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A Protestant Shtetl

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Just east of Chattanooga, four miles north of the Georgia state line, and six miles up the road from where the Andrews raiders abandoned The General following their famous Civil War railroad hijacking, lies the village of Collegedale. Nestled in a valley alongside the Appalachian ridge known as White Oak Mountain, Collegedale is home to some 4,600 people, most of them Seventh–day Adventists. Collegedale's major gift to popular culture are the Little Debbie snack cakes shipped across America from its sprawling McKee Bakery. But as the town's name suggests, its true *raison d'être* is the local institution of higher learning, Southern College of Seventh–day Adventists.

To a degree seldom true in communities of even this modest size (at least outside of Utah), Collegedale presents a solid front of sectarian homogeneity. Friday nights and Saturdays find its tennis courts empty, post office closed, and McKee ovens cooled. A twentieth–century Protestant *shtetl*, Collegedale persists–even thrives–in its anachronistic ways.

Its obscurity to the world outside its own immediate region mirrors the more general invisibility of Seventh–day Adventism in American society. Though a worldwide church of nearly six million members, Adventists are frequently confused with Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons (like Adventists, also creations of nineteenth–century American religious culture). The identification of Adventism with bizarre cultic practices formed the dramatic core of *A Cry in the Dark*, a film faithfully depicting the experience of Lindy Chamberlain, an Adventist pastor's wife in Australia who was accused of murdering her baby. Adventists suffer less acute forms of prejudice in the United States. The church's large hospital system–particularly the prominence of Loma Linda University's infant heart–transplant program–has provided some coveted public respectability. By and large, though, Adventists remain a people about whom you've heard but to your knowledge have never met.

This social distance is not accidental. From the church's beginnings in the 1830s and 1840s, Adventists have felt called apart as a prophetic voice, carrying the twin messages of Christ's imminent return to earth and the binding obligation of God's law, particularly the seventh–day Sabbath. Though their historical experience has precluded the kind of geographic clustering achieved by the Mormons, Adventists have nevertheless formed a distinctive subculture. This has been accomplished by an impressively extensive parochial school system reaching from first grade through college and even to graduate school. Moreover, in a land where the traditional Sunday day of rest has been redefined by football and the shopping mall, Adventists' sense of distinctiveness has also been nurtured by a commitment to careful Saturday observance. If less visible a cultural badge than the Amish horse and buggy, Sabbatarianism is nearly as thorough in setting Adventists apart from their neighbors. Few devout Adventists are found in the upper reaches of government or corporate America, where the fast track usually encourages the abandonment of an inconvenient and unstylish religion. Significantly, many of the most socially prominent Adventists are black, a group that tends to be less self–conscious about wedding piety and worldly success.

Adventism's uneasy relationship to secular culture is matched by its ambivalent standing within evangelicalism. This has been true from the movement's very beginnings, when the postmillenial reassurances of mainstream Protestantism were contradicted by the apocalyptic warnings of William Miller in the early 1840s that the world would soon be coming to an end. During the succeeding century and a half, Adventists have been suspected by the Protestant establishment of being, if not necessarily a cult, at least not part of the true Reformation ball team. The main sticking point has been the Adventists' allegiance to their prophet, Ellen G. White (1827–1915), whose enormous body of writings has been taken as normative for faith and practice. Evangelicals also grow impatient with their acceptance of the Old Testament Sabbath and with what they perceive as an unbalanced grasp of Law and Grace.

Probably more than any other Protestant denomination, Seventh–day Adventists feel an affinity with Jews. The Sabbath obviously feeds this. Abraham Heschel's wonderful meditations on the Sabbath make him a favorite among educated Adventist readers. More widely read is Chaim Potok, whose evocations of a devout, parochial community and its clash with modernity speak to an Adventist readership. His visit to the Southern College campus a few years back was a major cultural event. The sense of kinship to Jews also stems from the kind of self–identification as God's remnant people which had earlier nurtured a philo–Semitism in American Puritans. A recent sermon in the Collegedale Church took as its theme the evils of anti–Semitism. Of course one might hear a similar message from William Sloane Coffin. But for Adventists, who foresee one day the kind of religious persecution for themselves known historically to the Jews, the consequences of anti–Semitism strike closer to home.

This sense of the tenuousness of religious freedoms has led Seventh–day Adventists into the forefront of religious liberty advocacy. *Liberty* magazine is the premier journal of church–state relations, and the church's Religious Liberty Association frequently joins hands with the ACLU in challenging infringements on liberty of conscience issues. In their unease over Moral Majority attempts to rebuild a Protestant America (an effort seen as threatening to civil liberties), Adventists again stand outside the evangelical mainstream. The Collegedale Adventist community needs no reminders of the dangers of moral zealotry: firmly embedded in Southern College folklore is the month–long jailing of faculty early in the school's history during the 1890s, following arrests for violating Tennessee's Sunday Law.

