

Institute for Christian Teaching
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**GOD AND HISTORY:
INTERPRETING CONTEMPORARY EVENTS
FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

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Introduction

We are living in a dynamic and turbulent period in world history, which has witnessed the end of some of the most intractable conflicts of the 20th century. The world witnessed the breaching of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of communist regimes and the democratisation of Eastern Europe. In Southern Africa, apartheid after bitter struggles collapsed in a peculiar fashion leading to the democratisation of South Africa. In the Middle East, Saddam Hussein's government fell like a deck of cards during the Second Gulf War. The occurrence of these events was sudden and unexpected and found historians and social scientists sleeping like the ten virgins. This has necessitated the need for a reliable and viable interpretation of global change. Interpretations as to why these events took place have tended to be atheistic in nature glorifying the acts of men. For an example Solomon argues that '... realism – both the classical realism of Carr, Mogenthau and Niebuhr, and the structural or neo-realism of Waltz and Krasner – are best suited as tools to understand the turbulent world in which we live'.¹ Realism places emphasis on the state as the primary actor in world politics.²

It is the purpose of this paper to offer a Christian interpretation as to why these events took place. According to Butterfield the Christian perspective of history '... provide certain bearings for the interpretation of the whole drama of human life on this earth....'³ The significances and values of history are not to be found by focussing our attention upon man in nature, but are to be sought by the contemplation of man and the ways of God with man in history.⁴ Atheistic interpretations of history are arid and focus on petty discussions and evade issues that relate to man's larger destiny.⁵ I am aware that I have entered a minefield, as debate concerning God's providence in history is controversial among Adventist historians. Adventist historians in my view have gone to sleep (as it were) on this important subject and I intend to resuscitate the debate without running the risk of being labelled a trouble causer. It is also my contention that in as much as the atheists have

¹ <http://www.iss.org.za/Pubs/ASR/5No2/InDefence.html> page 1

² Ibid page 3

³ H.Butterfield. *Christianity and History*. London:G. Bell and Sons Ltd, 1949. page 3

⁴ ibid page 2-3

⁵ ibid page 24

developed their own interpretation of historical events, which is compatible with their worldview, Christians should also interpret contemporary events according to their worldview. In order to lay a theoretical foundation I will firstly analyse the atheistic interpretation of history as well as the generic Christian providential philosophy and relate them to the chosen contemporary events. Secondly the Adventist approach to history will be examined, showing its distinctness as well as its likeness to the generic Christian philosophy, relating it to the events under discussion. Last, but not least, I will attempt to use the generic Christian and Adventist philosophies to interpret three chosen contemporary events. In doing this I do not claim to have received any revelation at all. I am also aware that beyond the NT times we have limited revelation. Geering commenting on limiting the Christian's concern with history to those events to which the Bible only witnesses says 'These events have been referred to as "salvation's history" as if the hand of God is seen only in a selected events of the distant past."⁶ He goes on to argue that

the OT shows us that Israel was always concerned with contemporary history and was prepared to re-interpret her past in the light of what she witnessed in the present. Therefore the Bible leads us to pay proper attention, not only to the significant events in the past, to which it gives firsthand witness, but also to the human scene of our own day⁷

By implication God is present in both past and contemporary events. Our Christian worldview makes us assume and presuppose that '...the past is meaningful [and] in the hands of God even when we cannot see him'.⁸ May I also add that the presence is also in the hands of God even if we do not seem to see the hand of God in the present. To the eye of faith the works of God are seen in everyday life in events both public and private and in secular affairs.⁹ V. Soto adds 'every act of the historical drama is meaningful. No historical act is too insignificant to be outside God's

⁶ L. Geering. *God in The New World*. London:, Hodder and Stoughton, 1968, page 96

⁷ Ibid, page 97

⁸ G. Land. *Teaching History: A Seventh Day Approach*. Silver Spring: Andrews University Press, 2000, page 39

⁹ L. Geering. *God in The New World*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968, page 94

interest.’¹⁰ It is against this background that I am forced to think and interpret these contemporary events Christianly in order to discover meaning in the human drama.

