

# Do Christianity AND Politics Mix?

By Gene Hsu

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**C**hristians—and Adventists in particular—have traditionally been apathetic or even negative toward politics. They have often given biblical grounds for their attitudes. The Christian message is spiritual, rather than social or political, they believe. Jesus, after all, said that His kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). And, as Ellen White indicates, His mission on earth was not to liberate the Jews from the Romans but rather to free them and whoever believes in Him from sin.<sup>1</sup>

## **In the World, Not of the World**

Several New Testament passages suggest that Christians should reject political considerations. Christians are not to be of the world, just as Jesus was not of the

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world.<sup>2</sup> We are counseled not to love the world or the things that are in the world.<sup>3</sup> We are not even to be friends of the world.<sup>4</sup>

Given the worldly, often corrupt nature of politics, it is not surprising that these texts have often been used to justify the passive or even negative attitudes of Christians toward politics. But is this a correct interpretation of the gospel commission? If we do not go into the world, how can we share the good news of salvation with “every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people”?

Given the international nature of the Adventist Church, how can we

love and respect our brothers and sisters of the same faith in different countries, in different cultures, and under different political ideologies unless we understand the cultures and political systems in which they live? Furthermore, considering the all-encompassing and penetrating influence of government on human life, how can Christians, as citizens, afford not to understand and become involved in the operation of their own governments?

### **A Definition**

But first, what is politics? Many different definitions have been suggested such as "the authoritative allocation of values in a community"; "the striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power"; and "who gets what, when, how?"<sup>5</sup>

In spite of these different definitions (which really indicate only specific emphases), the essence of politics remains the same: the making of rules and regulations that have a binding effect on a significant group of people in a given society.

In a broad sense, politics or political processes exist whenever group decision-making takes place. Thus we may speak of school politics, corporate politics, or even church politics. But normally the term refers to the decision- and policy-making processes of local or national government.

The political process includes three main areas: (1) the choosing of decision-makers; (2) the actual making of government decisions and laws; and (3) the implementation of public policies.

In countries where citizens participate in the political process, they are more likely to be involved in the selection of decision-makers than in the actual formulation of policy.

In other countries, citizens are not allowed to participate actively in either process. Instead they may play only a subservient role in the political arena. That is, they must passively obey government rules and regulations made by other people.

Where they are allowed to do so, Christians should choose to participate either in the process of select-

ing decision-makers or in the actual making of decisions and policies. Public policies affect many aspects of their lives, including their freedom to worship and share their faith.

### **Party Politics?**

In most countries political parties are the vehicles through which decision-makers are selected. The term *party politics* conjures up images of influence peddling, corruption, and behind-the-scenes deals. Because of the potential for divisiveness, many people have

In some countries freedom of religion and conscience are recognized and allowed only if they harmonize with government policies. More enlightened rulers may allow greater diversity in the area of religious liberty than in political dissent.

This issue is of special significance to Seventh-day Adventists because Sabbath-keeping conflicts with national law in many countries. A better understanding of politics and government policies will help generate love and concern for our fellow church members who

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urged that party affiliation and politics in general should be shunned by Christians. But party identification is only one factor in the selection of decision-makers. Other considerations include the candidate's personality and his or her stand on issues.

Diversity of educational level, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, and religious beliefs also provide the basis for divisiveness. However, if such differences are approached with Christian love, they may actually bring enrichment and enlightenment as church members learn tolerance and respect for diversity.

### **Politics' Impact on Religion**

The relationship of politics to religion is of special concern to Adventists. Some countries have dominant or even national religions that are established by law or tradition. In these lands, religious liberty and freedom of conscience are defined by the state. For instance, religious liberty may refer to an individual's right to worship privately according to his or her religious faith, but not to a believer's right to publicly proclaim personal beliefs or to attempt conversions.

are being persecuted for their faith in such countries. Such understanding also confers an additional benefit. It helps prepare Christians to face a similar situation when religious persecution occurs in their own countries.

### **Teaching About Politics**

Our students need to understand the basic concepts and operations of the political process as well as biblical teachings concerning church-state relations. If they study comparative religion courses, they will come to understand different national views about religion.

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Most Christians hold similar views about the relationship between religion and government. These include (1) the value of sepa-

ration of church and state; (2) the legitimacy of governmental authority and the need for citizens to obey legitimate laws; (3) the need for human rights and religious freedom; and (4) the value of Christians, individually and collectively, participating in the political process, particularly in the area of religious freedom and other moral and cultural issues.

### **Government Attitudes Toward Religion**

In contrast to this unanimity, governments hold vastly different

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attitudes toward religious beliefs. These attitudes are shaped by their political ideologies. For example, Max Weber persuasively argues that there is a close relation between the spirit of a capitalist economic system and the rational

ethics of ascetic Protestantism.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, Karl Marx believed that communism makes all existing religions superfluous and supercedes them.<sup>7</sup>

Historical and circumstantial factors contribute to a nation's unique attitude toward religion. For example, while China, Japan, and Korea share many similarities in culture and traditions, the unique historical background of modern Korea formed the basis for the growth of Christianity in that country.

