

Book Review


It seems a legitimate question whether this autobiographical book merits a review in Spes Christiana. It was written by an academic but that, in itself, does not mean that the book can be classified as “academic.” Nonetheless, I believe the book is of real interest to historians of Adventism – not primarily because of author’s role in recent Adventist history, but because of the many insights it provides regarding persons, issues and events in American Adventism in the period of ca. 1965 to ca. 1985. The non-scholarly reader may not always be able to appreciate the broader context of Zackrison’s story, but historians of Adventism will, no doubt, find many details that supplement their knowledge of the Adventist denomination during this period in the.

Edwin Zackrison is a second-generation Adventist with Scandinavian (Norwegian and Swedish) roots, who, at age 7, moved from Illinois to Southern California, where he grew up and received most of his education within the Adventist bubble around La Sierra College (now La Sierra University). In this book the author chronicles in considerable detail the years of his childhood and adolescence, his college years, and the frustrations of his marriage, which ultimately ended in divorce. A major part of the book deals with his academic career, with its focus on the years of his advanced education – obtaining a doctorate from Andrews University, and on his teaching in the Religion Department of Southern Missionary College (now: Southern Adventist University) in Collegedale, Tennessee (USA). Two threads run through the story and continuously intertwine: Zackrison’s personal story and the state of Adventism during the years in which he prepared for the ministry and the

1 The article by Gilbert Valentine in this volume of Spes Christiana (‘Resisting “Neo-Adventism”: Tensions between Seventh-day Adventist Traditionalists and “Progressives” – 1966–1979’) provides much corroborative and additional information about the events Zackrison describes in his book.
period in which he served his church, first as a pastor and subsequently as a professor of theology.

Jerry A. Gladson, a neighbour on the SMC campus and a colleague in the Religion Department, writes in the Foreword: “This book comes out of Zackrison’s own personal, agonizing struggle to make sense of his inevitably disillusioning religious tradition” (p. xv). Gladson points to an important dimension in Zackrison’s professional life by describing it as a journey towards finding ‘freedom from a tightly structured toxic religious system” (xvi). Perhaps these words also reflect some of Gladson’s own frustrations, which prompted him to leave the Adventist Church.2

One reason for writing this review of Zackrison’s book is that it, in several ways, supplements the recent study by Gilbert Valentine (Ostriches and Canaries), which is also reviewed in this volume of Spes Christiana.3 It largely deals with the same period of denominational history, and with the unfortunate rift during that period between many of the church’s administrators and key theologians. Valentine, however, focuses on the controversies that erupted at Andrews University, while Zackrison chronicles the events and circumstances that led to the purge of the Religion Department at SMC, and the way in which this purge was carried out. Valentine’s book has a more scholarly tone, with fuller biographical references, while Zackrison’s book is more personal: it is not only the story of what others went through, but of what he himself experienced. I found his book not just a fascinating – and in many ways thought-provoking – account of an academic who tried to survive in an often hostile church environment, but its many forays into different aspects of church life suggest a range of topics for further research.

A Religious Man in a Religious Subculture

The author repeatedly refers to himself as “a religious person”. The title of the book indicates his intention to paint his “profile”, while the subtitle contains these suggestive words: “Confessions of a religion addict”. After carefully reading this 632-page book, I am still not totally sure what these words mean.


One expects that a person who decides to embark on the study of theology, enters the ministry, and pursues his ambition to teach theology, is indeed “religious”. But how far does being “an addict of religion” go beyond that? Has Zackrison detected and fallen victim to some unhealthy features in his Adventist faith and in his relationship to his employing church organization?

As someone who grew up in an environment with very few fellow church members, and who did not have the opportunity to attend an Adventist kindergarten and Adventist primary and secondary schools, I have often wondered whether I should be jealous of those who were raised in the vicinity of an Adventist institution and benefitted from education in denominational schools, or whether I should rather pity them. Zackrison summarizes a distinct pattern: “What I learned at home was idealized at Church and supported at home” (p. 11). He knew hardly any non-Adventists (p. 31). Later, he decided that this had not been all that positive: “I was a product of the protective custody of the church.” He only later became aware of the “insidiousness” of the kind of “legalistic, toxic” religion he grew up with (p. 66).

The descriptions of the Adventist subculture in which Zackrison was reared are enlightening for many church members in other parts of the world, where Adventist mores differed considerably, where rules regarding food and drinks containing caffeine were often less strict, as well as rules for entertainment and sabbath keeping. Swimming on Sabbath was taboo, but wading was permitted (p. 120). In Zackrison’s world Ellen White was appealed to for a final word in all theological and ethical questions, and in many practical issues.

How did the religious environment in which Zackrison was reared define him as a “religious man”? To this one might add another question: to what extent did Zackrison’s struggle to find a satisfying role as a minister result from this background, or did it also, or primarily, have to do with the expectations his mentors and the conference administrators had of new recruits to the ministry? And did his internship under the mentorship of Walter T. Rea4 perhaps have a significant influence in this formative period of his ministry (pp. 212ff.)? Against this background a relevant question emerges: To what

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4 Walter Rea was a great admirer of Ellen G. White, until he discovered how dependent she had been on other authors. He expressed his disillusionment in his book The White Lie (1983).
extent is the experience and “success” of ministers influenced by whether or not they grew up in an Adventist subculture?

**Theological Climate**

The period in which Zackrison grew up, began his pastoral ministry and then served as a religion professor, was characterized by strong fundamentalist tendencies. Concerted efforts by the General Conference leaderships and their supporters were aimed at combatting theological viewpoints that were considered dangerous forms of “new theology”. A series of theological conferences in 1974 were an important part of that strategy (p. 401).

