The White Lie Discussed

Douglas Hackleman

From a June 5, 1982, Sabbath afternoon program in the Loma Linda University Church sanctuary moderated by Daryll Ward. Three panelists—Jillian Staples, Dalton Baldwin and Doug Hackleman—each were given eight minutes to review Walter Rea's book, The White Lie.

The pugilism in his prose—the stabbing jab, the hooking combinations, even the occasional head butt—is more the result of how Walter Rea perceives the facts about Ellen White to have been handled, by those he refers to loosely as "the brethren," than the result of his knowledge of the facts themselves.

He has other names for the brethren: "Keepers of the keys," "Circuit riders," "Super-salesmen of the psychic," "Tired old men of PREXAD," and "The fences of the church" for "Ellen's pawnshop" in which are sold (I presume he means) second-hand words.

The White Lie also contains a rich mine of mixed metaphor. In one case, the image of froth—like on a head of beer—is amalgamated (an interesting word itself) with map, as in cartography. On another page a banquet becomes a picnic, in the same sentence, and, if I remember correctly, at the same meal. But it would be presumptuous of me to go on about Walter Rea's prose, since I never got past the Donald Duck School of literary criticism, and particularly since he does not fancy himself a stylist.

As regards the facts and exhibits presented in *The White Lie*, its most useful contribution, I found few mistakes and none of consequence. And I say that having scrutinized and preserved in my own files all but two or three of the documents quoted or referenced in the book. The mistakes I noticed when corrected only strengthen Rea's argument. He writes on page 59 that Ellen White had access to a library of "approximately five hundred books and articles." According to White Estate officials and *Ministry* magazine associate editor, Warren Johns, she had access to more than 1,200 books they know of, and Johns says he could name more than 100 books that she used in her own publications without credit.

Often in *The White Lie* the evidence is even more compelling than the use Rea makes of it; at other times applicable evidence goes unused.

Presenting parallel quotes demonstrating an "I was shown" statement that Ellen White had paraphrased from 19th Century health reformer Larkin B. Coles, Rea writes, "The 'I was showns' got to be a habit."

But the case is more problematical even than he seems to realize. Although it is common and accepted knowledge that the "I was showns" were later often extirpated from those books slated for sale to the general public, few people know that "I was showns" were shuffled back into certain of Mrs. White's writings (on republication), lending force, the second time around, to statements that had previously lacked the impressive introduction, "I saw."

The earliest example of an Adventist pioneer wondering about the source of an Ellen White vision, documented in *The White Lie*, is J.N. Andrews' question, following her 1858 Lovetts Grove great controversy vision, whether she had read the very similar view contained in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Her answer was no.

But Rea may have been unaware that as early as 1847 Joseph Bates was wondering whether Ellen White's second vision, in February of 1845 (applying Christ's Matthew 25 parable of the Bridegroom), wasn't somehow related to Hale and Turner's *Advent Mirror* article making the same point a month earlier. Since Ellen White was well

acquainted with Joseph Turner, and because the *Advent Mirror* article was in Ellen White's place of residence, Bates had to take her denial that she had read the piece, or even heard others in her home talking about it, at face value.

Following his page 48 statement "that many of the present apologists for Ellen White have tried to extricate her from the situation by proposing that perhaps God has a *different* standard for prophets," Rea references, but does not quote, the monograph of an SDA professor of ethics. In fact, the author of that monograph, Jack Provonsha, implies not a *different* but a *lower* ethical standard for prophets:

> Although from our point of view we might wish her to make certain concessions to our *ordinary* conventions. . . . this godly woman was so sensitive to the many voices of God . . . that she tended to overlook customary amenities like saying thanks to the *ordinary* writers who provided the occasion.

When a professor of ethics becomes an apologist, expected ethics become "ordinary conventions" and "customary amenities." But the professor knows that ordinary ethical conventions are the very basis for trust, around which *only* meaningful society can cohere. Nevertheless he expressed "a justifiable resentment toward those even well-intentioned people who concealed these 'facts of life' from us all of those years out of a mistaken impression that we couldn't handle them."

It is not altogether without cause that Walter Rea sounds like Jonah: "I do well to be angry." Over three years ago, across the green in the Loma Linda University Church chapel, on a Sabbath afternoon, White Estate secretary Robert Olson answered a question from the audience:

> There's a minister in the Southern California Conference who has been spending months working at it, in which he compares Alfred Edersheim's *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* with the *Desire of Ages*. And he's been sending us reams of his work, practically—maybe 200 pages of material. And he thinks he has found great similarity. "Here's a paragraph, word for word Mrs. White took from Edersheim." We've looked at that [he laughs] and we don't even see much resemblance (Jan. 20, 1979).

