Sabbath observance, law and religious freedom

Challenges facing the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Mxolisi Michael Sokupa¹

Abstract

This article focuses on Sabbath observance and the challenges facing the members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church globally and in South Africa in particular. The American experience marked the early beginnings of the church's response to these challenges. The paper highlights some interaction with laws in America. A case study on Sabbath observance in South Africa offers a different perspective that has not been explored before. This paper should spark a debate that will go on for some time within the Sabbatarian groups in South Africa.

Key words Sabbath, law, religious freedom, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Blue Laws.

1. Introduction

Seventh-day Adventists observe the seventh day as Sabbath based on their understanding and interpretation of Scripture (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005:249-266). The Sabbath as it is observed by Seventh-day Adventists commemorates God's rest at the completion of His creative work (Exod 20:11). Some view the Sabbath as exclusively for the Hebrews and that it was given to them as a token of God's deliverance after the Egyptian slavery (Knight 2003:134; Cox 1753:16). But both Jews and Gentiles may share in this memorial day "set apart as God's own rest day in the beginning, blessed and sanctified for the good of man, and pointing forward to that eternal rest when the heavens and the earth are made new" (Andrews & Conradi 1912:219). In his earlier work Andrews traced the history of the Sabbath from creation. This work also includes the reasons for the change of the day of worship to Sunday (Andrews 1887). This paper shows that the seventh-day Sabbath as observed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church and other Sabbatarian groups has been a subject of discussion, especially with reference to Sunday laws in the USA. Sabbath observance as practiced by Seventh-day Adventists has never

Mxolisi Michael Sokupa (*1968) is a senior lecturer at Helderberg College and a Research Fellow of Stellenbosch University, South Africa. – This article is abbreviated from a presentation at the Conference on Law and Religion in South Africa held at Stellenbosch, 20-23 September 2011. The original full length article can be found in the official conference publication, a 2012 Supplement of the Dutch Reformed Theological Journal. Published with the permission of the conference editor. Paper received: 1 November 2011. Accepted: 19 December 2011. Contact: Helderberg College, P.O. Box 22, Somerset West 7130, South Africa, Email: sokupam@hbc.ac.za.

been tested in a law court in South Africa. This paper discusses a case of the first black minister in South Africa with reference to Sabbath observance, preaching and teaching. A Seventh-day Adventist historian, A. Makapela, acknowledges personal freedom, personal choice and personal identity as values that had become important for the Church. He also claims that "these and many other ideas had democratised the Protestant churches and above all had also made it possible for the American Constitution and the Bill of Rights to be framed" (Makapela 1995:36,37). Therefore, in looking at law and religious freedom, a global perspective will be kept in view as we look at the South African Context. The reason for this is that there is a global representative structure through which the church operates across many continents and countries of the world. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has four levels of church administration: Local church (individual believers), local conference or local field/mission (organized churches in a state, province or territory), union conference or union mission (composed of conferences, missions or fields within a larger territory), and the General Conference (all unions in all parts of the world divided according to divisions which are administrative structures of the General Conference). The Seventh-day Adventist Church follows a representative form of church governance (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2005:26).

2. Background

After nearly 150 years the Seventh-day Adventist Church has just started a process of reviewing its ecclesiology. While the Seventh-day Adventist Church traces its identity from Scripture and claims the entire Judeo-Christian heritage, there are Christian traditions that have contributed more in the shaping of the church, such as the Free Church movements particularly since the radical reformation. There are common values between the Seventh-day Adventist Church and churches that claim this particular tradition and Cartwright enumerates a few: "voluntary membership, believer's baptism, separation from the world, mission and witness of all members, church discipline, and the rejection of the state-church alliance" (Cartwright 1994:26,27). The mid-nineteenth century marks an important period of development for the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The early development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church may be traced from the Millerite movement of the 1840's in the United States of America (Knight 1999:13-50). William Miller's preaching drew people from different denominations, among others Methodists and Baptists. The movement experienced a major disappointment in 1844 in hoping that Christ would come that year, based on their interpretation of Daniel 8:14. After studying this passage, they concluded that the cleansing of the sanctuary referred to the second coming of Christ. After examining this passage later, they found that Christ entered a new phase of his ministry in heaven (Knight 1999:32). The fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Advent-

ist Church outline the church's doctrinal teachings. These were developed from a rigorous study of the Scriptures. In 1860 the name "Seventh-day Adventist" was decided upon, and in 1863 the church was formally organized. In 1874 the first missionary was sent to Europe. In 1896 the first Seventh-day Adventist conference structure was organized in South Africa. Today the Seventh-day Adventist Church consists of over 16 million members across the globe. The Southern Africa Union Conference as of June 2010 has over 122,231 members within its territory. The church world-wide is growing by one million members every year.²