The Marxist interpretation of events

The Marxist interpretation is the brainchild of K.Marx and F. Engels. It is commonly referred to as ‘the materialistic conception of history’ or ‘historical materialism’. Later Marxists invented the alternative labels of ‘the economic interpretation of history’ and ‘dialectical materialism’. The Marxist philosophy of history has dominated historical interpretation for years and has no room for the acting of God in history emphasising that the course of history is determined solely or largely by economic forces. To Marxists, different societies are based on different modes of production (primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism and communism) and in these societies class relations are based on the role an individual plays in the economic structure. This structuring inevitably leads to a class struggle because some people have and others do not have. The end of this class struggle according to Marxists is the abolition of all classes and the attainment of complete freedom in a perfect communist society. Therefore, to Marxists history is nothing more than a class struggle culminating in a utopia on earth.

Marxist explained these three chosen events in economic terms and the class struggle. According to Marxists the fall of communism was a result of the fatal flaws of communist economics and the struggle between the rulers and the ruled. For South Africa it is said that the gulf between the haves and have not was too deep. In Iraq the issue was Iraq’s oil - open Iraq’s huge oil reserves to foreign companies. It cannot be denied that economic factors played a role. In fact the Bible concurs (James 5:1-6) that economic factors and class struggle do play a part in political/historical change.

However, the Marxist interpretation depends largely on reason and ignores the fact that ‘history is not proven to be true by rational analysis. Its acceptance is an achievement of faith, being apprehension of faith beyond the limits of reason alone’.¹¹ This observation calls for an interpretation of historical events that balances faith and reason. Furthermore, whilst it cannot be

¹⁰ V.Soto. Biblical Eschatology and the ides of progress: Implications for the teaching of history and religion. *Christ in the Classroom Vol 2*. 1988, page 240

¹¹ Ibid page 239

denied that economic forces influence the making and moulding of history but to say that they determine solely, or even largely the course of history, cannot be established.¹² For this reason we turn to the Christian biblical interpretation of historical events.

The Christian biblical interpretation of historical events

Christian philosophy of history comes out of the reading of the Bible. Land says that the Bible does not present a philosophy of history as such and suggest that we should infer from the stories of the Bible the understanding of history.¹³ White boldly asserts that ‘the Bible is the most ancient and most comprehensive history....’¹⁴ The Bible presents God as transcendent, as the creator and sustainer of the world. Hebrews 1:3 sees a God who sustains all things and Job says God’s hand is in the life of every creature and the breadth of all mankind. Ellen White says that Ezekiel 14 and 10:8 seem to indicate that the complicated play of human events is under divine control. She contends that ‘amidst the strife and tumult of nations, He that sitteth above the cherubim still guides the affairs of men’.¹⁵ This is a bold statement that indicates it is futile to imagine that men on their own make history but that God is guiding history to a ‘.... grand conclusion according to His will, purpose and knowledge’.¹⁶ The book of Revelations tells us that the destiny of men is not a utopian earth but a renewed earth. More importantly the God of Revelation does not only foresee but He sees right down the course of events to the end of all things, to the final end.

Perhaps the most intriguing passage is Acts 17:24-27. Paul says

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth, and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would

¹² L. Strauss. *It May Not Be Long Until...The End Of This Present World*. Grand Rapids: Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, 1967, page 61

¹³ Op cit page 40

¹⁴ E.G.White.*Education*.California: Pacific Press, 1903 page 173

¹⁵ Ibid, page 178

¹⁶ H.L.Poe. *Christianity in the Academy: Teaching at the intersection of Faith and Learning*. Washington: Baker Academy, 2004, page 120

seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him,
though he is not far from each one of us.¹⁷

This passage suggests that God knows in advance the rise and fall of nations. What we need to address however is whether God simply knows in advance what will take place or whether He causes these developments. With reference to the three contemporary issues two critical questions to ask are: 1) Did God know in advance that these governments in Eastern Europe, South Africa and Iraq would fall? If He knew did He cause them to fall? According to Daniel 2:21 God changes times and seasons, sets up kings and deposes them. Ryrie believes that God is not only on His throne but is actively, positively and sovereignly controlling the affairs of men to suit His own purposes.¹⁸ This however seems to conflict with human free will. Brunner in an attempt to answer this puzzle asserts that

God does not do everything that happens, but He knows it all beforehand. He foresees without being able to alter the course of events, but the very fact that He foresees it means that He leaves room for it to happen. God limits Himself in order to create room for the creature.¹⁹

Therefore in the unfolding of events human beings have a choice and history becomes an interface of God's will and man's choice.

