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Geography's Impact on Human Values

By Harwood A. Lockton

"Back to the basics in education" is the clarion call in many Western nations over the past decade. Politicians declare that the solution to national economic crises lies in a renewed emphasis on literacy, numeracy, science, and technology.

The social sciences and humanities are viewed as largely irrelevant by proponents of the "back to the basics" movement. Yet these are the very areas of the school curriculum that deal explicitly with values and people-to-people relationships. If societies fail to emphasize the humanities and social sciences, they will become more technocratic and mechanistic. They will consequently be even less able to discover methods for our global community to cooperatively solve its

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common problems.

The study of geography can significantly contribute to a better understanding not only of one's own society, but also of other people and lands. It

offers insight into the building of human relationships and values as well as an historical overview of the ecology of our planet.

A Working Definition

What is geography? A simple working definition is "the study of places and their people—where these places are, what they are like, what human activities go on in them and between them." The fundamental questions that geographers ask are these:

What is there?

Where is it?

Why is it there?

What are the implications of its being there?

How is it changing over time?

The geographic dimension of life—

whether at the individual, national, or global level—cannot be ignored. It is a condition of our existence. We all exist in time and *space*. Geography does indeed matter!¹

Values in Geography

Geography is more than the study of mountains and islands, deserts and rivers. It also involves the values of the people who occupy and use these features. One cannot escape values in the study of geography because geography deals with competing uses for scarce land and resources. Cowie lists some of the values that are inherent in the content of geography:

Geographic Expression of Religious Values

Religious values are sometimes expressed in the street plans of urban areas. The Roman gridiron pattern is thought to have characterized a bureaucratic order. However, the same pattern has been adopted by various religious communities such as the Mormons in Utah, who believe that they are following the plan of the city of Zion. Religious beliefs and taboos also affect agricultural systems—grapevines are absent in the Islamic areas of the Mediterranean, while pigs are absent in both the Islamic and Jewish areas of the same region.

Geographic Expression of Social Values

Values associated with the pursuit of leisure frequently conflict with the values of conservationists. In many cases concern about conservation is expressed primarily by upper-income groups in society. Although their higher level of education and increased leisure time make them effective champions of conservation, some of their concerns may be viewed as rather self-serving. While condemning the building of a noxious factory or power plant in their community, they may still desire the material benefits of such a facility—provided it is located in someone else's backyard.

Social values are also expressed in the social and racial segregation of housing areas in most of the world's large cities. This results from the deliberate manipulation of geographic space.

Geographic Expression of Economic Values

Cities reveal the influence of the economic values of Western society, with the working people's residential areas located in the older, cramped districts near the heavy industry or city center, while the affluent live in

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more spacious dwellings in the greener suburbs.

The Western affluent and materialistic life-style is spread through marketing campaigns and trade agreements. American tobacco companies, seeing declining profits at home, promote their wares to poorly educated citizens of third-world countries. Advertising encourages mothers in developing nations to give their children cola drinks instead of juice and to feed their babies powdered formula instead of breast milk. This increases malnutrition and illness in one part of the world while increasing profits and dividends in another part.²

Obviously, there is no shortage of

value-laden material in geography! As one Christian geographer has written:

Geography is the most effective subject in secondary schools for values formation with the exception of Religious Knowledge or Scripture classes. Social and spatial justice is simply the starting point for the potential in values formation which Geography offers.³

Many writers have recognized that the major problems of society and the environment arise from human alienation. "We have become estranged from ourselves and the world in which we live." Consequently, we have lost the "sense of dignity and significance of self and others..., the relatedness of life, and...the sense of the tragic significance of life."⁴

Blanchard points out that our alienation from the environment affects interpersonal relations. People have come to be regarded as objects in the same way as is the environment:

Technology...is developed and used by particular people (individuals, groups, corporations, nations) against other people to gain control of resources, including space and other people. Thus, the man-environment war is fundamentally a war against man himself.⁵

Responding to this critique of modern Western society, geographers are emphasizing a number of values in the

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ment is a central concern of contemporary geography and, of course, a biblical mandate.

