

American University Studies

Roy E. Graham

Ellen G. White

**Co-Founder of the
Seventh-day Adventist Church**

Peter Lang

Chapter 7

ELLEN G. WHITE'S INFLUENCE ON SDA APPROACHES TO RACE RELATIONS

In our consideration of EGW's position in the SDA church, we have discussed this in terms of denominational history, authority, and her role as a prophetic-type messenger. In this and the following chapter we look at her influence in two areas of contemporary, theological discussion, viz., race relations and ecumenism. These are selected because they are particularly relevant to a church which claims to be international in character and outlook, and which conducts a very large mission programme. These topics are important not only for the SDA church but also for all Christian denominations as they seek to relate to the contemporary challenges. On the first topic EGW had much to say for it was a live issue in her later years.

While at the outset of investigation the present writer envisaged a wider treatment of this topic of race relations, his study and increasing acquaintance with the material available led him to the conclusion that the investigation must be narrowed, in order to write a chapter of acceptable length in relation to the total thesis. In the material that follows discussion is confined, therefore, to a) race relations within the SDA church, in the conviction that if there is true unity and harmony there it will be a witness to the wider community, and b) to the situation in the U.S.A. and Britain, as far as the SDA church is concerned, with occasional significant developments or problems elsewhere being noted if they are pertinent to the main thrust of the chapter.

In both locations there are similarities and differences. In the U.S.A. the SDA church met the problem of race relations after some fifty years of development as an organisation. SDAs were made aware of the problem as their evangelistic programme, based at first in Northern USA, moved into the unsettled, post-emancipation South. After an initial attempt at continuing their policy of racial integration in their churches, they then moved towards separate development for black and white. One cannot explain this on a rational basis. In a complex situation it is difficult to know which pressures to resist and which you can give into without violating principle. Moreover, because of their distinctive beliefs, as we will notice, the SDAs faced unique problems in the South. Later, however, they responded to both internal and external pressures in a more thoughtful and Biblical approach. In Britain it was again some fifty or sixty years after the beginning of the SDA church in that country that a small denomination was confronted with the issue through an influx of immigrant members. The early welcome and acceptance of these black members was to lead later to frustration and even occasional friction on both sides. The prophetic messenger was no longer alive to give contemporary counsel as she did in the U.S.A., so her utterances had to be interpreted for the situation today.

In the U.S.A. the SDA church was confronted with an increasing proportion of its national population coming from a non-white background ethnically. In Britain the SDA church was to find itself as a minority group, denominationally, heavily populated with a minority group nationally. In the U.S.A. the moral and political backgrounds of the problem were largely rooted in slavery and abolition. In Britain the

moral and political problems historically were rooted in colonialism and the patronising attitude toward missions. They were made more complex however, by the pressures of contemporary thought developments of the twentieth century in a) political thinking, especially socialism; b) the rise of black power and black consciousness; c) a greater awareness of sociological backgrounds to ethnic origins and cultural ideas; and d) debates on human equality and rights.

Our task, then, is to endeavour to trace the problem within the historical perspective both of the secular environment and the development of the denomination, and to notice the influence of EGW's ministry and writing as the SDA church faced the issue of race relations.

Early SDA Approaches to Race Relations

It was in the midst of the American Civil War (1861-1865) that the SDA denomination was formally organised. In that year, 1863, all the members of the SDA church were resident in the Northern States of the U.S.A. Their early leaders were undoubtedly abolitionists in the mould of Garrison; - men and women who opposed slavery on moral grounds.¹

They expressed themselves clearly on this point in their official church paper, especially in response to a correspondent who had "been engaged for the last twenty-five years in the anti-slavery cause." This man had always "regarded the Review as an auxiliary" but now he chided the editor that in his opinion the paper had not acted in this capacity during the last two or three years. "It had failed," he said, "to aid the cause of Abolition."²

Uriah Smith, as editor replied categorically: "Our feelings in regard to slavery could hardly be mistaken by any who are acquainted with our position on the law of God, the foundation of all reform, the radical stand point against every evil. Slavery is a sin we have never ceased to abhor; its ravages we have never ceased to deprecate; with the victims locked in its foul embrace, we have not ceased to sympathise."³ Smith's concern is that "the tyranny of oppression" prevents effective help being brought to the slaves either as a body or as individuals. He does see, however, considerable opportunities for reform near at home. Then he writes:

"In saying this, we do not tell the slave that he can afford to be content in slavery, nor that he should not escape from it whenever he can, nor that all good men should not aid him to the extent of their power, nor that this great evil should not be resisted by any and all means which afford any hope of success. All this should be done. And we rejoice when we hear of one of that suffering race escaping beyond the jurisdiction of this dragon-hearted power. But we would not hold out to him a false ground of expectation. We would point him to the coming of the Messiah as his true hope."⁴

This same emphasis appears in his conclusion when he affirms that their primary task as Christians was "to emancipate our fellowmen, from the worst of all bondage, the service of sin"⁵ James White made a similar antislavery approach in the midst of the Civil War in an editorial entitled "The Nation".⁶ In this he commented on the apparent contradiction between the strong antislavery position of the SDAs and their non-involvement in the war. He sought to redress the "fanaticism growing out of extreme non-resistance"⁷ that had been developing among some SDAs and went so far as to say that in this "most hellish rebellion

since that of Satan and his angels" it might be inexpedient to refuse to fight if conscripted.

This editorial provoked voluminous correspondence in the Review, discussing opinions both pro and con, until the end of October 1863. In a final article James White modified his position from that taken in "The Nation" and wrote:

"We did say in case of a military draft, it would be madness to resist. And certainly, no true disciple of non-resistance would resist a military draft... We have struck at that fanaticism which grows out of extreme non-resistance, and have labored to lead our people to seek the Lord and trust in him for deliverance. How this can and will come, we have no light at present."⁸

The discussion petered out after this leaving the SDAs still perplexed and divided on the issue. EGW had kept out of the controversy, but, in 1863 when her Testimony no. 9 was published showing pro-Northern sympathies, she disagreed with both James White and the extremists on the opposite side, and stated plainly that the SDAs could not "engage in this perplexing war, for it is opposed to every principle of their faith"⁹ Her reasons were that in the army there would be a continual violation of conscience, and that there were wrongs on both the North and South sides. The Rebellion must be condemned, but she points implicitly in the direction of non-combatancy. After further study and because of their convictions a) on the perpetuity and sacredness of the ten commandments, with particular reference to their sabbatarian concern, and b) that the shedding of human blood in war was contrary to the Christian faith, the SDAs chose a position of non-combatancy in the Civil War, a practice they have recommended to their members ever since.¹⁰