

“The ‘Meaning’ of the Meaning of God in History”

The most audacious statement humans can make is that the greatest power in the universe, the creator of all, the one to whom we apply the name God, has an active interest in the affairs of humanity. “What is man, that thou art mindful of him,” the Psalmist wonders, a notion that should continue to astound.

Seventh-day Adventists, along with most other Christians, share this assumption. Indeed, historic Adventism has produced one of Christianity’s most thorough expositions of God’s involvement in human history. Termed “the Great Controversy,” this interpretation encompasses truly cosmic dimensions of divine and human activity. Adventists take confidence in God’s creative and redemptive power and in the ultimate working out of His providence.

But do we understand what we are affirming? That is, have believers given sufficient thought to the warrants behind their statements of faith? I’m doubtful. The issues are not only complex but literally beyond our full comprehension. Consequently, one can only approach the two questions below with generous dollops of humility, accepting the tentative nature of any conclusions.

There are two large questions that interest me (as they should every Christian). First, what do we mean by saying that God is at work in the world? And second, by what means and to what extent can we discern His activity?

The good news for you today is that I’m not going to try to answer those questions in the

remaining nineteen minutes. Actually, I couldn't answer them if you gave me a week. I'm at the early stages of my ruminations. I will do just two things. The second will be to share the axioms and a few further questions that will guide my thinking. I'm hoping that you may be able to refine or even challenge some of my assumptions and thus further my work.

But first, and foremost, I want to revisit two Adventist scholars who took up this work nearly a half century ago: George E. Shankel and Siegfried Schwantes. These works, which came out within three years of one another, 1967 and 1970, are to my knowledge the last Adventist book-length efforts to deal with "the big questions." My sense is that these books are not currently informing the efforts of Adventist historians. With only one exception, I have not seen either book referenced in decades. I will suggest later why that might be. And yet I think it worth our while today to at least tip our hat to their work and perhaps consider letting our students know about them.

George Edgar Shankel, author of *God and Man in History*, was born in Nova Scotia in 1894. His life epitomized the old-time Adventist career pattern. Forty-seven years of denominational service, including long stints as president at Helderberg College in South Africa, academic dean at Atlantic Union College, dean and history teacher at West Indies College, and then as history teacher at various U.S. Adventist colleges in the 1950s & 60s (including SMC), continuing to teach even after retirement. Shankel earned a doctorate in history at the University of Washington in the 1945, writing a dissertation on government Indian policy in British Columbia.¹

God and Man in History, subtitled "A study in the Christian Understanding of History," appeared in 1967. It is wide ranging. Part 1 surveyed the leading philosophies of history, from

the Greek to Augustine to Enlightenment to Communism. For the advanced undergraduate student (his primary audience) this could be useful introduction.

Part 2, really the heart of the book, deals more directly with how the Christian should conceptualize history. Shankel argues that the Christian historian really does have special tasks. These include making moral judgments on the past; utilizing Scripture as a means of imposing coherence on history (a coherence provided by God's covenant with humanity); identifying key historical concepts, such as the assertion of man's free will and divine sovereignty, and especially the provision God has made for human salvation. One's studied reflection on these matters will lead, Shankel is confident, to the conclusion that history indeed has meaning, a meaning that is intelligible.

To the question always first at hand: Have historians the right to judge the providential nature of events? Shankel says no. "No responsible historian should have the temerity to assign providential action to specific historical events as was done through the prophets of Old Testament times."² Yet in the manner of traditional Adventist thinking, he could not resist in the same paragraph suggesting that God indeed intervened when the Spanish Armada threatened nascent Protestantism in England. He goes on to cite the First battle of Manassas and the Dunkirk evacuation as similar candidates for providential intervention. Shankel's work reassures Adventist readers rather than pushing them in new directions.

One sees this in his use of prominent thinkers. Shankel displays familiarity with the notable philosophers of history of his day: Toynbee, Gardiner, Collingwood, Butterfield, and others. But his use of them suggests a cherry-picking disposition, looking to support his conclusions rather than to grasp their larger arguments. He draws on the noted English historian

(and Christian) Herbert Butterfield a number of times, yet never alludes to one of his central contentions, that it is unwise and often perverse to attempt moral judgments in history.

