In this book, Sigve Tonstad, argues that the seventh-day Sabbath is a gift from God to all humanity. But early on (though not in the first century) the Christian community rejected the gift, and thus inflicted upon itself a devastating loss. The loss impoverished the Christian experience of God’s care. It also fed atrocious evil—not only, as it turned out, Christian oppression of Jews but also sustained inattention to the earth and the human body and, in addition, disastrous embrace of the Roman Empire and of its imperial ethos.

Tonstad advances his argument through exegetical and historical analysis. Despite disparagements of the Sabbath that came, over time, to be as routine as they were clueless, in Scripture itself, the Sabbath was never a burden, nor was it ever an “arbitrary” test of loyalty. It was instead a sign of divine presence, reliability and love. It was a celebration of the world God had made, and was contuing to make. It was a respite from labor and from obsession with productivity. It was a reminder of the purposes—the “vision of inclusion”—that God and humans share.

God, Tonstad declares, gave the Sabbath as a gift at the beginning—before Israel—and God intends it for everyone. (He makes this point by repeated invocation, not only of Genesis but also of Isaiah 56:6,7.) As for New Testament passages that Christian writers have pressed into service against the Sabbath (e.g. Galatians 4:8-11 and Colossians 2:16, 17), he lays down careful and persuasive arguments that these writers misread what the Bible is saying.

Christian antagonism to the Sabbath came early, and from the start this antagonism reflected anti-Jewish prejudice, or even hatred. The author several times reprises his argument about the damage all this causes to both the body and the earth. And in the course of his elaboration, he shows how Sunday was from the start an instrument of imperial control. Constantine’s legislation applied not just to Christians but also to worshippers of Hercules, Apollo and Mithras. What is more, it made no mention at all of Christ or of the resurrection. In the end, he says, the victory of Sunday over Sabbath hardened the church into hierarchy and the divine image into that of the “ultimate despot.”

Thus Sunday cannot, Tonstad argues, “shoulder the functions of the Sabbath.” The seventh-day Sabbath is where the human story begins, and it is where, under God, the story will end. From start to finish, his book is a defense of a very particular expression of religious faith. It assumes—no, it makes the case—that failure to see the truth of his argument is an error. Indeed, it is a grievous error.

This last struck me, when the book first came out, as particularly intriguing. As it happens, the work of the Andrews University Ph. D. graduate Samir Selmanovic appeared also in 2009, and received considerable attention outside of Adventism as well as inside. Entitled It’s Really All about God: Reflections of a Muslim, Atheist, Jewish Christian, the book was remarkable both for its autobiographical reflections and for its insistence that no community can claim to have “ultimate” truth, or religious “supremacy.” The distinctive religions (Selmanovic mainly focuses on the various monotheisms) must now see themselves, he argues, as “interdependent” and wholly fallible perspectives on the way and will of God. Although he exhibits affection for (as well as criticism of) his own Christian heritage, he sees no profound difference between Torah, Jesus Christ and Muhammad, or at least says nothing about such differences in the book. Atheists themselves, indeed, belong to the network of interdependence the author envisions. They actually “bless” religion: they are “God’s whistle-blowers.”
The times are friendly, it seems, to perspectives on religion that play down differences and underscore similarities. Although I myself am thoroughly sympathetic to Tonstad’s study of the Sabbath, the wider cultural context raises questions about the church capacity, today, to win people over to a message of difference. When the wider culture tends to shrug its shoulders, or express outright hostility, if confronted with particularistic expressions of religious commitment, how can Tonstad’s argument find acceptance? How can it find acceptance, not just within the more thoughtful domains outside of Adventism, but also within the more thoughtful, or fashionably thoughtful, domains of Adventism itself?