Social Justice

Geographers are increasingly concerned about the welfare of human beings, whether at the local, national, or global level. The unequal development of national economies and societies is reflected in the contrast between the dismal existence of the majority of earth's inhabitants—whose lives are impoverished in terms of both quality and quantity, and the escalating affluence of a few. Such a paradox cannot escape the geographer's attention.

While the media repeatedly draw our students' attention to environmental conflicts and problems—usually because these crises threaten *our* comfortable life-styles—the plight of the other two-thirds of the world is highlighted only when massive disaster strikes—such as drought in Ethiopia. People rarely ask why drought, which is only an annoyance in Australia or the United States, should be a matter of life and death in Ethiopia. Of all the subjects competing for time in the high school curriculum, only geography addresses the needs of the developing countries as one of its central concerns.

✓ **Adventist Values and Geography: The Earth**

The two central values in geography are environmental responsibility and concern for the welfare of people from other parts of the world. A key virtue of geography is its integration of the cognitive and affective domains without any artificiality or contriving, which is not always the case with programs of environmental education, social education, or citizenship training.

✓ **Alienation and the Environment**

The idea of alienation is not foreign to Adventists. When discussing the Fall we often speak of the alienation of humanity from God. The Tower of Babel story suggests some lessons about the alienation of humans from one another.

But only rarely do we think of humanity's alienation from the environment, even though evidence of this occurred before proof appeared of people's alienation from one another (Genesis 3 and 4). The alienation of human beings from their environment—which resulted from sin—is central to geography curricula.

The Bible contains many lessons relating to human environment. It

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study of human environment. The two central values are those of ecological concern and social—specifically spatial—justice. Both areas ultimately relate to morality, and so are of vital concern to Christian teachers.

Ecological Concern

The survival of our earth and its people depends upon the ecosystem and natural environment. We consequently have a "responsibility to respect and maintain the integrity of that complex system."⁶ The natural environment is not an object to be exploited as we wish—not if humankind is to survive and indeed improve its quality of life. Unfortunately, standards of living are usually measured in terms of quantity, which in itself indicates certain values.

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Morrill says, "A sense of stewardship must be the social consequence of a science of human-environment relations."⁷ Stewardship of the environ-

declares that human beings are dependent upon God through the immediate world (Exodus 16, Jeremiah 5:22-24), and, also, humankind is presented as accountable to God for its environment. The inhabitants of earth were not given by God a *carte blanche* to exploit their planet. Through the inclusion of Sabbatical and jubilee years the Levitical system performed an ecological role. God endowed human beings with the responsibility of being stewards of the earth (Genesis 1:28, 2:15).

✓ Stewardship of Earth's Resources

The geographer's interest in places and the environment relates directly to a concern for stewardship. As Adventists, by limiting our attention mainly to money and time, we have only partially developed our theology on stewardship. We have not developed a theology of the environment. This is certainly paradoxical for a church that puts so much emphasis on the doctrine of Creation.

A well-developed concept of our responsibility for the stewardship of the earth's resources would affect our life-style, freeing much of our time and money to assist in improving the physical and spiritual welfare of others. This would also have beneficial effects on the ecology and on our own health.

✓ Life-Style and the Environment

In the Adventist ghettos of the Western world, is the life-style of Adventists ecologically much different from that of non-Adventists? I think not.

As Adventists we have failed to look at the environmental and social ramifications of our diet and life-style. Even in the health areas that our traditional doctrines have addressed, we have not comprehended the ecological and social ramifications of our choices. For example, a study of the geographical elements of food supply shows that vegetarianism would make food available for the hungry world.

Western Adventists (and those in developing countries who would copy their life-styles) should examine other aspects of their relation to the environment, such as their use of nonbiodegradable plastics and disposable products; their failure to recycle newspapers, bottles, and aluminum cans; their wasteful use of petroleum products and other fuels; their use of products that deplete the ozone layer, etc.

Geography calls upon us to question our materialistic life-style from the perspective of ecological relationships:

should we as Adventists not question it also from a spiritual perspective?