The Old Testament (OT) seems to suggest an interpretation and meaning of history. The Cambridge historian, Butterfield has said of the OT 'Altogether we have here the greatest and most deliberate attempts ever made to wrestle with destiny and interpret history and discover meaning in the human drama....'²⁰ The Biblical accounts on the history of Israel, the ministry of Jesus and the ²¹growth of the early church point to a God who intervened in the affairs of men for a purpose. The Israelites saw the hand of God in events and ascribed their success to God.²² It would appear to have been

¹⁷ NIV page 1262

¹⁸ C.C. Ryrie. *The Bible and Tomorrow's News*. Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1976, page 30

¹⁹ E. Brunner. *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption Dogmatics Vol II* Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1952, page 172

²⁰ H. Butterfield. *Christianity and History*. London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd, 1949, page 2

²¹ *Ibid* page 72-73

²² *Ibid*, page 73

one of the functions of the great prophets to point out that God was still acting and intervening in history as in the time of Moses. Before king David God raised up charismatic leaders to meet particular crises.²³ These men and women such as Moses, Joshua, Miriam, Esther, Samuel, Gideon and so forth carried out divine tasks. Moses was sent by God to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and he led them to the land of milk and honey. God is seen here to be interested in the freedom, justice, mercy, and dignity of the Israelites. Would God not be equally concerned with the freedom, justice and dignity of the peoples in Eastern Europe, South Africa and Iraq? God also showed His concern for the Israelites on the long march to freedom in Canaan by providing them with food, manna, water etc. It seems to me that God cares about little details of men. Would He not care about what the majority of people in Eastern Europe, South Africa and Iraq ate? During the period of the judges, monarchy and exile God continued His providence for the Jews. The theme of providence is very clear in the OT to the extent that the history of Israel is the hand of God at work. In the New Testament God came down to live among men in the form of Jesus. Land sees the first advent of Christ as the most important intervention in history.²⁴ The apostle John says we have seen His glory the glory of One and who came from the father (John 1:4) At Nazareth Jesus declared His ministry as ‘to preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour’ (Luke 4:18-19). This is a loaded statement from Jesus suggesting that apart from the deliverance from sin He cares about the physical, social and emotional needs of people. Dr McAfee Brown addressing the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1975 spoke of Jesus as ‘liberator’ concerned with ‘social, political and economic liberation’.²⁵ The ministry of Jesus culminated in His death on the cross an event which became the lynchpin of history. Beyond the cross history is made as people respond or are repulsed by the cross. The power of the cross-manifested itself in the works of ordinary and unsophisticated men like Peter, John, Stephen, Paul, Huss, Jerome, Luther amidst trials and tribulations. When Satan sought to destroy God’s church during the dark ages God

²³ L. Geering. *God In The New World*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968, page 93

²⁴ G.Land A Biblical Approach to the study of history. *Christ in the Classroom Volume 21*, 1998, page 459

²⁵ E. Norman. *Christianity and the World Order*.Oxford:OUP, 1979, page 1.

raised men to save the church from false teaching and heresy. Is this not what Paul was alluding to when he says that God determines the place and time men live? Is it not possible that the power of the cross-determined the place and times of the people concerned with the demise of the regimes in Eastern Europe, Iraq and South Africa? Can our faith not allow us to make this Christian inference?