The religion of many Adventists in the pew was based on eschatological fear. Zackrison recounts how the thought of the “small black cloud” that would “soon” appear on the horizon, was never far away, and that for him “fear was a stronger motivator than assurance or love” (p. 19). The teachings of Brinsmead caused confusion but had a definite appeal to many who believed in the possibility of sinless perfectionism (p. 386). The book *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*, that resulted from conversations between some evangelical leaders and a few Adventist scholars, became a bone of much contention, as M.L. Andreasen and others claimed it denied an important element of historic Adventism. The proponents of what is now commonly called Last Generation Theology were adamant that its definition of the human nature of Christ as “pre-fall” amounted to serious heresy. According to Zackrison, the Adventist Church of the 1970s, had, in fact, turned away “from an emphasis on the gospel to a renewed emphasis on end-time and the prophetic uniqueness of the movement”. Anti-Catholic sentiments tended to be as forceful as ever before” (pp. 157 f.). Zackrison contends that the election of Robert Pierson in 1966 led to “a religious McCarthyism” (p. 361). The administrators at the highest level of the church wanted to have the final word in the formulation of doctrine. “If the officials and the theologians disagree, the officials are right, and the theologians are wrong. This is a question of authoritarianism, not necessarily of qualifications” (p. 363).

The term “Omega” would receive its most vocal expression in the book with that title that was written by attorney Lewis Walton.5 Ellen White had

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defined the pantheistic ideas of John Harvey Kellogg as the “alpha” of apostasy. Subsequently, the “omega” label could be put on anyone who was accused of harbouring alleged or real unorthodox ideas. Walton’s book, which was endorsed by many church leaders (including Review and Herald editor Kenneth Wood) “became a powerful weapon to identify college Religion Departments in North America as seats of apostasy” (p. 376), with SMC prominent among these.

The Purge at SMC
Roughly the last one-third of the book deals with events leading up to the purge of the SMC Religion Department and the removal of Zackrison and some of his colleagues from the religion faculty. Much of this story parallels the account given by Zackrison’s colleague Gladson (see note 2). Its credibility is further strengthened by the detailed description of a similar purge at Andrews University in various lengthy articles in Spectrum and in Valentine’s recent book.

In the general climate that gained dominance in the church after the more relaxed presidency of Reuben Figuhr (1954–1966), several Religion Departments and a number of individual theologians fell into administrative disfavour, and several initiatives were undertaken to remove those who were suspected of teaching heresy. Ironically, the strategies of many of those who believed a purge was overdue, became part of “a campaign of unethical behaviour and outright lies” (p. 427). A number of malicious publications, run by ex-students of the college, played an important role in fanning suspicions regarding the orthodoxy of a number of religion teachers at SMC (in particular Edwin Zackrison, Lorenzo Grant and Jerry Gladson) and of the college president (Frank Knittel), who had hired them. What happened at SMC was part of a nationwide picture. “A vicious fundamentalist uprising, fanned by lies, conspiracy theories and influential families with money, was spreading across the land” (p. 469). The purge at SMC was “bankrolled” by a rich (and very conservative) family that had a history of generous financial support to the college (p. 550). Voice recorders were supplied to students who were willing to report the content of the lectures of teachers who were under suspicion, and some lay members became self-appointed spies, roaming the campus, handing out tracts and hiding in the back of lecture rooms. Their highly biased reports were spread through bigoted publications, which were often accepted
as truth by church leaders at the union level (e.g. by SMC board chairman Alfred C. McClure) and at the denominational headquarters, and were endorsed by the editors of the official denominational journal *Adventist Review*. After Frank Knittel was relieved from his post as SMC president by means of an enforced sabbatical, his successor was expected to finalize the purge (p. 484). And, as a result, Zackrison, who had just defended his doctoral thesis, and who was never accused of any specific theological heresy, was discontinued as an SMC staff member. He concludes: “When paranoia and money rule, theology makes no difference” (p. 513).

**Bias?**

In spite of including some primary documents as a series of appendices of the book (pp. 541–609), Zackrison’s description of the purge at Southern Missionary College is not (and could not be) fully objective. Whether or not he draws a “profile” of himself that errs on the positive side, is hard to tell on the basis of just reading this book. He does include many positive evaluations of himself from colleagues and students. Are these possibly too selective? Only those who know him well personally can perhaps answer that question.

Reading about the merciless destruction of Zackrison’s career (and about the way in which the careers of some of his Andrews’ colleagues – see Valentine’s book – were prematurely ended) raises various questions. I would welcome a study devoted to the question: *Are there perhaps non-theological issues which made (and perhaps make) some of the church’s theologians more vulnerable during periods of more pronounced fundamentalism?* Another fascinating question centres on the influence of rich individuals and families. Zackrison is reluctant to name the McKee family that has long been a benefactor of SMC and whom he holds at least partly responsible for the events that ultimately brought him not just a lot of personal trauma but also cost him his job as a tenured professor. The church could certainly benefit from a multidisciplinary study about the way in which affluent individuals and families have at times used their financial means in promoting theological tendencies, influencing personnel appointments and establishing programmatic priorities.

Zackrison mentions dozens of influential leaders. In most cases he does not hide his sympathy or antipathy. (It would have been useful to include an index of persons and topics). I wonder whether perhaps some of these persons are put in a rather too negative light, as, for instance Gordon Hyde and Alfred
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McClure. The new online Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists (ESDA) can help in getting a more balanced picture of these and many other individuals, but the roles of some of them would certainly warrant more extensive, perhaps book-length biographies.

In summary: Zackrison’s book cannot lay claim to being an academic treatment of Adventism during the two decades following the mid-1960s, but it is valuable as a personal reportage of the climate that dominated the church in the United States during that period.

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