✓ Aesthetic Aspects of the Environment

Geography helps us see the adverse impact of human greed and lack of concern on the environment. While Adventists celebrate Creation in the abstract dimension of *time*, we often ignore the visible and sensual dimension of *place*. Students should be led to appreciate the beauty of the earth: great mountain ranges like the Alps and the Himalayas, magnificent rock formations like the Grand Canyon and Ayers Rock, spectacular waterfalls like Niagara and the Victoria falls, deserts, lakes, and forests, underwater formations like the Great Barrier Reef, great rivers and valleys, and other natural wonders.

Through a study of the environment we can lead our students to appreciate the beauty and intricate nature of landscape dynamics. Developing students' aesthetic sensibilities is a valid and integral aspect of geography that ought to be included in the curriculum.

✓ Adventist Values and Geography: People

Human problems—sin problems—are seen in their most obvious form in communities and societies: conflict between groups (over resources or land, for instance); concentrations of wealth, and the resulting contrasts between the haves and the have nots. However, the Adventist Church, like other Christian groups, has primarily concerned itself with the salvation of *individuals*. Ignoring the social dimension, we have stressed evangelism and medical missions. This approach is gradually changing as we realize that communities can be changed by the gospel. The work of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency in rural development projects is evidence of this changed emphasis. Yet the average church member remains unaware of ADRA and its development work. Teachers could well use many of its projects as sources of case study material for their classes.

Christ condensed the Decalogue into human responsibility to love God and our neighbor. In this age of the global village our neighbors are more than those who live in our local community. Geography literally provides a world view. It aids us in understanding the causes of shared human needs. Because the needs of humanity are a central focus in contemporary geography, the subject has much to offer our students. It is but a short step from

humanity's physical needs to its spiritual needs, which should concern us as Christian educators.

In the book *Education* Ellen White refers to only a few school subjects such as language, literature, music, science, history, and in some cases she offers criticism of the curricula involving these subjects. Geography and the social sciences, however, are referred to implicitly and in a positive light:

It is acquaintance that awakens sympathy, and sympathy is the spring of effective ministry. To awaken in the children and youth sympathy for the suffering millions in the "regions beyond," let them become acquainted with these lands and their peoples.⁸

This statement clearly deals with the teaching of geography. It also coincides with the current concerns of the discipline! Geography was taught from the 1890s in the church's model school at Avondale College in Australia. The college's motto summarizes this concern aptly, "For a greater vision of world needs."

Avoiding Stereotypes

How we introduce other peoples to our students is important. It is easy to present and reinforce stereotypes. For example, here are several quotes from a number of school textbooks in use during the 1970s: "No arab can be trusted far"; "Natives seldom show any facial expression...are good at routine jobs"; and "the Natives in fact seem as destructive as the baboons, but it is very difficult to get them to change their habits."⁹

Older reference materials can also be a problem. A well-known encyclopedia printed in 1957 described people in one Southeastern Asia nation as "indolent, pleasure loving... They have no idea of the value of money, and little notion of honesty... addicted to gambling... their courage on the whole is not high if judged by European standards... when a man of another race might commit suicide, [he] runs amuck."

Social darwinism is strongly entrenched in the social sciences. According to this philosophy, society continually develops and improves toward some as-yet-unspecified unique and ideal civilization. Since Western society is viewed as the highest stage thus far attained, all other societies must represent earlier stages of evolution. Therefore, terms such as "primitive race" and "Stone Age" people are used. If peoples have not reached a particular level in a scheme devised by Westerners, they are judged to be backward. Such peoples are described as "still using mules," as

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tent etc., in your social studies teaching?

The responses to this question indicated that social studies textbooks seem to lack adequate geography emphasis. Seventy-eight percent of the respondents felt they needed to supply extra materials and content. More teachers than administrators answered Yes to this question.

Typical comments were: "Book requirements are not enough." "Every school must be adequately equipped the same as science and math and others." "Yes, our teachers have added much to the geography text."

The next four questions asked respondents to rate their answers on a given scale.

Question 12. On a scale of 1 to 7 (1 being the lowest) how would you rank geography in importance compared to the other subjects in the school curriculum?