The early church believed that God had spoken and acted in their day in a way, which lit up all that had gone before.²⁶ The OT and NT seem to suggest that all that happens takes place within the knowledge and will of God. Consequently, Christians believe in divine providence and that history moves in a linear pattern. Brunner writes that ‘the historical time process leads somewhere. The time line is ... a straight line. This is so because God ... has entered ... at a certain point’.²⁷ In other words, God intervenes in history and has His own timetable of events. The infinite-personal God is there, but He is not also silent because there is no use in having a silent God.²⁸ He spoke to us through the scriptures and He should be there and not silent in contemporary events. The Bible leads us to see the problems of peace and war, of politics and economics, of race relations and poverty, of crises, which hang over us as the areas where God is speaking His word in history today.²⁹ Therefore Christians visualise a God who is active, directing history to His destination. Commenting on the role of divine providence in history Butterfield says ‘whether we are Christians or not, we are liable to a serious technical errors if we do not regard ourselves as born into a providential order. We are not by any means sovereign in any action that we take in regard to that order....’³⁰ this alone makes history meaningful to Christians. In other words the Christian interpretation of history goes beyond the statement of the Hegelian philosophy of history that “all that is real is rational;” all reality is a means to the final divine purpose.³¹ It is the Christian interpretation of history that can reveal this purpose. It is this meaning and purpose, which must be

²⁶ L. Geering. *God in The New World*. London: Hotter and Stoughton, 1968,, page 95

²⁷ E. Brunner. *The Problem of time in God, History and Historians* (ed) McIntire New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948, page 87

²⁸ F.A. Schaeffer. *He is There and He Is Not Silent*. Wheaton, Illinois: Tidal House Publishers, 1972, page x and 18

²⁹ L. Geering. *God in The New World*. London: Hotter and Stoughton, 1968, page 97

³⁰ H. Butterfield. *Christianity and History*. London: G. Bells and Sons Ltd, 1949, page 96

³¹ E. Brunner. *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption Dogmatic Volt II* Philadelphia,:Westminister Press, 1952, page155

at the core of our interpretation of contemporary events. God is there in contemporary events and He is not silent. If Jesus is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow³² should He not be interested in the affairs of men today?

Adventist interpretation of historical events.

The Adventist philosophy of history is not radically different from the generic one although it has some distinctiveness. It is based on the Bible and the writings of White. This philosophy has evolved over time. Serious discussion on an Adventist philosophy of history began in the 1960's and 1970's as a result of the works of Shankel and Schwantes which provoked Adventist historians. Adventist historians admit that God intervenes in History as observed by Shankel that 'the powers of the earth are frequently the instrumentalities in the hands of God to accomplish His purpose, although they may be entirely unconscious of fulfilling any such divine mission'.³³ This statement suggests that God uses people to accomplish his will and affirm the Biblical interpretation and may be used with caution to interpret contemporary events. In reference to the three case studies were Gorbachev, George Bush, Mandela and de Klerk God's chosen instruments to accomplish his purpose? We may never know for sure, but our faith makes us not to think otherwise. Shankel emphasises the faith element as crucial in the analysis of history. He goes on to say that 'everything that happens is allowed to happen by God'.³⁴ This is critical to consider when interpreting contemporary events. Did God allow communism, apartheid and Saddam to collapse? Our faith makes us think so. Adventists believe that in the end God's plan will be fulfilled and at the same time that human beings will have made their free choice. To this end history becomes the response of men to God's will. After Shankel Land whilst agreeing to the providential perspective of history thinks that it is not useful because of limitation of God's actions outside revelation.³⁵ However Land encourages Adventists to be influenced by their Christianity when interpreting history.

³² Hebrews 13:8 (NIV page 1378)

³³ G.E. Shankel. *God and Man in His History. A study in the Christian understanding of history.* Nashville:T.N, Southern, 1967,page 166

³⁴ S. Schwantes *The Biblical meaning of History.* California: Pacific Press, 1970,page 16

³⁵ G Land *Teaching History A Seventh Day Approach.* Silver Spring:Andrews University Press, 2000 page 56

Perhaps more critical in the Adventist perspective is the great controversy theme of White. She describes history as a cosmic battle between Jesus and Satan and says that these two forces influence the actions of men. All humanity is involved in this great controversy between Christ and Satan regarding the character of God, His Law and His sovereignty over the universe.³⁶ The theme provides a worldview of our origin and destiny and the ebb and flow of human history.³⁷ However man has a choice in this cosmic battle. The great controversy theme therefore may be used to interpret contemporary events. With reference to these three case studies, did we not witness a struggle between the forces of good and evil?