Within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there is no doctrine that has tested its members on matters of religious liberty more than the Seventh-day Sabbath. There are other concerned groups on the subject of days of rest as well (Gallagher, 2001:12). The contribution of the Seventh-day Adventists on matters of religious liberty began with a response to Sunday laws. Therefore the main focus of the discussion in this article is on the response of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to Sunday laws in the past, present and future.

3. Religious liberty and law in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

The seventh-day Sabbath was observed by Jews and adherents to the Old Testament Scriptures until the middle of the fourth century. During the fourth century the conversion of a Roman Emperor Constantine into Christianity brought some changes in the way the church was viewed and also placed the church in a favourable position (Davies 1965:159). Sunday laws date back to the time of Constantine, who wrote the first Sunday observance act in the fourth century. In 321 Constantine raised Sunday to the level of other pagan holidays by "suspending the work of the courts and of the city population on that day (Coleman 1914:32,33).

In tracing Sunday law history during the succeeding sixteen hundred years, we find that such laws were developed where governments recognized an established church, in other words where there was no separation of church and state.

Sunday laws were imported into America from Europe during the seventeenth century by the colonists, who believed that secular government could legislate both civil and religious conduct (Costa 2010:190).

Since World War II, certain merchandising outlets operating mainly through suburban branches have discovered that some customers wish to shop on Sunday. Other retailers, in their endeavour to suppress Sunday selling competition, have sought to modernize the old Sunday Blue Laws, to secularize them and use them as an instrument of competitive control.

www.adventist.org.za/index.php/about/adventist-history.

Religious intolerance is clearly portrayed in the way the Puritans of New England treated those who were deviant, with particular reference to the Blue Laws of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By means of "the whipping post, the ducking stool, the stocks, the pillory, fines, prisons, and gibbet", force was exercised against the will of individuals to obey these Blue Laws (*Liberty* 1963:18f).

It is important to note that the notion of "Blue Laws" is seen in a negative way by some writers. Wylie insists that such laws should be regarded as Sabbath laws. In his introduction he states:

It is not too much to say that our Sabbath laws were introduced in a period of our highest national ideals, and have been operative through the noblest periods of our national history. Can it be denied by any — even by those most addicted to the reproachful terms, "puritanical," "Blue Laws" that the American Sabbath has conserved if not created the national character on its best side by law-abiding, self-control and serious view of the citizen's responsibilities? (Wylie 1905:ii)

Some incidences that illustrate the way these Blue Laws operated may be cited. In 1670 "two lovers, John Lewis and Sarah Chapman, were accused and tried for 'sitting together on the Lord's day under an apple tree in Goodman Chapman's orchard." "A Dunstable soldier, for 'wetting a piece of old hat to put in his shoe' to protect his foot — for doing his heavy work on the Lord's day, was fined, and paid forty shillings." "Captain Kemble, of Boston, was in 1656 set for two hours in the public stocks, for his 'lewd and unseemly behaviour, which consisted in kissing his wife 'publicquely' on the Sabbath day, upon the doorstep of his house," on his return from a three year's voyage. A man who had fallen into the water and absented himself from church to dry his only suit of clothes, was found guilty and "publicly whipped" (*Liberty* 1963:18f; Earle 2004:146). Therefore the introduction of Sunday laws brought tension relating to Sabbath observance.

4. The response of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to the Sunday laws

Sunday laws affected the Seventh-day Adventist Church in its early stages of development in the USA around 1888. The church, however, responded to this crisis through active interaction with the government. Alonzo T. Jones, an editor of a Seventh-day Adventist Magazine, *American Sentinel*, challenged Senator Henry W.

