

## CHAPTER 6 The Adventists Persevere

How did the Adventists respond to the challenge of the revived 'recognition' campaign? Admitting that their task would be even more difficult, they applied themselves nevertheless with resolution and enthusiasm. On the surface their morale was excellent. When the first petitioning campaign was at its height, perhaps foreseeing that their struggle would be a long one, the Adventist central executive telegraphed to A. T. Jones, who had very successfully directed this sort of campaign for the Adventists in the United States, requesting that he come to Australia to assist in 'the present religious liberty crisis'.<sup>1</sup> Jones didn't come, but the suggestion that he should was an indication of the seriousness with which the Adventists regarded their situation. However, a number of Adventist leaders in the Australian field had had considerable experience in the United States in the kind of work involved. These included W. A. Colcord, the Religious Liberty secretary, J. O. Corliss, Mrs White, and her son W. C. White.<sup>2</sup>

No less than with the recognitionists, there was an imperative quality about the Adventist campaign. Just as to the councils of churches there seemed a fundamental rightness in any civil constitution 'recognizing' God, so to the Adventists there was in this an equally basic wrongness. Furthermore, to each, the position of the other was not merely incorrect; it was, in some basic sense, odd or contrary.

Separating religion and the State, a columnist in the *Southern Cross* had written on 26 March, with reference to the first petition campaign,

is a divorce which it passes the wit of man to make. Religion, in a word, is interwoven with human life at every point... society is built on it, and is only possible by virtue of it.

Colcord, in sharp contrast, writing in one of the pamphlets which the Adventists distributed in July and August, saw the matter in this way:

Civility – or the duty to recognise and respect the natural rights of men as men – belongs to Caesar. Religion – or the duties which men owe to God as Creator and Redeemer – belongs to God, and is to be rendered to Him and to Him only. 'Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him *only* shalt thou serve.' Religion is not to be rendered to civil government. This being so, with the *subject* of religion civil governments can of right have nothing to do.<sup>3</sup>

The advertisers very often did not so much talk to, as through, each other. When this happens, it usually indicates that the disagreement is not solely, or mainly, about the facts or even about value preferences in relation to those facts, but stems rather from different conceptions – differing presuppositions – by reference to which those facts are described or evaluated. Largely that was the case in the continuing conflict between the Adventists and the councils of churches. They never could agree because their *conceptions* of what religion basically was, and of what the State basically was, were in many respects sharply different. The recognitionists, through the mediating concept of morality, typically saw man's relations to man, and man's relations to God, as serially linked within what was to the eye of faith a single ensemble. The Adventists saw man's relations to man, and to God, as constituting two irreducibly distinct ensembles of relations. The two ensembles were related in that God made both, but they were related *as* ensembles, not *within* an ensemble.

The facts the Adventists relied on basically were an extension of those they already had employed. As before, a counter-petition was circulated, although, since the petitions now were to be forwarded to the colonial parliaments, and since to the Adventists the Adelaide decision constituted a favourable precedent, the text differed in a number of respects. The Adventist petition now asked the colonial parliaments

*not to pass any Measure or Amendment for the insertion of any Religious clause or Declaration of Religious Belief in the Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth which might be taken as a basis for such legislation, but that in this respect it be allowed to remain as framed and adopted by the delegates to the Adelaide Federal Convention.*<sup>4</sup>

Like the recognitionists, although on a smaller scale, they organized public meetings.<sup>5</sup> They sent numerous letters to the colonial press and interviewed such parliamentarians and government ministers as would receive them.<sup>6</sup> A great quantity of pamphlet material was distributed to every member or each colonial parliament. 'Every Hon. Member', remarked a speaker in the Western Australian Legislative Assembly, 'has been deluged by papers from the Australasian Tract Society.'<sup>7</sup> The Adventists were now more open in their approach and it became more widely known that they were the organizers of the counter-petitions. On 31 July a *Bulletin* columnist gave the following vivid but overdrawn portrayal of the Adventist canvassers:

A petition *against* [the 'recognition' proposal] is being pushed around Melbourne, not by Jos. SYMES, or the Anarchist Club, or any disreputable, Unbelieving body, but by – the Australian Tract Society: The Non-Conformist conscience is, in this matter, astoundingly common-sensical, and its arguments are briefly set forth in a tractlet:

The recognition of God is an act of faith

A statement of that recognition is a declaration of faith.

To incorporate in the Constitution of a civil government a recognition of God, or a declaration of faith, is to insert a religious clause.

And so on. A religious clause necessarily tends towards interference with Man's secular right to believe, or disbelieve, anything he chooses, therefore let us keep GOD'S name out of the blessed Constitution, says the Tract Society. It is quite interesting to find citizens of ordinarily modern snufflebustious aspect walking apologetically into city offices for the purpose of explaining that State recognition of GOD is inconsistent with original Christianity. Fat merchants, trading as pillars of their particular churches, stare at the petition mongers with scorn...

On 21 August the *Bulletin* remarked with obvious, if oblique, approval that 'the S.D.A. people [were] evidently "mad only no-no-west"'.