Siegfried Schwantes's career was even longer and more diverse than Shankel's. Born in 1915 and Brazilian-German by ethnicity, he earned his college education at PUC and taught a variety of subjects throughout seven different divisions of the Adventist world church, from the Philippines to Lebanon to Brazil to Rwanda to Australia among others. He also taught for a time at the SDA seminary at Andrews University in the mid-1960s. The pinnacle of his educational training came with his earning a Ph.D. in archaeology at Johns Hopkins in 1963.³

I judge Schwantes's *The Biblical Meaning of History* (1970) a more sophisticated and nuanced work than Shankel's, in part a reflection of his training in ancient history. But his aims are similar to Shankel's, that is, to aid Adventists in developing a coherent view of God's providential guidance of history. In doing so he invokes a word (and concept) encountered infrequently these days: *heilsgeschichte*, salvation history. The Christian historian's task should be to discern the patterns within history suggestive of God's fulfillment of his purposes. In exemplifying this undertaking, Schwantes makes many interesting observations.

He takes, for example, a broad view of God's workings. In relatively detailed chapters on ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia Schwantes displays a broad-minded willingness to consider that spiritual advances have occurred outside the Judeo-Christian tradition. The cult of Osiris, for example, nurtured notions of individual moral accountability, and the later reforms of pharaoh Ikhnaton attempted to instill a monotheistic creator god belief in Egypt. Likewise, Babylonian religious literature through many centuries reveals religious themes with tantalizing parallels to the Old Testament's. But in the case of both civilizations polytheism, obsession with magic and

astrology pushed aside “what might have been.”⁴

Schwantes also develops the Pauline concept of “the fulness of time,” the idea (which I find persuasive) that the incarnation occurred at the optimum moment in human history for the flourishing of the Christian faith. Yet Schwantes is naive about none of this. He understands that Christianity struggled to establish itself in a hostile Roman world. Further, he readily admits that the church failed in important ways over the next two millennia. Schwantes is quite certain that if the church had done its job the second advent would have occurred long ago. God’s leading, unfortunately, never guaranteed human following.

Despite this, Schwantes believes that the history of the church (as “the extension of the Incarnation” in his words) must remain the focus of the Christian historian. It is where salvation history happens. Secular history is only important as it “provides a backstage to redemptive history.”⁵

Schwantes, like everyone who gives these issues thought, struggles to understand the simultaneous presence of human freedom (the perverse unfolding of which he sees as a major historical theme) on the one hand, and God’s providential interventions on the other. Easy appeals to paradox are certainly too glib, but it may be as good as we can do.

Obviously, I’ve scarcely scratched the surface of Shankel’s and Schwantes’s work. I’ll leave it to you pick up their volumes (a task made easier, I’ll add, by Pacific Press’s reissue of Schwantes’s book in 2014). But I do want to ask why their books have not had greater impact within the Adventist community. I’ll suggest two answers.

One reason may be that Adventism already has its answers to the big questions, thank you. They came from Ellen White. Her Conflict of the Ages series seemed to provide all the

commentary we needed on God's workings before, during, and after earth's history. Why bother with the added subtleties Shankel and Schwantes offered? Perhaps the fact that White's name was not mentioned in the text of either work caused devout readers to question whether these men were truly on board with the Great Controversy scenario. (Actually, Shankel does include a handful of EGW quotes, but with one exception one must look to the endnotes to learn that they are White's.) I'm confident it was a conscious decision by these two scholars to avoid having their books be considered a gloss on White's writings. Loyal Adventist though they were, they hoped to lay a foundation for Christian thinking about history independent of White's.

The absence in either book of any mention of the qualifications of the authors may also speak to the publishers' unease with subject. One would expect that Pacific Press would let readers know of Schwantes's Johns Hopkins credentials. Who better to take on the task of interpreting ancient history? But for all any reader would know, Schwantes was a colporteur from south Georgia. I'm suspicious that Adventist publishers remained leery of potential anti-intellectualism among the rank and file. Who needs a degree in archaeology when our prophet wrote so authoritatively without one?