Blue Laws may be defined as follows: "local and state laws that prohibit or restrict individuals from engaging in certain acts on Sunday and impose legal sanctions on violators. These regulations are commonly referred to by names: "Blue Laws", "Sunday legislation", "Sunday-closing laws", or "Sunday Statutes" (Laband & Heinbuch 1987:11).

Blair with his national Sunday Observance Bill. Morgan observes that Jones saw the enforcement of Sunday as a worship day disadvantaging the observers of a Saturday Sabbath. The Seventh-day Adventists whom Jones was representing had to choose between giving up one sixth of their work time or live against their consciences (Morgan 2010:12). Morgan points out that even "a proposed exemption for 'Seventh-day believers' would solve nothing.... It would reflect mere toleration of difference, not recognition of human right" (Morgan 2010:12). In the light of the above observation, it seems that the Sunday laws have had an impact in America and in countries where such laws were legally enforced. This is evidenced by the fact that long after the laws were scrapped, Sunday is still a day where most business activities, particularly in the public sector, are closed. In South Africa where freedom of religion is protected, Seventh-day Adventists face different challenges in which they are limited in the amount of hours they can work per week in certain sectors. Therefore this does have an indirect impact on their livelihood and economic participation. This means that exemption from work on Saturday is not enough in some work situations, it takes away the right to work on Sunday because the place is closed on Sunday when a Seventh-day Adventist can work.

The response of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to the 1888 Sunday Law crisis, according to Morgan, was not limited to individual work, there was also an effort towards grass roots organization. For example, the church's International Tract Society solicited support from church members through signed petitions. The members were also urged to get their friends to sign the petition. According to Morgan there was a balance in the way Jones approached the question of religious freedom. He opposed the Sunday bill as well as the Christianization of education (Morgan 2010:13).

Therefore the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the USA responded to the Sunday laws by engaging in discussions with the government and also by soliciting support, not only from its own members but from those who sympathize with them on matters of religious freedom (Höschele 2010:164). The American experience that is discussed above illustrated how Seventh-day Adventists respond to matters of religious freedom. In other parts of the world the issue may not be Sunday laws, it may be homosexuality and law and how the church responds to the rights offered to such individuals within the church community. The next section looks at a case of religious intolerance with reference to the Sabbath within the South African context.

5. Richard Moko: A case study in the pre-1994 South Africa

As a background and preamble to Moko's case it is important to sketch the relationship between church and state within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In the late nineteenth century the Seventh-day Adventist Church was growing through its missionary thrust. It was around this time that missionaries were sent to South Africa (Pantalone 1998:45; Du Preez 2010:95f). The position of the church at this time on the matter of the relationship with the state was that there should be no relationship with governments. This included offers like tax exemption and donations from the government. It was during this time that the British South African Company under the leadership of John Cecil Rodes offered 6,000 acres of land in Mashonaland, Rhodesia, to P.J.D. Wessels, who was a prominent leader of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and attended the General Conference (a highest governance body within the Seventh-day Adventist Church) in the USA. At this 1893 meeting of the General Conference Wessels reported to the committee about the land offer. He saw missionary possibilities and how this would help in the growth of mission work in Mashonaland (Costa 2010:137).

Costa (2010:137) further observes that Wessel's arguments were met with opposition from A.T. Jones (referred to earlier in this paper as one of the champions of religious liberty). Jones advocated for a clear separation between church and state that would not accommodate such relationships with the state. Ellen G. White, one of the pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, opposed Jones and the leaders who supported his views of radical separation between church and state ("Nineteenth Meeting" *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, March 6, 1893; Costa 2010:138).

The background sketched above gives some indication that there was a very positive relationship between the church and state in South Africa. There were no laws that were enforced against the Seventh-day Sabbath worship in South Africa. However, even within such a context of a healthy relationship between church and state, there were problems that were faced by Seventh-day Adventist pioneers in South Africa. This section addresses a case particularly demonstrating elements of religious intolerance within the context of the pre-1994 South Africa.

Richard Moko was the first indigenous Seventh-day Adventist minister in South Africa (Cooks 1986:4). In 1903 Moko was working in East London preaching and establishing the Seventh-day Adventist Church there (Mafani 2011:32f).

