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Geoffrey D. Dunn

**Report on MATS 2021:  
Theology and Social Issues in Melanesia**

Barrie Abel Jr

*Peer Reviewed Articles*

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part 2:**

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**A Reflection on the Good Samaritan of Luke 10:25–37**

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# CATHOLIC AND SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST DIALOGUE IN MELANESIA: AN EXERCISE IN PASTORAL AND CONTEXTUAL PRAXIS THEOLOGY

**Douglas Young, SVD**

Catholic Archbishop of Mount Hagen, PNG

## **Abstract**

The relationship between the Catholic church and the Seventh Day Adventist church in Papua New Guinea has been characterised by conflict and negative characterizations from both churches. This can be viewed as an “intractable” conflict. Both churches have the same position on ecumenical dialogue, that it can never mean compromise on fundamental aspects of biblical truth. The paper explores: the official or quasi-official stance towards ecumenism of each church, drawing on official or quasi-official statements, and the history of dialogue in Papua New Guinea. It will indicate areas of agreement and difference and point to a way forward.

## **Key Words**

Catholic church, Seventh-day Adventist church, ecumenism, dialogue

## **INTRODUCTION**

The relationship between the Catholic and Seventh-day Adventist churches in Papua New Guinea has been characterised historically by conflict and negative characterisations from both churches. The Catholic church has sometimes questioned the ecclesiological status of the Adventist church and the Adventist church has challenged the legitimacy of the Catholic church, especially the institution of the papacy and its place in salvation history, as well as other key Catholic practices. At times these and other doctrinal differences, such as the day of worship, dietary laws, and eschatology, based on highly divergent interpretations of key scriptural passages, have led to public and private disputes between the adherents of both denominations.

I do not intend to pursue these doctrinal issues, though I would love to engage in genuine dialogue about them rather than just debate. I take it as a given that of all the Christian denominations working in Papua New Guinea

the doctrinal and historical divisions that divide the Catholic church from the Seventh-day Adventist church are the greatest.

Both denominations, however, hold to substantially the same Christian Bible, which should form the basis of respectful even harmonious relationships among those who profess that Jesus Christ is Lord. They are often close neighbours territorially and often have adherents from the same kinship group, district, or electorate. They have to work together in the provision of educational and health services in Papua New Guinea. In this article I explore the possibilities and limitations involved in overcoming a seemingly intractable conflict for the benefit of the Christian mission and the delivery of services under the gospel mandate.

I am aware that this is a sensitive topic, so I want to be careful to treat it sensitively and respectfully. I had great hopes to work on this paper with an Adventist colleague, but it seems that was not possible. As I worked on it myself, I came to a clearer understanding as to why such collaboration is probably not possible. However, I did share some of these thoughts with former Adventists and a local Adventist pastor (Malachi Yani of Mount Hagen) to make sure that I had the perspective right. I hope that this admittedly rather one-sided perspective may generate discussion to make it a little more balanced.

## **MY HISTORY IN ADVENTIST DIALOGUE**

Let me share my own history of Adventist dialogue.

Growing up in Australia, I had no contact with Adventists. If I knew anything about them, they would be associated with Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. I did come to know that the Adventist hospital in Sydney served vegetarian food that looked like meat!

When I came to Papua New Guinea as a student in 1973, I was based in Sari, Enga province. I would often walk with people to the market on Saturdays. This took us past a large Adventist congregation in Tetemanda. We were always cautious going past them so as not to upset anyone. When I shared this story at the MATS conference, an Adventist pastor from Tetemanda told me that he felt the same way walking past the Catholic church on Sunday! At this time, I would have become aware of some key Adventist doctrines and how they differed dramatically from Catholic ones.