It is evident that Adventists like other Christians believe in God's providence and acknowledge God's sovereignty in history. However they are cognisant of their limitation beyond revelation. To this, end as an Adventist, I propose to interpret three contemporary events by asking questions, which will act as indicators or pointers to God being still active in history without necessarily being declarative and certain that I have found God in history. This approach will make learners think and reflect deeply on these issues and enable them to go beyond the facts and dates of history.

The collapse of communism and the emergence of nation states in Eastern Europe

Years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe historians continue to debate one of the most important political questions of the 20th century- why did communism collapse so suddenly? Secular historians have suggested a wide range of explanations. Brzezinski discussed the critical role of policymakers like Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, and John Paul II in the demise of communism.³⁸ Pipes and Malia debated the importance of history and ideology.³⁹ Conquest analysed the deleterious impact of the Stalin

³⁶ SDA Church Manual Hagestown: Mad, Review and Herald Pub. Assn, 1995 page 9

³⁷ SDA Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide *The Cosmic Conflict between Christ and Satan*, page 3

³⁸ The collapse of communism.htm page1

³⁹ *ibid* page1

Years.⁴⁰ Novak delineated the missing element of faith in communism.⁴¹ Brzeski exposed the fatal flaws of communist economics.⁴² Dulles predicted that the Soviet Union would come to an end as a result of its failure to satisfy the needs of its people and its large ethnic mix.⁴³ Interestingly some secular historians allude to the fact that communism denied people the freedom of worship. The silence by most Christians on this subject is worrying. An event of such magnitude cannot be explained by political, social and economic factors only. Economic forces on their own could not have solely or even largely determined or influenced the course of events in the Soviet Union. Therefore Christian historians need to look at this event from a Christian perspective. Drane asserts that events happen not in a haphazard manner but as part of a great design based on the character of God.⁴⁴ Schaeffer says that God has told us what His character is through His word. Mrs White encourages us ‘... to draw the curtain aside for us to see the Almighty working events according to His will’.⁴⁵ These statements confirm that events do not just happen and when they happen there is a reason. What then was the reason for the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe? It should be noticed that for the first time in history a powerful empire fell without attack by enemy forces. The Bible makes it plain that God knows in advance the rise and fall of nations. Therefore He knew that at some point in time the once mighty Soviet Empire would collapse. However what we do not know is whether God caused it to fall. Yet on the other hand the Bible shows that every government that exalts itself against God like Babylon will fall. Communism was anti-religion and anti- God declaring religion to be the opium of the people. Russian society was godless, ruled by godless men who denied the people their inalienable rights given by God.⁴⁶ The goal of communism was a perfect society without God, the divinity of man, faith in oneself and the deifying of the human spirit.⁴⁷ Could the God of heaven allow such an irreligious and ‘satanically inspired’ system to

⁴⁰ ibid page1

⁴¹ ibid page1

⁴² ibid page1

⁴³ <http://www.iss.org.za/Pubs/ASR/5No2/InDefence.html> page21

⁴⁴ J. Drane as quoted by G. Land. *Christ in the Classroom Vol 21*, 1998, page 457

⁴⁵ E.G.White *The Story of Prophets and Kings*. California: Pacific Press, 1917, page 459

⁴⁶ L. Strauss. *It May Not Be Long Until... The End Of This Present World*. Grand Rapids: Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, 1967, page 60