The tractlet referred to was one of two circulated by the Adventists. One had been written by Colcord, the other by Daniels.<sup>8</sup> One hundred thousand were printed and circulated during May, July and August.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore a special ten-thousand edition of the *Southern Sentinel* was printed in July.<sup>10</sup> 'In addition to the circulation given to [The *Southern Sentinel*] by our members', noted the *Union Conference Record*, a journal which circulated only among Adventist members, it was 'supplied to all the members of Parliament in Australia and Tasmania and to about six hundred leading newspapers in the colonies.'<sup>11</sup> There was about the Adventist campaign a professionalism, an efficient adjustment of small means to large ends, which the recognitionist effort mostly lacked. For a church that so rigorously and with such determination believed in the separation of Church and State, the Adventists played politics very well.

However professionalism, or perhaps inspired amateurism, was not now enough to win the day for the Adventists. Although in their petitions to the various legislatures the Adventists obtained the support of about 22300 distinct signatories,<sup>12</sup> the councils of churches, in those colonies in which they organized public petitions – Victoria and Tasmania – obtained about two signatories for every one by the Adventists.<sup>13</sup> Even before the colonial parliaments met, some but not all of the leading secular newspapers<sup>14</sup> and many leading politicians had declared their support for the insertion of some sort of 'recognition' clause in the preamble. Politicians needed to have their ear to the ground. Hence one safely can accept that while the explicit and doctrinaire secularism expressed in the Adventist petitions was electorally popular, the religious formalism lying behind the 'recognition' petitions was even more so.

So it was clear in advance that the churchmen would obtain the backing of most of the colonial legislatures. Yet it was also plain that while their victory was in one way sweeping, it was also a limited one. Their victory would secure for religion some sort of 'place' or special status in the coming Commonwealth. However, those politicians and newspapers who announced their support for 'recognition' usually made it clear that they regarded it as purely formal, and devoid of political implications. These were the terms, and the recognitionists had to accept them, for the size of the counter-petitions made it clear that they had no hope of winning better ones.

The editorial of the *Sydney Morning Herald* for 10 July, in which it announced its support for 'recognition', typified the swing on this question. 'The case appears to be', declared the editorial, 'that a large portion of the people have had their feelings touched.' Since this was so, and since the reference to God was so unspecific that any theist could accept it, there was no danger that its insertion could be employed to stir up 'sectarian controversy'. In other words, 'recognition' offered nothing specific, and threatened nothing specific, so therefore safely could be allowed. Yet the clerics clearly were successful on one point. They had succeeded in carrying a theistic perspective right to the centre of the federation movement. They had had that perspective, and themselves as its especial bearers, accepted as part of that movement. In this respect they had succeeded where Moran failed. Federation was still secular business, but now its tone had slightly changed. At the time of the Bathurst Convention the *Sydney Morning Herald* could afford airily to dismiss the 'recognition' issue as a 'debating society' question. It could no longer do so. 'If the demand [for 'recognition'] comes accredited with the support of a large and representative portion of our people,' concluded the 10 July editorialist, with an astonishing turnabout, 'we cannot think that the Convention would be so influenced by the pedantry of secularism as to refuse to give effect to the proposal.'

Nevertheless, there were limits to the conversion of the secular dailies. The editorial columns of the *Age* and the *Argus* simply ignored the 'recognition' issue. However, the following sardonic report on the presentation of 'recognition' petitions to the Victorian legislature, from the news columns of the 30 June *Argus*, captures the flavour of their 'neutrality':

Honourable members extracted a considerable amount of amusement from the presentation of petitions. Nearly every member of the House had a petition to present from some congregation; several had two, and some even three or more. There was keen competition for turns, and when at least half the members rose to their feet at the same moment each with a long document dangling in front of him, the effect was striking, and a laugh was raised, which was renewed from time to time, until the spirit of frivolity pervaded what should from the nature of the case have been, at least, a grave proceeding.

It was not only the parliamentarians who were being mocked.

Once many of the colonial political leaders had made their peace with the recognitionists, the Adventist view of the situation darkened, although their energy remained undiminished. 'Satan has ever been at work to restrict religious liberty', stated the *Bible Echo* on 9 August, 'and to bring into the religious world a species of human slavery.' And there were, throughout the colonies, humorous other intransigents. To 'claim the authority of God, by the insertion of His name in the preamble', declared an editorial of the *Australian Workman* on 10 July, 'for a Constitution which is, above all things, imperfect, and likely to be subversive of human liberty, is simply to blaspheme. Religion has need of deliverance from its friends.' A fortnight later (one may presume this was one of the journals on the receiving end of the Adventists' distribution of literature) it noted with approval Colcord's statement that 'a religious basis to the Constitution and the laws of the nation would practically disfranchise every logically consistent unbeliever.' The *Hillgrove Guardian* on 17 July warned,

Grant this recognition of God in our new Constitution, and it is only the thin edge of the wedge towards perpetuating religious strife, and the next step will be in the direction of an established religion with State Aid.

A *Bulletin* cartoonist had similar thoughts. A cartoon of 10 July pictured a group of parsons, portrayed as scruffy and unshaven pirates, driving an enormous wedge into the crack of a door marked 'Parliamentary Government'. Along the thin edge was written 'Recognition of Deity'. On the large end of the wedge, which was about to be struck by a huge ass's jawbone entitled 'Church Militant', was written 'sectarianism'. However, these commentators had become voices in the wilderness. It was quite clear that the next round would be won by the churchmen.