On completing my studies, I was ordained and returned to be parish priest of Kompiam in Enga Province. The main station where I lived was adjacent

to an Adventist community and church. Occasionally the Catholic people would complain about anti-Catholic teaching taking place there. On one occasion the issue was some rather graphic posters. I spoke to the pastor about this. I don't know what he did about it, but people were happy enough that I had conveyed our concerns. Then the Aussie Adventist pastor took to leaving his vehicle with us and dropping in for coffee on his way out. He assured me that Catholics and even popes could be saved. I began reading Adventist (and also Baptist, my other neighbours) material. Looking for such material I had an interesting experience in the Adventist bookshop in Sydney where my request was met with some consternation. At this time, I read Ellen White's *Desire of Ages* and *The Great Controversy* and some other material on health issues. This is difficult reading for a Catholic. I also read the Adventist author, Samuele Bacchiocchi's thesis on the Sabbath from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.<sup>1</sup> I felt rather proud of this level of openness. The image of the Catholic church, especially in *The Great Controversy* was almost unrecognisable to me, but an eye opener to see myself as at least some others see me. It gave me a much better understanding of the strong grassroots reaction to any appearance of dialogue with the Catholic church and how it could be seen as a fundamental betrayal of the prophetic nature of Adventism. It could be seen as playing into the hands of a church perceived as wanting nothing less than total domination through the inevitable convergence of Catholicism and Protestantism against the faithful remnant of Sabbath keepers. During my time at Kompiam I also "lost" to Adventism John Pundari, currently MP for Kompiam-Ambum, whom I had known since he was a child. He would come asking questions and I would try to answer them as best I could. Then one time he came and I realised that he was no longer asking questions to find out the truth. He was asking questions to probe the weaknesses in my argument. He had gone. Although our paths have diverged in many ways since then we occasionally meet and recall those times.

I digress to comment also on my journey in dialogue with the Baptists. I became friends with the Baptist pastor and his family. The people commented: before we were united in our common religion; then the different denominations came and the pastor and the priest were arguing; and

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<sup>1</sup> Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Biblical Perspectives 1; Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977).

eventually we also were arguing. Now the pastor and the priest are friends, but we are still arguing. It's about time that we caught up with them and got back to where we were before!

In 1997 I went to Divine Word University, a Catholic university open to all. Some of my students were Adventist. They came to DWU with some trepidation due to what some of their pastors had told them, but nearly always left with a different perspective. I understand that many Adventists like to come to DWU because of its academic excellence and its respect for their freedom of religion. Of course, they knew that we would draw the line at any overt anti-Catholic activities and they have always been respectful of that. I had many good discussions with them and some are friends till now.

When I became a bishop, we went on our *ad limina* pilgrimage to Rome. An Anglican bishop accompanied us as part of our covenant with them. We visited the department that looks after Christian unity and dialogue. After hearing of many initiatives in dialogue with many different churches, I asked them if there was any formal dialogue with the Seventh-day Advent church. The bishop in charge said that there was but it had to be done discretely as the Adventist interlocutors involved feared a backlash if it was not handled well. Subsequent events proved that the discretion was warranted.<sup>2</sup> There is a fine line between discretion and a perception of secrecy and even betrayal.

Now in Mount Hagen I have participated in several combined fellowships involving Adventists. I hear complaints about street preachers and stories of confrontation with them. Our Catholic people have a deep desire for an apologetic approach to explain the Catholic church's position on the issues that concern Adventists. Recently I had an invitation to speak at an Adventist camp hosting a foreign speaker.<sup>3</sup> I queried whether I would be truly welcome at such an event and was told that the Adventist complaint was against historical Catholicism but the Seventh-day Adventist church has great respect for the contribution of the contemporary Catholic church. I jumped at this chance to show that I did know something about Adventism and I wanted to outline the areas of agreement that could be built on. Unfortunately, the camp was badly washed out and we were simply unable to proceed through the crowd to get to the grandstand. Our fleet manager and my driver on this occasion was an Adventist and being stuck in traffic

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<sup>2</sup> [http://faithofjesus.to/Catholic-Adventist\\_Compromise.html](http://faithofjesus.to/Catholic-Adventist_Compromise.html)

<sup>3</sup> <https://record.adventistchurch.com/2017/04/13/doug-batchelor-marvels-at-gospels-reach-in-papua-new-guinea/>

enabled us to talk a bit about it and I asked him why it was that so many Adventists had such a negative view of the Catholic church. He said, “Because they do not know you”.