⁴⁷ Ibid page 65

continue unabated? Do we not see the character of God in the demise of communism? Furthermore White says that the greatness of a country is ‘... measured by the fidelity with which it fulfils God’s power’.⁴⁸ Soviet law rigidly restricted freedom of religious worship. It was a criminal offence for a mother to teach her child a verse in scripture. Could this have contributed to the fall of communism so as to create a great spiritual vacuum and enable the gospel to reach all nations? Hegstad commenting on Isaiah 41:2-4 says ‘ In our day, the Master of Eternity has stirred up President Gorbachev to open much of Eastern Europe to the gospel.’⁴⁹ Tokes places God at the head of what happened in the Soviet Empire declaring it ‘divine intervention’.⁵⁰ He asserts that a force more powerful than himself propelled Gorbachev. Could this powerful force be God? Was Gorbachev a Cyrus from within who like Cyrus was an instrument of God?⁵¹ Hegstad says that in Isaiah’s day (Isaiah 42:2-4) the one from the east was Cyrus but in our day it is Gorbachev who like Cyrus set people free although Gorbachev did not profess to be a Christian.’⁵² Revelations 13 speaks of a power that will cause universal worship at the end of time. Could it be that God allowed one super power to collapse to enable this to be realised? Brunner suggests that ‘ All that happens is connected with the divine purpose; all is ordered in accordance with and in subordination to, the divine plan and the final divine purpose.’⁵³ Was the collapse of communism in accordance with the divine purpose? Was this not a testimony that human beings are not capable of building a perfect society on earth? Is this not a pointer that the destiny of men is not this world? Hegstad suggests that unprecedented changes in Eastern Europe foretell a final confrontation between the kingdoms of the earth and the kingdom of heaven. These questions and issues I have raised are building blocks in attempting to interpret this event from a Christian perspective.

⁴⁸ E.G. White *The great Controversy* California: Pacific Press. 1927,page177

⁴⁹ R.R. Hegstad. *Pretenders To The Throne*. Boise, Idaho:Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1990, page 125

⁵⁰ The force behind the fall of communism.htm

⁵¹ Isaiah 45

⁵² R.R. Hegstad. *Pretenders To The Throne*. Boise, Idawo:Pacific Publishing Association, !990, page 125

⁵³ E. Brunner. *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption Dogmatic Volt II* Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1952, page 155

The demise of apartheid and the democratisation of South Africa

Apartheid disappeared from the political landscape rather unusually. This has made some people to underestimate what happened. Who could have thought in February 1990 that the release of Nelson Mandela from life imprisonment heralded at the same time the beginning of the end of white domination, its architects had vowed would last forever? Or that de Klerk, instead of being reduced to irrelevancy, like Ian Smith, in Zimbabwe would emerge as one of the vice-presidents of South Africa? And that Buthelezi, whose movement had been embroiled in the struggle for supremacy with the ANC, would end up as cabinet minister of the government of national unity? And indeed that many high-ranking apartheid officials would be retained? Many people believed that the demise of apartheid would be bloody and protracted. Woods comments ‘ I thought we would see apartheid go but I didn’t think it would go so relatively peacefully’.⁵⁴ No one imagined a peaceful end of apartheid and a smooth transition to democracy. That this was the case is a miracle. Carolus recognised this and entitled her presentation at a symposium held to mark the 40th anniversary of the Anti- Apartheid Movement ‘ South Africa: Beyond a Miracle’.⁵⁵ She asserts that social scientists will write all manner of things but miss that in some ways what happened in South Africa was a miracle. Is this not interesting and mind-boggling? Woods in attempting to explain why the collapse of apartheid was peaceful attributed it to international sanctions. Agreed but this is a half-truth. Does the Bible not teach us that God is a God of peace, justice (Micah 6:8), integrity (Proverbs 20:7) and equality (Galatians 3:28)? How do we explain that Nelson Mandela and his colleagues after being imprisoned for years were prepared to forgive and forget? Does God not say revenge is mine? But perhaps what is more intriguing is the role-played by the United Democratic Movement (UDF) in ensuring that the transition to democracy was relatively peaceful. The UDF rallied and integrated the disparate parts of opposition politics into a larger whole with a goal of a non-racial democratic South Africa. It is said that the call by the UDF for talks between the ANC and apartheid regime laid the seeds for a future negotiated settlement between the two antagonists.

⁵⁴ freedomforum.org page 1

⁵⁵ <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/aam/symposium.html>, page 19

What should be noticed is that most of the UDF leaders were Christians. Is it an accident that the UDF called for a peaceful end to apartheid? Is it not mind boggling that it was dialogue that ended apartheid? This dialogue was made possible by the presence of two men Mandela and de Klerk, especially the forgiving spirit of Mandela. Ellen White suggests that God works through human instrumentalities. Were these men raised at the appointed time in the history of South Africa for a purpose? Is it not interesting that the two immediately vanished from the scene soon after accomplishing their tasks?