My second conjecture about the books' lack of influence lies in their simply being the victims of bad timing. Think about their dates of publication: 1967 and 1970. These were within the years when the contemporary Adventist historical community—indeed, the larger Adventist intellectual community—took shape. The sort of history Shankel and Schwantes were doing suddenly fell out of fashion. *God and Man in History*, for example, suffered the fate of being the subject of Ronald Numbers' first published writings for a church publication. In the second issue of *Spectrum* magazine his review entitled "In Defense of Secular History" questioned the

foundations of Shankel's work, pointing out internal contradictions in his agenda for the historian.⁶ By contrast Andrews University church historian Kenneth Strand judged Schwantes's book, though subject to the frailties of superficiality necessary in a popular work, to have achieved its task "with a remarkable degree of success."⁷

So why am I, a person whose primary scholarship has been American theater history, taking up this enterprise? I'll attribute part of it to my college mentor and our late colleague, Gary Land. More than any other recent Adventist historian, Gary thought about issues of faith and history. He was an early member of the interdenominational Conference on Faith and History and contributed to *Fides et Historia*. His short work, *Teaching History: A Seventh-day Adventist Approach*, is thoughtful and well-informed. I like the idea of continuing, at least in a small way, his work.

I also think there is the possibility of making a contribution to the subject. What I lack in training I compensate for in temperament. By this I mean my loyalties to the Adventist tradition will not impede my ability to make open-minded judgments.

The basic difference in my approach to the subject of perceiving the historical nature of our faith and that the two authors just discussed is my belief in a thicker description. One must consider, for example, the nature of inspiration, the development and adequacy of particular doctrines, the splintering of the Christian church, its waxing and waning through time and over geography, and a candid evaluation of the cultural and social impact of Christianity. It's very complicated, beyond my abilities, but someone has to try. It's particularly important for the Adventist tradition, which has hit something of a wall in its ability to think freshly about its prophetic role in America.

So with that, I will close by listing a few of the early questions that interest me and then certain axioms that will underlie my thinking.

1. How has God made his presence known or intuitively felt in human history?
2. Can we identify a purpose to God's activity? Do we sense a change of purpose over time?
3. If one accepts classical definitions of God's attributes, what are the means by which God can interact with changeable, transient humanity?
4. What are the implications of positing Jesus Christ as an expression of God's direct intervention in human affairs?
5. How has the Christian Church sought to understand and then implement Christ's call for a community of believers that will proclaim the gospel?
6. How do we account for the repeated shortcomings of the Church and its internecine struggles over time?
7. If history can be understood through a secular lens of human causation/impersonal nature, what scope is left for supernatural or providential activity?
8. How can the unremittingly high level of evil throughout history—natural and man made—be harmonized with the providential oversight of a caring God?
9. Can we truly establish human free will as the fundamental source of agency for human action? How do social and cultural factors support or mitigate belief in individual free will? Even more challenging, how do mental and emotional pathologies in some

individuals, which apparently preclude freedom of will, fit in our traditional understanding?

10. Is there solace—or even hope—to be gained by a greater intellectual understanding of God’s work in history? Is His presence normally so veiled that such consolations are inevitably limited?

And here are some of my axioms:

1. That God has been active in the world since its creation (though perhaps more intensely and certainly more evidently at some times than at others).
2. That Jesus Christ represents the clearest and most direct example of God’s interaction with and care for humanity;
3. That the Seventh-day Adventist Church occupies an important place in God’s redemptive efforts for the contemporary world, upholding the Sabbath and reminding people of Christ’s pledge to return to earth in power and salvation.
4. That Ellen White served as a prophetess for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, guiding its people in many ways that were positive for the building up of the movement. Her writings continue to be important for the church, possessing great devotional value. But while they may be privileged, they cannot be viewed as authoritative in biblical exegesis or doctrinal construction.
5. That human fallibility and finiteness inevitably compromises our efforts to comprehend God’s workings in the world. Appropriately, doctrinal formulations will be tentative and

open to revision.

1. Obituary, *Review and Herald*, March 10, 1977, p. 23.
2. Shankel, *God and Man in History* (Nashville: Southern Pub., 1967), pp. 203-04.
3. *Andrews University Focus*, (Fall, 2008), p. 43.
4. Schwantes, *The Biblical Meaning of History* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1970), chapters six and seven.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 139, 186.
6. Ronald L. Numbers, "In Defense of Secular History," *Spectrum* (spring 1969), pp. 64-68.
7. Strand, review of *The Biblical Meaning of History* in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 10 (1972), pp. 199-201.