As head of the Catholic Church Agency I am happy to see Adventist students feel at home and confident in our schools since we follow the constitution and relevant Education Acts and our own principles to allow access of Adventist and other pastors to their adherents. Sadly, this is not usually reciprocated and sometimes people pressure me to repay in kind. But if we do not allow freedom of religion, including access of pastors to their own adherents, we fail to be truly Catholic.

### **INTRACTABLE CONFLICT**

Why then pursue this topic? Surely it is an intractable conflict that does not lend itself to dialogue, analogous perhaps to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. It is for that very reason that I would like to explore the situation and see what if anything could be done to bridge this gap.

Intractable conflicts, broadly defined, are intense, deadlocked, and resistant to de-escalation or resolution. They tend to persist over time, with alternating periods of greater and lesser intensity. Intractable conflicts come to focus on needs or values that are of fundamental importance to the parties. Human needs theory tells us that fundamental human needs and values are non-negotiable.<sup>4</sup>

These conflicts usually involve a complete breakdown of trust. There is suspicion of the actions and even the overtures from the other side. There is a process of “enmification”, caricaturising the other side in negative terms, which can justify their rejection and even elimination.<sup>5</sup> Stakeholders are mistrustful of high-level negotiations and fear betrayal. Leaders’ attempts to broker peace are often rejected by the grassroots. And steps forward are often disrupted by incidents that can derail the process.

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<sup>4</sup> H. B. Danesh, “Human Needs Theory, Conflict, and Peace in Search of an Integrated Model,” in *Encyclopedia of Peace Psychology*, vol. 2: *Eq-Po* (ed. D. J. Christie; Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012)  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470672532.wbep127>.

<sup>5</sup> Liora Sion, “Enemy Making,” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of War: Social Science Perspectives* (ed. Paul Joseph; Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2016)  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326040515\\_Enemy\\_Making](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326040515_Enemy_Making)



## RESPONSES TO INTRACTABLE CONFLICT

### Confidence Building Measures

Scholars and practitioners recommend certain responses to such cases. The first and most practical are what are called “confidence building measures”. These involve attempts at cooperation in other areas that are not the areas of conflict (i.e., “non-theological” in this context), building informal personal relationships of trust, especially among leaders, mutual involvement in multilateral activities, proactive steps by peace champions, and partnering together with a third party (e.g., government, UN, Red Cross, etc.).

### Areas of Agreement

In Catholic-Adventist relations an important area is our common commitment to freedom of religion. Although this is a shared value there are obviously different meanings given to the idea. For the Catholic church, there is no longer the doctrine of *extra ecclesia nulla salus* (“outside the church there is no salvation”) understood exclusively. There is no longer the principle, *errorem ius non habet* (“error has no rights”) to justify religious persecution. This shift of approach is spelled out clearly in *Dignitatis Humanae*, the “Declaration on Religious Liberty” from December 1965 from the Second Vatican Council.<sup>6</sup> Education is another area where our shared values may be able to build confidence, especially since most of our schools have adherents of these and other faiths as well. At Divine Word University for example, in 2019, 19% of students are Adventist. Students are encouraged to honour the Sabbath on campus and they seem to appreciate the freedom they experience. They like the peaceful ethical environment and academic excellence of DWU at lower cost. although some come with trepidation, they usually leave with a more positive view of the Catholic church. In the past, graduations have been held on Sunday partly out of respect for the deeply held views of Adventists. There is currently an Adventist member of the university council (as well as from the Lutheran and United churches).

