Book Review


This book of 398 pages is a collection of papers presented at the Third International Symposium of the Institute of Adventist Studies at Friedensau Adventist University, held on April 23‒26, 2018. The book, published in 2020, gives a rich tour d'horizon of Adventist life on the European continent. In the global Adventist village, there might be only two Europeans out of a hundred, but if there were something like a “quality-index,” the score of European Adventism would be higher. And the strength of this volume is its eye-opening extensive presentation of the quality of theology, history, practice, faithfulness and creativity against all odds of the European Adventist church. The worldwide Adventist Church has allotted three divisions (of their global total of 13) to Europe. And although these divisions have their place administratively, it also really creates divisiveness. As an Adventist living in the Netherlands and therefore being part of the Trans-European Division (TED), there is not only a state-border with our eastern neighbour Germany, but churchwise as well since Germany is part of the Inter-Europe Division (EUD). This administrative structure also creates barriers between me and other European countries, such as Romania and Russia (which are part of the Euro-Asia Division – ESD).

Since we have five authors from TED, ten from EUD and three from ESD, and all authors have competency in their particular field and chosen topic, I feel we have a volume of abundant expertise. In addition to these 18 authors, we find another three authors writing from the USA, which makes a total of 21 contributions to this book.

The topic is covered from a wealth of angles: historically, sociologically, theologically, missiologically, ecumenically and ecclesiologically.
I feel that this volume breaks new ground in the sense that European Adventism is treated as one unit *vis à vis* the rest of the global Adventist church and *vis à vis* the public at large. For me it is a new experience to identify with European Adventism as a whole and with what it stands for. Denis Fortin in his opening article puts it well when he says: “European Adventism can be a prophetic voice to speak to the rest of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and make significant contributions in understanding the Church’s relationship with society and other Christian churches. The rest of the Church awaits this witness and one need not be shy about it” (pp. 23–24).

Subsequently the three parts of the book are as follows: (I) Mission and Diversity of Adventism in Europe; (II) European Adventism Facing Violence, with attention mainly to the Eastern-European context; (III) European Adventists, the Public and the Christian Other, with thought provoking issues like Adventist identity in the political and ecumenical arena.

Let me now move a little more in-depth. It is of course impossible to share the richness of each article in a review like this. But let me take some of its gems. It was quite revealing to me that Ellen White after her visit to Europe (1885–1887) changed several chapters in the *Great Controversy* to put more emphasis on Huss, Jerome, Zwingli, and countries like France, the Netherlands and Scandinavia. By doing so she indicated that Adventism is not just an American phenomenon, but a movement with a message that had its origins in Europe, a long time before William Miller began to preach it (cf. p. 12). This reminds me of *The English Connection* (1981) written by Adventist scholar Bryan Ball, who was my Newbold teacher. Ball very eloquently showed that the English Puritanism of the 17th century provided all the roots for 19th century Adventism in America. So, the unique elements of Adventism can be traced back to earlier Christian sources. I remember by the way, as a theology student at the time, that it was quite an achievement to have this book published by James Clarke in Cambridge, a general and widely respected Christian publishing house.

Furthermore, this volume is a voice to make bridges with Christian thought leaders of the past and the present. And maybe that is the most important contribution of European Adventism to the rest of the global Adventist community: to be open-minded, to build bridges and to value diversity within the unity of Christ’s Body, His Church.
A few gems on mission-outreach, past and present:

In his paper and in his own words, Chigemezi Nnadozie Wogu “has demonstrated that Adventist missionaries have been able to develop a significant range of contextual approaches, not only in terms of actual thought, but also with regard to ‘method’ and types or reasoning. This happened in spite of Adventism generally presenting itself as theologically homogeneous” (p. 97).

In his paper on reaching secular Europe, Petr Cincala quotes Rudy Dingjan, a prolific church planter: “Winning secular European people will not happen by simply making worship more entertaining and fancy. To connect with people is the key. We need ministries in which we can mingle with them and let them taste Kingdom life” (p. 110).

Daniel Adrian Neagu throws some revealing light on the issue of the persecution of Seventh-day Adventists in Romania during the inter-war period. He says that “the recent declassification of the documents from the Military Archive … brought to light new elements regarding the purpose and role of military priests. One of the major objectives of their activity was to fight against what they perceive as the ‘sectarian offensive.’ Their declarations … towards Adventists and Baptists, must be understood, however, in the Romanian interwar context, in which for many people nationalism was the appropriate expression of their love for their country, and Orthodoxy was deemed the highest form of romanism (that is, the national sentiment of the Romanians, the Romanian spirit)” (p. 175). This makes plausible his argument for why the persecutions against Adventists (and other smaller denominations) took place. Very aptly Neagu calls it “in the name of right faith against real faith.”

