferences and divisions of the General Conference. Its continuing maintenance

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and support lies in the hands of duly authorized boards of trustees. Its actualization is primarily the work of its teachers, facilitated by administrative personnel. But its success depends on the continuing moral and financial support of the whole community of Adventist faith—its leadership and its membership.

Adventist higher education is not a task for the timid, the apathetic, the perfunctory, the unfocused, or the impatient. Nor is it something that can be done in bits and pieces. Advent-

ist higher education becomes a reality only when and where there is a critical mass of competent, energetic, and courageous scholar-teachers, along with a complementary critical mass of able, prepared, and serious students.

At best, Adventist higher education is a difficult task. Hardly ever is it serene. Occasionally, it is frustrating. But for those of us who have dedicated our lives to it, it is worth all the effort and more—because of the good it can do for our students, for our community of faith, and for the world around us. ☞

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 17.
2. Arthur F. Holmes, *All Truth Is God's Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977). To be sure, not all truth is worth discovering. There may be no reason to determine, for example, the exact number of bricks in the exterior walls of the campus library. But if one wanted to do so, the inquiry would be both feasible and legitimate.
3. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1976), s.v. “Schools, SDA,” pp. 1, 296.
4. Ellen G. White, “Christ Our Hope,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, (December 20, 1892), p. 785; repr. in *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1946), p. 35.
5. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), vol. 5, p. 706. The passage was written in 1889.
6. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 106. See also Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 15-23.
7. White, *Education*, p. 57.