But if in some important respects Adventists diverge from typical evangelicalism, in other regards they are indistinguishable. There is a similar conservatism of lifestyle. In fact, the list of vices officially eschewed by Adventists would probably surpass that of most other Christian groups. And though Jerry Falwell might consider them insufficiently political, Adventist loyalty to the Republican party rarely wavers. The Collegedale precinct consistently provides GOP candidates a comfortable margin of support; this in a district with a popular and conservative Democratic congresswoman, Marilyn Lloyd.

More significantly, Adventists share evangelicals' sense of living in a culture that pays them little heed and confers even less respect. The renewed prominence of the Christian Right during the past fifteen years tended to obscure a more fundamental fact: American culture has become more resolutely secular and (by a necessary corollary) less beholden to its Judeo–Christian roots. Though boycott–wielding evangelicals won some well–publicized victories in their battles with network programmers and the management of 7–Eleven convenience stores, and though hard–core pornography is perhaps less evident today than in the 1970s, still, the content of today's most broadly distributed products of popular culture–television, music videos, film (and now, it seems, even museums)–is more patently violent and more nakedly sexual than ever. Yes, perhaps Madonna and 2 Live Crew are only doing what Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry did three decades earlier: pushing at the edge of the cultural envelope. But to conservative Christians that is exactly the point. This apparently limitless broadening of the publicly acceptable has led both to a frantic pursuit of the outrageous and to the nearly complete hegemony of the profane over the holy.

Evangelicals respond with jeremiads and generally ineffectual attempts at political action. Apart from a few accepted intellectuals such as Peter Berger, Richard John Neuhaus, or Michael Novak (none of whom would comfortably wear the label evangelical), Christians have not won respectful hearings for their social criticism. Their (admittedly) shrill demands for individual and social regeneration elicit mainly dismissive caricature from the arbiters of culture, for whom H. L. Mencken's 1925 roast of the fundamentalists of Dayton, Tennessee, continues to influence "right" thinking toward the devout. There is within liberal capitalist culture a kind of inherent pressure to reduce all differences to matters of taste. Evangelical Christianity's failure to bow its knee to the secular bitch goddess casts it as an enemy of the people, to be responded to not with persecution but with ridicule–and, of course, charges of intolerance.

There was a time when White Oak Mountain symbolized the desired separation between Collegedale and the secular world beyond. Today, however, Chattanooga's suburbs climb up the mountain's ridge, and despite lingering efforts on the part of Southern College to remain *in loco parentis*, there seems little hope of keeping the world out of Collegedale or vice–versa. Student modes of dress are entirely up to date, and dormitory parking lots contain cars most faculty members couldn't afford. Increasingly, talented students pass over the traditional service professions of teaching and ministry in favor of snappy new majors like marketing or corporate wellness. The pride taken in a hometown girl's selection as Miss Tennessee a few years ago fed a craving for public recognition.

For all of that, the school remains a countercultural institution, striving to balance student careerism with a profound sense of the personal rewards and moral demands of the Christian life. The Student Missions Club, for example, whose prototypes thrived at Yale, Syracuse, and other mainstream campuses a century ago, is still prominent at Southern. Twenty to twenty–five students a year, primarily involved in English–language education, scatter to locations as remote as Korea, Truk, Iceland, and Israel. Locally as well, the College and community now seek a greater presence in the Chattanooga area through their classical radio station and extensive welfare projects.

With a student body ever more reflective of American Adventism's ethnic diversity, Southern College has nonetheless escaped the grotesque demands of multiculturalism heard on so many campuses. This is partly explained by an administration, faculty, and student body that is conservative and adheres to traditional notions of curriculum. But it also resides in the presence of a guiding religious philosophy, which inoculates against the recurring epidemics of educational fashion.

Not that, like most evangelical institutions, Southern College doesn't show a less appealing side on occasion. The school is marked by parochialism and a somewhat qualified embrace of academic freedom. Indeed, the worldwide resurgence of religious fundamentalism in the 1980s did not miss Collegedale. An attack on the college's religion department by area zealots left the school for a time divided and demoralized. But these are after all the vices of the community's virtues, of its seriousness, its vigilance against the erosion of moral standards, and its willingness to disregard secular public opinion when that interferes with the pursuit of its own vision.

In a society where pluralism has become the unofficial holy writ, one might think that communities like Collegedale would be valued for their very idiosyncrasy. Such, it need hardly be said, is not the case. Instead, evangelical centers are held to be vestiges of the bad old days, still redolent of Bible–thumping hypocrisy, of science bashing, of segregation, and of a patriarchal order. But one does not have to buy into Christian teaching or even to forgo every last suspicion of evangelicalism in order to appreciate the way it serves as a flywheel for a society badly in need of counterbalance.

In the best Madisonian spirit, liberals and conservatives both ought to accept–even champion–the existence of communities like Collegedale, communities that embody old–fashioned, but very far from shopworn, truths.

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