What is the attitude of European Adventists towards the European Union? Reinder Bruinsma asserts that “while Adventists have not turned away from this interpretation [of the prophecy of Daniel 2 that a complete unification of political Europe will not happen], current Adventism does not place much emphasis on it, apart from more critical comments from representatives at the conservative edges of the church … On the other hand, there is appreciation for some practical advantages that the EU has brought” (p. 243).

The disconnectedness, ‘iron and clay,’ of three regional divisions results in hardly any sharing of knowledge and talents. This is seen in Jón Stefánsson’s paper about so many different hymnals.
The story is told of Einstein and his wife, that when she said to him “for me there are two important elements in life: time and space” Einstein responded, “and what is the second one?” While for Einstein time and space fall together, Michael Person shows very profoundly that church and place fall together: He argues that it is necessary for a local church to be embedded in a local setting. For a local church to be part of a global institution at the cost of its local flavour, traditions and culture is unhealthy and counterproductive. He says: “But why would people in my place recognize the importance of my church when my church does not recognize the importance of my place?” (p. 258) Let me continue quoting him: “We need to re-assess our dependence on our host church in the USA and avoid an unhealthy co-dependency … A pastor struggling to make Jesus known in secular Frankfurt or Amsterdam needs all the encouragement and understanding she can get from her leaders in the world church. Her place is not their place” (p. 261). And his concluding words says it all: “There is opportunity for the local church to become a place of genuine welcome and resource – of belonging. We must learn hospitality as holiness. Finally, unless the Seventh-day Adventist church has a sense of its place, its rootedness in Europe, it can have no enduring place in the hearts of Europeans. In short, the Adventist Church in Europe will have no rich history to tell unless it respects the geography of the heart, unless it pays greater attention to hearts nurtured by the natural and cultural landscapes of Europe” (p. 262).

The presentation of the Dutch Adventist parliamentarian Marianne Thieme created quite a positive impact on the Symposium participants at Friedensau back in 2018. When I read her timely words on ecology, care for animals and the environment, I cannot help thinking of the young pioneers of the Adventist movement in the nineteenth century. They were in the foreground when it came to abolishing slavery, promotion of healthy foods and lifestyle and equality of all citizens. If our church – local and international – would get hold again of this pioneering, creative and prophetic spirit we would have 100 Thiemes around the globe where there is now only one. These words of Thieme may help us get there again: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has … It always seems impossible until it is done!” (p. 272)

The high level of research in Contours of European Adventism is demonstrated by the paper of Tiziano Rimoldi, in which he presents “Italian Seventh-
day Adventists, Military Service and Conscientious Objection.” In his article containing 78 footnotes, he digs into Italian, European and worldwide Adventist magazines to make his argument. He (of course) quotes extensively from *Il Messaggero Avventistica* and *L’opinione*. He concludes: “Italian Adventists were forerunners of a change of perspective. In fact, Italy … in 1998 recognized conscientious objection to military service as a personal right for all (Law no. 230) and practically abolished obligatory military (or civil) service from 2005 onward (Law no. 226)” (p. 291).

Bernard Sauvagnat relates the interesting involvement of Adventists with Bible Societies; for example, in 2003 Dr Rudy Van Moere an Adventist minister and then Professor of Old Testament at the Brussels Protestant Theological Faculty became a member of the board of the Flemish Belgium Bible Society and was elected vice-president, plus he was very much involved as board member of the Netherlands Bible Society. Sauvagnat concludes: “Adventist contributions were possible because of the high quality of training of ministers and scholars in Biblical languages. Moreover, the general atmosphere of brotherhood in Christian universities and churches in Europe facilitated the inclusion of Adventist scholars among the scientific teams of the Bible societies” (p. 300).

How European Adventists relate to other Christians is illuminated by four case studies and with a very comprehensive overview of types of interchurch relations (juridical, cooperative, communicative, experiential), in the article by Stefan Höschele. He shows the blessings and challenges of interchurch relations. In Hungary, the Adventist Church experienced a break-away of concerned brethren in the past. Höschele writes: “In spite of the partial reconciliation, the general relationship to other free churches in Hungary remained distant, and the ‘Hungarian schism,’ as it has become known, remained a sign to many Adventist leaders that aiming at closer relations with other denominations is potentially divisive for the SDA Church itself” (p. 309).

Before this volume closes with an impressive “Working Bibliography” of more than 70 (!) pages, Rolf J. Pöhler articulates in the concluding article the ways in which Europe may contribute to the growth and wellbeing of the global church. “Among its ‘treasures’ are its cultural sensitivity, Protestant identity, conscientious adaptability and critical loyalty” (p. 315). Finally, Pöhler indicates that migration may challenge the European Adventist uniqueness.
Since there is so much disconnectedness and individualism in the DNA of the European, it is a tour de force and a compliment that the Symposium, the publication of this book and also the European contribution to the *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventism* (ESDA) have succeeded.

I recommend this book as a must read for every leader in the European Adventist church (local and regional) as well as for the leadership of the global church.

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