

### Reality and Renovation. Fritz Guy's Re-Routing of Adventist Thought.

My interest in theology was kindled in the early sixties when I enrolled in Fritz Guy's religion class as a college freshman. I have been learning from him ever since. His reflections never fail to inform and provoke my thinking. And this present offering is no exception.

I have been asked to comment on Guy's paper from the perspective of "revelation." I want to take a rather long view of that topic, however. For what Guy gives us here is not a doctrine of revelation as such, but a list of important issues that SDA theology should address. It is helpful to relate this paper to his earlier work, "Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith."<sup>1</sup> According to the book's last chapter, theological thinking is "tripolar thinking." It attends to the Christian gospel, the cultural context, and the Adventist heritage. Guy's paper today represents a clarion call to take more seriously the second of these poles—the cultural context—than SDAs have been doing. He lists seven "theological realities" that SDA theology should address as we move ahead in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

My first question concerns the title and central theme of Guy's paper. He never explains just what he means by "theological realities." This is a problem, because in the course of the discussion, the expression refers to quite different things. On the one hand, Guy applies it to the historic SDA commitment to "present truth," Reality #1, which means openness to new ideas and to new ways of understanding our heritage. (Reality #7 is essentially a restatement of this theme.) As he describes the other realities in the list, however, they seem to refer to something quite different (including #6, which contains three more such realities). They are not resources, but challenges that SDA theology must meet: the complexity of the Bible, the success of science, particularly as it accounts for the history of the cosmos and of life on our planet, and the physical nature of human existence. In this sense, "theological realities" represent scientific data that thinking people cannot deny and SDA theologians cannot ignore. On the one hand, then, we have the SDA heritage that permits, or even invites, us to change, and on the other, number of scientific facts that require us to do so.

The second of Guy's realities calls us to reject interpretations of the Bible that ignore its human dimension. There is considerable diversity in the Bible, and the biblical materials all bear the mark of historical conditioning.<sup>2</sup> There is an important connection between Reality #2 and the four that follow. A proper understanding of the Bible prevents us from attaching literal, factual significance to its historical and cosmological references. In many ways, Guy notes, SDAs have accommodated their thinking to the discoveries of modern science, and the time has come for us to accept the rest and face the theological consequences. And this, as I read him, is more or less where Guy leaves things here. My concern is what lies ahead. He has planted a signpost that reads, "Adventist theology—this way." But where will that road take us? The territory will certainly be new. Will the landmarks be recognizably Adventist? This is not a risk to be taken lightly, of course, but as "present truth" assures us, neither is it a risk to be feared.

Guy's proposal is reminiscent of a major stream of religious thought. The most influential theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century sought a way of doing theology that lies between dogmatic certainty and secular disbelief.<sup>3</sup> They "reconceptualized the meaning of Christianity in the light of modern knowledge" and their work was characterized "by its openness to the verdicts of modern intellectual inquiry, especially historical criticism and the natural sciences."<sup>4</sup> This is a worthy endeavor, I believe, but not necessarily the one that should preoccupy us now.

My question is not whether Christian theology in general, or SDA theology in particular, should address the concerns that science raises. Of course it should. My question is just how much of the theological enterprise should

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<sup>1</sup> Andrews University Press, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> If acknowledged, this reality would reverse a significant shift in SDA approaches to the Bible over the past thirty years or so. According to Volume 5 of the *SDA Bible Commentary* (1956), for example, there is value in the historical critical method, though it must be carefully applied. According to the *Handbook of SDA Theology* (2000), there is none.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity: 1950-2005* (WJK, 2006), 537.

<sup>4</sup> Dorrien, 2-3.

be devoted to concerns like these? Are they just a part of it? Or are they pretty much all of it? Are they the central agenda that SDA theology should pursue? Or are these matters tangential to our major task? Could they, for example, be relegated to the role traditionally described as “apologetics”?

One reason for this question is the fact that Guy offers us little in the way of guidance for addressing the questions he raises. We have a list of challenges, but not a strategy for meeting them—beyond the general assurance that present truth will see us through. If you’ll forgive a sports analogy, he catalogues the talents of the opposition and encourages his players to give it their best effort. But we also need a game plan.

To use the terms of his tri-polar scheme, I hope that SDA theology will give more attention to the first pole, the Christian gospel, and the third, the SDA heritage. Only I would expand the latter to include the Christian heritage. Just as we cannot read the Bible in a vacuum that ignores either the concrete surroundings of the writers or our own surroundings as readers, neither can we ignore the larger Christian community to which we belong. Christianity is more than a list of beliefs. It is a living, worshiping, caring and serving community. Accordingly, the task of theology is more than providing us with defensible cognitive claims about humans and the cosmos. Its task is to portray the living reality of the Christian community past and present.

As for the first pole, I have felt a new wind blowing through a good deal of theological reflection in recent years.<sup>5</sup> There are those who believe that the fundamental endeavor of classical constructive theology, viz., to make faith plausible to the modern mind, has run its course. In its wake, they argue, it is time to return to the faith of the early Christian era, embrace their concerns, renew an interest in their doctrinal commitments, find common fulfillment with them in Christian worship.

What if we started with other theological realities? What if we began, not with the problems that modern science poses, but with the historic center of our faith? Suppose we affirm Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, as the reality from which we take all our theological bearings.<sup>6</sup> And suppose we then extend the significance of that center throughout the range of human inquiry, including cosmology and anthropology. If the crucified and risen Lord is the One through whom the world was made, we should view the cosmos as creation, not merely as nature, as the unfolding of divine purpose, not the impersonal product of chance and necessity. If the Lord of life went to the cross, then we know that God makes the sufferings of the world his own suffering, and refuses to give them the last word. If the One crucified is risen indeed, we have assurance that the universe is open to divine transformation. In his risen form, Christ was undeniably identical to and amazingly different from the One who died. So, the regularities of nature that so impress us do not exhaust the possibilities that await us.<sup>7</sup> All of this needs extensive unpacking, of course, but there are Christians who are working on it, and SDAs should make common cause with them.

In this provocative piece, Guy both challenges and reassures us. To be faithful to the past, we cannot repeat it. We must face the future and make the changes it requires. But I hope he adds to his thoughts on the important issues described here additional proposals that show how we can meet these challenges and how the resources of the faith once for all delivered to the saints, and reaffirmed by our SDA forbears, can continue to guide us in the years ahead.

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November 21, 2008

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<sup>5</sup> Some are represented in the additional meetings at the AAR, like those of the Christian Theological Research Fellowship.

<sup>6</sup> As the earliest Christians did according to 1Cor 15:3-5.

<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy that an essay like Ted Peters’, entitled, “Resurrection of the Very Embodied Soul?” appears in a book that explores in detail the relation between scientific and religious views of human nature—*Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, ed. Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, et al. (Vatican Observatory Foundation, 2002).