Apartheid was described as a crime against humanity. It denied the majority any form of democratic participation in the political decision making process on the basis of explicitly racial criteria. Political power was exclusively in the hands of a minority, which defined itself racially as white. Ownership and control of the means of production were concentrated in the hands of the white minority. Africans were reduced to nothing but labour power. The ruling class maintained itself in power through the constant use of extreme oppression and coercive measures. In short apartheid debased and degraded other human beings who were created in the image of God. As already allude to God is God of love, mercy, justice, freedom, farness and equality. It is only through justice that salvation is made evident.

Perhaps more mind-boggling is the fact that supporters of apartheid justified it on religious grounds. They argued that the blacks as the inferior race should continue to be drawers and hewers of water. The state also favoured the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) effectively robbing people their right of freedom of worship. By justifying apartheid on religious ground was the state not blaspheming God? The state therefore denied the people the right to make choices in matters of religion. God does not force. These questions and many others not asked might enable the students to see beyond the economic and political factors as reasons, which led to the collapse of apartheid.

The fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq

Saddam Hussein was dictator of Iraq from 1973 until 2003, when his regime was overthrown by a United States-led invasion. It is alleged that Hussein was one of the worst dictators of the 20th

century. Willem van der Walt referred to Hussein as the ‘ devil’s advocate.’⁵⁶ While in power he kept a tight network of family and clan ties, which permeated all the regime’s main military, security and political institutions. His regime seemed highly unlikely that it would fall.

Like the other regimes already discussed, Iraq had become a society where human beings created in the image of God did not have freedom of religion, association and expression. The invasion of Iraq was justified on the following grounds: the threat from Hussein; weapons of mass destruction; terrorism and terrorists attacks; human rights abuses; Iraq’s oil; spreading democracy; and the violation of UN resolutions. Historians need to answer why the government of Hussein collapsed so easily? Why was this so when many people expected the mother of all battles given that it was widely believed in international circles that Hussein was no push over because of his heavy arms and the crack Presidential Guard? Saddam Hussein had also vowed to fight to the last men. But when the war began this was not to be and the American led coalition was even surprised at the ease of their victory. Historians attribute this easy victory to the strength of the American –led forces and the internal opposition to Hussein’s regime. While this cannot be denied we need to search for reasons beyond the obvious. According to Romans 13 God places rulers and also removes them. Did God intervene in Iraq? If He did what prompted him to do so? Are governments (as already pointed to) not supposed to rule according to His attributes? White writes ‘ Every nation that has come upon the stage of action has been permitted to occupy its place on the earth that it might be seen whether it would fulfil the purpose of God’.⁵⁷ Its success depends upon the exercise of power given by God.⁵⁸ It would appear that the Iraq regime was found wanting in this regard. After the regime of Hussein collapsed 270 reported mass graves with estimated remains of 40,000 people were discovered. In fact some historians describe Hussein’s rule as a horrific crime against humanity only surpassed by other tragedies like the Rwandan genocide of 1994, Pol Pot’s killings in Cambodia, and the Nazi Holocaust of World War II. In Isaiah 28:17 God says that He will make justice His measuring line. Did the regime of Hussein fail the test?

⁵⁶ <http://www.pretoria.co.za/Nuus/briewe.asp> page 14

⁵⁷ E.G. White. *Education* California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1903, page 177

⁵⁸ *Ibid* page 174

Perhaps more critical was the goal and mission of Hussein. Hussein not only looks alike to the ancient world conqueror Nebuchadnezzar but their mission was the same - to control the world.⁵⁹ He portrayed himself as successor to Nebuchadnezzar and to prove this He reconstructed the Southern Palace of Nebuchadnezzar and the temple of Ishtar. Like Nebuchadnezzar he erected an image of himself and anyone who did not revere his image was imprisoned. Idolatry became the order of the day in Iraq just as it was in ancient Babylon. Idolatry and self-glorification led to the fall of ancient Babylon. Could God not have intervened in Iraq to bring to an end what amounted to be a defiance of prophecy? It is also pertinent to mention that there was no freedom of worship in Iraq. God created free being with choices to make. These choices are important at this time when we are living in the last days. Was the fall of Hussein not meant to create a window for the spread of Christianity in the Middle East? Is it accidental that the majority of the coalition countries believed in Christianity although it may be argued that in some ways they did not act Christianly? At this point in time let me attempt to apply the interpretive framework of White to all the three contemporary events. Land suggests that the great controversy theme of White may be divided into distinct time periods.⁶⁰ Looking to the future Mrs White foresaw nations rejecting God's law, the growth of spiritualism, the coming together of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, and the decline in religious liberty. It can be recognised that the three countries in many respects rejected God's law and denied its citizens the right to worship God according to their own conscience. Furthermore do we not see the struggle between evil and good in these societies? The great controversy theme suggests that Jesus and Satan are behind the throne of rulers. These rulers then reflect the characteristics of the one who rule them. This is the controversy that is raging on. In this controversy between good and evil we need to make decisions. The decisions we make in our human situations is our response to God and in the process we are making history and encountering the God of history.⁶¹ There are ups and downs in history because of this great controversy. The