A petition was signed by members of Independent and Presbyterian churches in East London East Bank area in which Moko was accused of preaching heresy by teaching that Saturday and not Sunday was the Sabbath day. He was encouraging the younger generation to stay away from work on Saturdays. The petitioners demanded that Moko be expelled from the township (Mafani 2011:33).

⁴ "A.T. Jones raised sharp arguments for radical separation of church and state that found support among Adventist Leaders" (Costa 2010:137; cf. General Conference Daily Bulletin, 6 March 1893, 486).

The location superintendent, Lloyd, gave way to the petitioners by giving Moko one week's notice within which to leave the location. Lloyd was aware that he was acting outside the ambit of the law, as there was no provision in location regulation for such action. Moko was a registered tenant in the East Bank Location. Therefore his expulsion had to be based on a contravention of the law.

"The Town Fathers, on the other hand decided to act with greater prudence because, they pointed out, such drastic action as expelling a person from the location merely because he was exercising religious freedom could have established a serious precedent." 5

At this time there was no reference to a bill of rights or any document that protected religious freedom. Moko therefore depended on the judgment of those who were handling his case.

"Lloyd was therefore instructed to serve notice upon Moko, calling upon him to 'desist from causing discontent' amongst the township residents otherwise he would indeed be evicted in terms of Section 13 of Act 11 of 1895."

In his letter of appeal against eviction, Moko denied the charges that were levelled against him and appealed for a hearing claiming that this was all based on "difference in religious opinions" (Mafani 2011:35).

Headman Minnie on the other hand claimed that the call for rest on Saturday would cause labor shortage in East London. On the other hand Superintendent Lloyd of East London believed that it was not acceptable for an African to be away from work every Saturday (Tankard; CL, SA Native Affairs [Lagden] Commission, 1903-5 II, 822-4).

There are many other cases of intolerance where freedom of expression was deprived that were never documented.

Moko's case has demonstrated that even within a context where there is no enforcement of Sunday laws or legal restriction of worship on a Saturday Sabbath, there were elements of intolerance. Therefore this case is important for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa, to ensure that religious expression and freedom is afforded for those who worship on a day that is not popular in the business sector and the religious arena.

6. A current Seventh-day Adventist perspective in South Africa (post-1994)

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa is part of a global church family. Through the years of apartheid, which did not leave the church unscathed, the

⁵ Tankard, www.eastlondon-labyrinth.com/townships/moko.jsp; cf. CA, 3/ELN 453. H Minie to Location Superintendent, 29.2. 1904).

⁶ Tankard, www.eastlondon-labyrinth.com/townships/moko.jsp.

global vision of a world-wide united church was maintained.⁷ There is Seventh-day Adventist presence in almost every country around the world.⁸ With the headquarters in Washington USA, the church is administered through its 13 regional divisions across the globe. The Church in South Africa is part of this world-wide structure under the Southern Africa Indian Ocean Division. This division includes such countries as: Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Reunion, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Ascesion, St. Helena, and Tristan da Cunha Islands. The headquarters of this Division are in Pretoria, South Africa. The church in South Africa is administered through the Southern Africa Union Conference, which includes Namibia, Lesotho, Swaziland and the entire South African territory. The headquarters for this union are in Bloemfontein. The union is administered through six conferences (Cape, KwazuluNatal-Free State, Lesotho Trans-Orange, Transvaal, Swaziland) and one field (Namibia) under which the local churches fall.

Globally "high concentrations of Adventists are found in Central and South America, throughout Africa, the Philippines and many other areas. In composition, 39 percent of Adventists are African, 30 percent Hispanic, 14 percent East Asian, and 11 percent Caucasian." With reference to its mission "the church places great emphasis on different aspects of human freedom and responsibility. These include: religious liberty and human rights, humanitarian aid and development, better lifestyles, health and wholeness, education and personal growth, as well as social issues and community involvement."