Consequently, *The White Lie* reflects its author's unswerving determination to undermine the perpetual foot-dragging that follows any attempt to persuade SDA church papers to inform the laity of matters superficially damaging to self-esteem. A recent example of this foot-dragging from my own experience:

The June 4, 1981, *Adventist Review* contained an insert—a reprint of a 1933 monograph about the writing methods of Ellen White, written by her son Willie and Mrs. White's assistant for several years until her death, Dores Robinson, entitled simply, "Brief Statements." One important—and very mistaken—sentence in that *Review* insert caught my attention: " In the vast field covering thousands of pages of messages of encouragement, reproof, and spiritual instruction, she worked independent of all other writers. . . ."

I sent Kenneth Wood four pages of parallels between Mrs. White's *Testimonies* Vol. 4., and Abel Steven's book *The Great Reform*, asking him to please find a way to frankly correct the mistaken impression *Review* readers would have acquired from the Willie White insert, that his mother "worked independent of all other writers" while penning the testimonies. The *Review* editor answered my letter saying, "Personally, I do not see as much difficulty in the insert as you seem to. . . . After all, are words the distinctive property of any one person?" To date, despite further urging, there has been no correction by the *Review* of this significant bit of misinformation.

Walter Rea is discouraged by the fact that the emerging information makes no dent whatever in the authority level accorded Ellen White's declarative

sentences. For example the General Conference president's editorial in the *Adventist Review*, May 13 of this year: Referring melodramatically to a cartoon of himself as "scandalous," Neal Wilson introduced a quotation from *Great Controversy* by writing, "God tells us: 'As the storm approaches. . . . Men . . . who once rejoiced in the truth, employ their powers to deceive and mislead souls . . . '" (p. 608). "God tells us"?!

And what about the book that historian and Southwestern Union College president Don McAdams discussed with eighteen of his colleagues in Glendale over two years ago, "I think if you went back and put a footnote in *Great Controversy* at the end of the paragraphs where it's appropriate, you would find a footnote at the end of almost every paragraph." Even the final chapters of *Great Controversy* are known now to be colored by the last-day prognostications of non-Adventist authors.

Just when it was becoming obvious how much we didn't know about her writings, the General Conference in session—God's highest authority on earth—voted an enlargement of Ellen White's authority in the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs at Dallas in 1980.

Despite the pushing of Walter Rea, I believe it can be safely said that there remains to be published in the *Review* or union papers one solitary parallel passage between Ellen White and any of the religious writings she requisitioned. Yet a White Estate official was kind enough to send me 122 pages of beautifully printed parallels between Ellen White and just one book, *Sermons,* by the nineteenth-century Anglican cleric, Henry Melvill. 122 pages! And they had not completed the comparisons with Melvill. If you will forgive me one of several possible puns: Ellen White had a whale of a time with Melvill's *Sermons*. (Everyone will recognize that this is Henry, not Herman Melvi11e of *Moby Dick* fame.)

Recently I suggested to Walter Rea that his irascible tone might cause otherwise willing readers to recoil. He disagreed, citing the 45 percent sale of his first edition and his certainty that a 2 x 4 is sometimes required to get a mule's attention. Given the history of the glacier-like flow of information on this topic, he may be correct.

Like him and his methods or not, it required a Walter Rea to slightly redirect the juggernaut by throwing his body almost literally beneath its wheels. (White Estate officials have here and there admitted more in amount and in kind than even Rea claims in his book—evidence that *The White Lie*, such a failure as literature, has been so much a heuristic success. It was more useful in that regard even before it was published; because certain brethren began digging frantically against the day of its publication, hoping not to be caught once again—and this time they were not—with their trousers around their socks.)

In summation: *The White Lie* is short on forgiveness. But everyone will remember that to forgive is divine. And Walter Rea is merely *a* divine, but one who has divined much about the writings of Ellen White previously unknown. C.S. Lewis said, in his introduction to George MacDonald's *Lil1ith*, that one must *know* before one can forgive. There are those of us who need to pray for the ability to forgive Walter Rea his way of making us know about Ellen White. Others of us must pray for the grace to forgive our failing leaders; because when John Harris wrote that "the church of God, enfeebled though it may be, is the sole object on which He bestows His supreme regard," he was not writing about the Seventh-day Adventist church. He was speaking of those only who will populate the Kingdom to come—those who have learned to forgive one another. And in that sense, Ellen White and her writings have finally become, for Seventh-day Adventists, a "testing truth."