⁵⁹ C.H. Dyer and A.E. Hunt. *The Rise of Babylon – Sign Of The End Times*. Wheaton, Illinois: Tidal House Publishers, Inc 1991, page 17

⁶⁰ G. Land *Teaching History A Seventh Day Approach*. Silver Spring: Andrews University Press, 2000, page 57-58

⁶¹ L. Geering. *God in The New World*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968, page 97.

downs in history are evident when we have rulers like Napoleon 1, Hitler, Stalin, Hussein, Milan and so forth. In this context God raises men like Gandhi, Mandela, Gorbachev etc to reflect his character. Jones says that Mahtma Gandhi showed him more of the spirit of Christ than any other man in East or West.⁶² Did we not witness the struggle between good and evil in the three countries? Can we not say that in Eastern Europe all those who demanded an end to the 'evil empire' were agents of goodness whilst those who defended it represented evil? Is it not possible to ask the same question for South Africa and Iraq? These questions will lead to an interpretation that will in my view give meaning to history. These questions will force people to view history as a movement towards an end and an absolute divine meaning in which man cooperate through surrender to God's will.

Summary

The atheistic interpretation of history is not adequate to interpret contemporary events because it does not give meaning to history and also fails to come to grips with sudden global change. As already shown, secular historians struggle to explain why these events were sudden and unexpected. In most cases they ignore this aspect. On the other hand Christian historians especially Adventist, whilst they agree to God's providence in History, they are cautious (sometimes apologetic) to claim that they have found God in history. To this end, I have presented a Christian interpretive approach that is question based as a way of pointing to God's presence in history without necessarily being declarative and definitive. In my view, this will make learners think and reflect more on global change enabling them to find meaning in history. It will also offer them a different explanation to historical events.

It is also imperative that Christian historians need to develop a Christian mind to enable them to interpret events Christianly. Blamires says that 'the Christian mind is the prerequisite of Christian thinking...'.⁶³ The development of a Christian mind will enable Christians to see the hand of God in their own personal experiences and in turn extend this to contemporary events. Therefore as

⁶² E.S. Jones. *Gandhi Portrayal of a friend*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1948, page 51

⁶³ H. Blamires, as quoted in J.M.Sire *Discipleship of the mind Learning to Love God in the Ways We Think*. Downers Grove, Intervarsity Press, 1990, page 12

Christian historians we need this Christian mind to enable us to interpret events from a Christian perspective.

Conclusion

It seems to me that these three case studies have providential overtones. The questions raised in this essay are meant to point or indicate God's presence in contemporary events although His footprints may not be visible and so obvious. They are clues not proofs of God's intervention. Perhaps let me end with Mrs White's observation that

in the annals of human history the growth of nations, the rise and fall of empires, appears to depend on the will and prowess of men. The shaping of events seems to, a great degree to be determined by his power, ambition or caprice. But in the word of God the curtain is drawn aside, and we behold behind, above and through all the play and counter-play of human interests and power and passions, the agencies of the all-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will'.⁶⁴

Indeed these are words of wisdom. White seems to suggest that God directs the affairs of generations of mankind as they march by. To this end Christian historians should 'draw the curtain' and make people see that rulers of this world are 'pretenders to the throne'.

⁶⁴ E.G. White *Education* California: Pacific Press Publishing, 1903, page 173