The responses indicated that most respondents felt geography was somewhere in the middle with 74 percent in the 3-to-5 range. The rest of the responses were about evenly divided between those above 5 and below 3.

Administrators and teachers reflected an almost identical pattern of response. Comments included the following: "Less than religion, math, and reading, but more than art and other social studies areas." "If you're asking how it is ranked presently, I would circle No. 1. If the question is how it should be ranked, it should be higher." "Importance, unfortunately is not reflected in academy course offerings. Constraints are basically financial." "As important as others."

Question 13. What percent of your total social studies teaching would you estimate is devoted to geography?

The estimations varied greatly ranging from 0 to 60 percent, with a majority of respondents indicating 10-30 percent.

Qualifying comments indicated that many felt the amount of time was insufficient. Some felt guilty for taking more time than allotted at the expense of something else.

Question 14. What percent of all grade 9-12 students are likely to take one or more geography courses?

Seventy-eight percent felt that the proportion was 10 percent or less.

Question 15. What fractional part of the social studies texts you use this year is devoted to geography concepts?

Sixty-three percent of the respondents estimated that less than a quarter of the content was devoted to geography. Teachers and administrators gave similar responses.

Qualifying comments made by respondents included such statements as these: "Usually one chapter out of 10." "In my opinion the popular social studies series I use deals with history far more than geography. For example a prominent area in the U.S.A. has only three pages to tell about the region."

Question 16. If you feel geography needs to be emphasized more in SDA K-12 schools, how best can this be brought about? Any other comments are welcome.

Again the response was more than expected (55 typed pages of comments when compiled.)

Reactions to the survey ranged from a few wary comments such as, "I feel there is enough emphasis in K-12 that it should not be a cause for concern. Apparently this is another sector outcry." "It appears this is from a geography oriented person who is attempting to push geography," to enthusiastic outbursts of support like these: "Thank you for this opportunity to sound off. I've felt strongly about this for some time." "I'm pleased to see we are admitting we have a problem, and are trying to do something about it." "I am glad to see someone who is questioning our curriculum." "I was thrilled to receive this questionnaire. I surely hope this doesn't become a dead end." "I think this will be an eye-opener to educators." "This survey is long overdue. Congratulations, and I hope the survey will make an impact on the NAD, K-12 Board."

The supportive, positive comments dominated the responses by at least three to one.

These responses indicate a need to strengthen the geography program in secondary schools by increasing the offerings and requiring students to take at least one geography course. Two comments illustrate this perception: "A geography requirement for high school is appropriate." "As an administrator interested in curriculum, I highly support the concept of teaching geography to most high school students."

Some respondents drew attention to

the difficulties of adding anything more to an already crowded curriculum as in the following two statements: "Curriculum grows while time shrinks. How to squeeze in more emphasis on anything is a serious problem." "Geography needs proper emphasis, but let's not be reactionary and swing too far the other way."

The enthusiasm of the respondents shown toward this survey points to considerable interest among SDA educators in increasing and improving geography education in SDA schools. As one respondent remarked, "It's a start! Thank you for considering this subject in depth."

Has the time come for serious curriculum evaluation and planning in both the elementary and secondary schools? Obviously it has. □

Wilfred W. Liske's doctorate included social studies education as part of its specialization. He has taught at the elementary through college level in the West Indies, the Bahamas, and the United States. For a number of years he was a Professor of Education at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. Though officially retired in 1988, he continues to accept guest lecturing assignments in various parts of the world, such as England and India.

REFERENCES

¹ Gilbert Grosvenor, President of the National Geographic Society, Editorial, *National Geographic* (January 1988), n.p.

² Cyril E. Roe, "Geography Education: A Critical Need," *The Journal of Adventist Education*, 50:3 (April-May 1988), pp. 11, 12, 36, 37.

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"not yet" having computers, or as "dying out."

Much prejudice exists in society because such views are still promulgated. Geographers are becoming increasingly aware of the ethnocentric biases of their own world descriptions. We can learn much from an attempt to study the values of others from as unbiased a viewpoint as possible. Christ taught the ultimate equality of all races—the family of God.

Service Learning

Curriculum developers have devised a number of strategies for incorporating values into their teach-