7. Religious freedom and law for Seventh-day Adventists

In the post-1994 era of democracy the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa has been challenged to adjust some of its practices and policies to be in line with, for example, the Labour Laws. Other cases were relating to issues of restructuring and the rights of certain groups in the process of restructuring which has been a process that started in the 1980's and has not been concluded to date. The church in South Africa through its legal advisors has attempted to not only become reactionary, but to put mechanisms in place that will help shape its relation with the South African Law. For example, most institutions of the church have offices or

This is evidenced by the statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Boraine 2000:180-181).

By 2005 the Seventh-day Adventist had presence in 203 of the 208 countries recognised by the United Nations (see www.religionfacts.com/christianity/denominations/seventh_day_adventist.htm).

⁹ www.adventist.org/world-church/index.html.

For example, the Southern Africa Union Conference had a policy that favoured what was termed the head of the household (which consisted of exclusively of men). This policy was scrapped because it is discriminatory.

structures that deal with human relation aspects of administration that look into policies versus labour law to ensure good labour practice within the church.

One of the challenges currently is to document the principles followed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church on religious freedom as part of local church policy. So far these are found in the policy documents of the higher structures of church organization that focus on global issues and largely an American context. However, the Seventh-day Adventist Church policies do accommodate and respect local practices in so far as they are in harmony with the general principles that the church upholds.

Another challenge that could be mentioned is that there seems to be a bias against private service providers in education in South Africa. Most private service providers are Christian-based. The government is holding back on allowing institutions to be given a university charter. Students who are in such private institutions do not have access to government aid as individuals. Even so such service providers as private institutions have a role to play within the education sector.

7.1 The position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church on church and state

Seventh-day Adventists believe in separation of church and state. However they do not believe separation of church and state to be a moral principle taught in Scripture, but rather a philosophy of government under which a moral principle, religious liberty, is best achieved. Seventh-day Adventists do not believe in absolute separation of church and state (Hofstrader 2011:6).

7.2 The religious freedom principles as held by the Seventh-day Adventist Church The Seventh-day Adventist Church defines religious freedom with reference to worship. This gives one freedom to worship God without force and coercion. The Seventh-day Adventist Church takes a position that "the union of church and state is a sure formula for discrimination and intolerance and offers a fertile soil for the spread of persecution." (2008-2009 FL 05 p 309.) Further, "separation of church and state offers the best safeguard for religious liberty and is in harmony with Jesus' statement, 'Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's' (Matt 22:21). This means that civil government is entitled to respectful and willing obedience, to the extent that civil laws and regulations are not in conflict with God's requirements, for it is necessary 'to obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29)" (*GC Working Policy* 2008-2009 FL 05 p 309).

Seventh-day Adventists oppose all forms of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, nationality, colour, or gender. We believe that every person was created in the image of God, who made all nations of one blood (Acts 17:26). We endeavour to carry on the reconciling ministry of Jesus Christ, who died for the whole world so that in Him "there is neither Jew nor Greek" (Gal 3:28). Any form of racism eats

the heart out of the Christian gospel. One of the most troubling aspects of our times is the manifestation of racism and tribalism in many societies, sometimes with violence, always with the denigration of men and women. As a worldwide body in more than 200 nations, Seventh-day Adventists seek to manifest acceptance, love, and respect toward all, and to spread this healing message throughout society.

South Africa has experienced a wave of xenophobia in the past decade. This has to be included in the list of unacceptable ways of treating fellow human beings.

The equality of all people is one of the tenets of our church. Our Fundamental Belief No. 13 states: 'In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him, and with one another, we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation.¹¹

8. Conclusion

The seventh-day Sabbath is an important teaching in the life of the members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and other Sabbatarian groups. The Sabbath presents a potential problem when the state prescribes a day of worship other than the seventh-day Sabbath. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has made strides globally and in America particularly to define, defend and promote religious freedom. This paper has highlighted a few challenges that the Seventh-day Adventist Church faces in South Africa. While we enjoy the privilege of religious freedom and participate in defining that freedom for ourselves, we are aware that government systems are dynamic. It is the masses that make and influence law, not the few that sit in parliament. Regarding the future, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has a view that is based on apocalyptic eschatology. This view provides a warning for us and those with whom we associate in the "struggle" for religious freedom. A continuous engagement, clustering, and collaboration should map our way forward.

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¹¹ http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main-stat14.html

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