Mutual confidence can also be aided by reflecting on the areas of biblical, doctrinal, and theological agreement that already exist, albeit with significantly different approaches:

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<sup>6</sup> Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1975), 799–812.

- The expectant waiting for the *adventum* of Christ of which we know not the day or the hour;
- The realisation that salvation can be lost by effective apostasy;
- The urgency of the evangelical imperative: to be church is to evangelise;
- The value of family life and prayer overflowing into a dignified life;
- That ecumenism can never be about doctrinal compromise; and
- That education and health are profoundly Christian ministries undertaken as part of the gospel imperative, and not just as a “service”.

In Papua New Guinea, the Churches Partnership Program has enabled cooperation in the provision of services for evangelisation through educational, health, and social programs.<sup>7</sup> There have also been multilateral agreed statements on a theology of development and gender equality to which both the Adventist and Catholic churches have subscribed. I wonder if this has happened anywhere else in the world?

For example, the agreement on a theology of development has “seven foundational Christian pillars” shared by Adventists and Catholics:

1. The incarnation of Christ is foundational;
2. The church is the locus for living out the love of God for all humanity;
3. Respect for the dignity of humanity is essential;
4. Empowering and investing in the people is a common value;
5. Humans are custodians of God’s creation and stewards of God’s economy for the common good;
6. Development must be integral (wholistic) and human (benefiting human persons); and
7. The church is an advocate for the disempowered.

## **A COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO ECUMENISM**

### ***Unitatis redintegratio* (“The Restoration of Unity”)<sup>8</sup>**

The “Decree on Ecumenism” from November 1964 issued by the Second Vatican Council contains the Catholic principles on ecumenism, both

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<sup>7</sup> Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “Development Assistance in Papua New Guinea”

<https://dfat.gov.au/geo/papua-new-guinea/development-assistance/Pages/governance-assistance-png.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, 452–480.

theological and practical. There is a section dealing with churches and apostolic communities separated from the Holy See, with special consideration of the eastern churches and the separated churches and ecclesial communities in the West. It describes several levels of ecumenical activity: the dialogue of experts, the dialogue of life, and the dialogue of prayer. It asserts that to be Catholic is to be ecumenical (but longing for reciprocity).

In an address of November 2016 Pope Francis commits to continue the journey. Christian unity is one of his principal concerns and one that he hopes is the concern of every baptised Christian:

... unity ... is a gift that comes from on high ... I like to say that *unity is made by walking*, in order to recall that when we walk together, that I, when we meet as brothers, we pray together, we collaborate together in the proclamation of the Gospel, and in the service of the least, we are already united.<sup>9</sup>

In an historic visit to the World Council of Churches in Geneva in June 2018 on the theme of “Walking, Praying, and Working Together”, Pope Francis addressed the common issues faced by all people at this time: immigration, climate change, and global conflict.<sup>10</sup> Both the Catholic church and the Seventh-day Adventist church are not members of the World Council of Churches for similar reasons, but both cooperate with it where possible.<sup>11</sup>

## Adventism and Ecumenism

The Seventh-day Adventist approach to ecumenism and the official leadership position on other doctrinal matters can be found at their key web site, “The Biblical Research Institute”.<sup>12</sup> It is sometimes difficult to obtain a clear position on “official” Adventist doctrine as there are many splinter

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<sup>9</sup> Francis, “Address to Participants in Plenary Assembly of Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity”

[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20161110\\_plenaria-unita-cristiani.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/november/documents/papa-francesco_20161110_plenaria-unita-cristiani.html)

<sup>10</sup> World Council of Churches, “Pope Francis affirms Catholic Church’s Commitment to the Ecumenical Journey” <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/pope-francis-affirms-catholic-churchs-commitment-to-the-ecumenical-journey>

<sup>11</sup>

<https://web.archive.org/web/20070108213734/http://news.adventist.org/data/2006/02/1141762525/index.html.en>