The Japanese rule of Korea between 1905 and 1945 neutralized the contradictions between nationalism and Christianity that had existed in Korea. In fact, the Japanese oppression of the Korean church made that church a champion of Korean nationalism.

The use of the native Han gul alphabet by the Korean Christian church asserted the solidarity between Christianity and nationalism. Since Christian mission schools were the only alternative to the Japanese-run education system, attending church-operated schools became a symbol of boycotting the invaders.<sup>8</sup>

Japanese colonial rule and the subsequent ordeal of national division and war destroyed much of Korea's tradition, thus creating a spiritual void. Christianity, which made Koreans feel both patriotic and modern, filled this void.<sup>9</sup> The suffering of the Korean people during the time of colonialism and civil war also created a favorable climate for Christianity.

Political ideology and historical events are only two of the factors that help to explain how nations view religion and why Christianity grows in some countries but not in others. Other related subjects that deserve further investigation in the classroom include the role of religious organizations as interest groups in national political processes, the relationship between religious affiliation and ethnic groups, international religious organizations in international relations and politics, and the role of religious groups in political development and nation building.<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to the traditional view  
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approach seems absolutely necessary. The student who has begun in the classroom the process of separating the absolutes of Christianity from their historical circumstances will be ready to translate that living faith into another cultural context, whether it be a Western society or a non-Western civilization.

Cultural and intellectual history, by making us more aware of our identity, individually and collectively, puts us in a position of strength as we face the buffetting winds of a rapidly changing world. □

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> James Harvey Robinson, *The New History* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1912; paperback ed., New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Bloom, p. 30. Because of the relativistic assumptions behind much cultural history, Bloom is quite critical of the field. He believes that philosophy is a superior means of transcending time and place.

<sup>5</sup> James Burke, *The Day the Universe Changed* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1985), p. 337.

<sup>6</sup> Bloom, p. 39.

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held by many Christians, world political affairs are very closely related to the development of Christianity, the growth of churches, and the completion of the gospel commission. Seventh-day Adventist students need to learn about political affairs and systems and their relationship to religion in a variety of governments and political systems. Such knowledge will help them better understand their church, their political system, and the world around them. □

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1940), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> John 15:19; 17:14, 16.

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 2:15; Colossians 3:2.

<sup>4</sup> James 4:4.

<sup>5</sup> David Easton, *The Political System* (New York: Knopf, 1953).

<sup>6</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1930), pp. 2, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, "Principles of Communism," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International, 1975), p. 354.

<sup>8</sup> Donald N. Clark, *Christianity in Modern Korea* (New York: University Press of America, 1986), p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Political Development* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1970).

## SOCIAL STUDIES FOR STUDENTS OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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5. A sense of compassion for the less fortunate;

6. A sense of respect for and therefore a tolerance for the opinions of others;

7. A willingness to accept necessary changes within a system of law and order deriving from the will of the people;

8. Attitudes favorable to the social, physical, cultural, and economic development that will enable the learners to participate in the life of the community, and when they leave school to function as innovators in a society in which all members can take pride; social studies should make the school an agent of change.<sup>6</sup>

The original purpose of the ASSP was to reorganize the approach to social studies both at the primary and secondary levels as well as in teacher-training colleges.<sup>7</sup> These concepts have, therefore, become the basis for the advanced teacher-training program in social studies in Kenya.

### Guidelines for Zimbabwe Schools

When the newly independent country of Zimbabwe in 1980 settled on a social studies syllabus for their primary schools, they adopted the following broad guidelines:

1. To gain such an understanding of oneself as a member of society as will result in positive and acceptable behavior in the community.

2. To gain insight into the organization, origins, and culture of his and other communities.

3. To understand one's social obligations and responsibilities in fulfilling them.

4. To know about life in certain selected communities and countries, comparing and contrasting them with one's own so as to ensure an appreciative understanding of their differences.

5. To be able to relate the past to the present in the study of change and continuity in human affairs.

6. To be aware of the implications of population growth upon one's physical and social environment.<sup>8</sup>

In most African countries the syllabi both for primary and secondary schools are set by the government. Where church-operated schools still exist, they have to follow the same guidelines as the government-operated institutions. This is particularly true in the secondary schools where students are prepared for national exams.

### Obstacles to Implementation

The above guidelines show that the theoretical framework exists for a competent social-studies program in the African nations. However, in some countries the program has not been made fully operational because those in charge have failed to commit sufficient resources to make it succeed.

Some governments have committed themselves to upgrading science training, feeling that they will achieve greatest benefit from the money thus spent. However, social studies is critical to the education and modernization efforts of developing nations.

Improvement is needed in two main areas. Textbooks are seldom available in sufficient quantities. In fact they are often not available at all. Teachers often have limited training, and their pay is so low that they skip classes to earn a second income from another job. Neither of these problems is unique to social studies, but rather tied in with other problems in the educational systems of the developing countries.

### Christian Values and Social Studies

Although social studies offers some solutions to the conflicts between peoples and nations, it also highlights the intractable nature of certain human problems and draws attention to the eternal and more stable values of human existence. These values seem to have greater appeal in the third world than in some of the developed countries.<sup>9</sup>

A Christian who is well versed in the social sciences will definitely have an advantage in interpreting the human situation at this critical