<sup>12</sup> <https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/>

groups with extreme views as was explained to us by Dr Lemoni Manu, at the MATS Conference of 2018.<sup>13</sup>

The official Adventist approach to ecumenical dialogue and cooperation to be found at the Biblical Research Institute web site, is characterised by caution and reservation, in contrast to the more positive and active Catholic approach. Adventists hold that the church at the end of time will be a remnant, not a “megachurch”. Their anxiety about ecumenism is due to the danger of the relativisation of belief, dangerously polite acceptance of heresy, compromising of biblical authority, weakening of evangelical mission, confusing the foundations of Christian sociopolitical activity, and a confused understanding of religious liberty.

Regarding the ecumenical cooperation with the Catholic church in particular, there are possibilities but it is just on the wrong and losing side of the Great Controversy.<sup>14</sup>

## THE WAY FORWARD

Given these differing approaches, what is the way forward?

Formal covenants or agreements between the Catholic and Adventist churches on baptism and marriage, as accomplished with the Anglican, Lutheran, and United churches in Papua New Guinea, are very unlikely, as is bilateral formal worship or a joint statement on any issue. Theological agreement is unlikely on most issues but a better understanding is achievable. And there is still a need for Catholic theological work to address some of these Adventist concerns, a process which can be very helpful in clarifying Catholic theological thinking as well. Dialogue rather than debate is welcome and should be attempted where possible.

However, experience shows that multilateral activities are still possible, such as the conferences of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools, which have allowed even this humble contribution to happen. We can continue to work together in the Church Partnership Program and explore

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<sup>13</sup> See Limoni Manu, “*Early Davidian Seventh-day Adventist Apocalyptic Eschatology between 1929-1955: A Comparative, Historical, and Theological Investigation*” (PhD diss., Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> An excellent Adventist appraisal of Catholic church history to the modern age that ends with this conclusion can be found at

<https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/Reflections%20%2359%20%287-17%29.pdf>

similar options at the local level (many provincial Governments have established “councils” of churches, involving Catholic and Adventist churches, primarily to deal with grants). In the past we have had a shared role in peacemaking and related research sponsored by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Pacific Adventist University and Divine Word University, the only private universities in PNG, collaborate in the Vice Chancellors Committee. There can be a continuation of combined fellowships and working together on social issues, especially if invited by a third party. Adventist teachers in Catholic Agency schools generally feel welcome and are able to integrate (some for over twenty years) and this relationship can be continued. We can improve communication on areas of tension such as polemical street preaching and reciprocal access to students in Agency schools

Combined fellowships seem to work along the formula where each denomination leads the whole community for a day, and the thanksgiving contribution is shared equally. Some such fellowships have been running in WHP for over ten years very successfully. They usually need to be organised by a leader or businessman, not a church leader.

For Catholics to be able to address Adventist concerns more constructively, it would be good to integrate an Adventist clarification and response into this paper, use contemporary historical studies to add nuance to Protestant/Adventist perspectives on church history, reframe contentious issues by putting them into a bigger context, employing different (positive) perspectives, and rephrasing the old issues with fresh language.

Maybe a Scholastic principle can help. *Nunquam negas, raro concedas, oportet semper distinguere* (“if two conclusions appear incompatible, it is necessary to make a distinction”). We need to make some important distinctions and maybe find ways to recognise that biblical studies can bring together paradoxes, such as the biblical affirmation of both the Sabbath and the Lord’s Day; and unity theology (John 17:21) and remnant theology (Rev 12:17).

## **CONCLUSION**

I hope that these reflections can contribute to greater understanding and respect between Catholics and Adventists. There is no doubt that the gap between us biblically, theologically, and historically, is enormous. But Christ came to bridge such gaps. If we all focus on him and his call, and truly try to

follow him under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, there must always be hope for a coming together around the table of the Lord in this life and certainly in the next.