

Was Ellen White Really a Plagiarist?

Examining the Evidence

(this section will be updated regularly)

by the volunteers at Ellen-White.com

<http://www.Ellen-White.com>

One cannot study the allegations against Ellen White without inevitably coming across the charge that she was a plagiarist. Obviously this is a serious issue and should be studied carefully by both supporters and critics of Ellen White. While this web site is designed to take a closer look at the charges and methods of her *critics*, supporters of Ellen White often have room for improvement as well. If Adventists shut their ears and eyes to the charges against her, claiming that she's right simply "because she's the Lord's prophet" then they are actually doing her writings, the church, and themselves a disservice. Critics would then be correct in saying that Adventist logic in defending Ellen White is no better than some of the other churches out there who claim to have a prophet (a sentiment that is often expressed). Therefore we will take the approach of looking at the actual evidence.

It may surprise some to know that the plagiarism charge against the Lord's faithful servants is nothing new. John Wesley and John Bunyan were both accused of this practice (see *John Bunyan: Mechanick Preacher*, by William York Tindall, New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1964, pp. 194ff and "John Wesley's 'Calm Address': The Response of the Critics," *Methodist History*, October, 1975, pp.13-23). While this by no means gets Ellen White off the hook, it does show us that this sort of allegation is really nothing new.

In 1982 a new book came out which brought this charge and others against Ellen White. The book was called *The White Lie*, and it definitely had an influence in Adventist circles. To read a response to its author's methods and conclusions, we recommend a booklet prepared by the Ellen White Estate called [*The Truth About "The White Lie."*](#) If you are reading a printed version of this page (and don't have Internet access) you can order a copy of the book from the Ellen White Estate (12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, Maryland 20904; Phone: 301-680-6540; FAX: 301-680-6559). There is a minimal charge.

The White Lie revealed various "parallel lines" between Ellen White's writings and other authors. The findings prompted an awareness of the need to study into this matter more intensely than Adventists had done in the past. While it had for decades been known that Ellen White had used the writings of others to enhance her own (EGW herself had addressed this), it was the *volume* of such use that was now under fire.

Adventist Reaction Quoted By Critics

Examining the reaction of various Adventist leaders from both ends of the theological spectrum has become a key part of the entire plagiarism charge. In fact, as we have read through the allegations we have found that a surprisingly large portion of the material out there focuses on what was said by this or that leader regarding the findings. Quote after quote from Adventist articles and personal letters are displayed to the reader. While it may be interesting and even historically relevant to study such reactions, it has little to do with the writings themselves. Two years before the book came out General Conference President Neil Wilson had commented on the issue. His statement is quoted the following way by one critic:

"...in her writings Ellen White used resources more extensively than we have heretofore been aware of or recognized..."

Neil Wilson, President of General Conference, in a March 20, 1980 Adventist Review article

What Wilson stated was indeed true. Everyone recognized this as the research continued. (We will post more of what Wilson said on this subject, and his conclusions, in the near future.)

Here is a quote by Arthur White, exactly as it appears on the critic's page:

"Now it is true that the intensive work in a study of the relationship between portions of certain E.G. White books and the writings of commentators and historians **HAS DISCLOSED A WIDER USE BY ELLEN WHITE OF OTHER WRITINGS, THAN EITHER THE WHITE ESTATE OR PRESENT CHURCH LEADERS WERE AWARE OF.** The staff down through the ages has been much too small and too busy in meeting the demands upon it to give time to probing for answers to questions now being asked." (emphasis added)

Arthur White, grandson of EGW, head of White Estate, 18 Jan 1981

And so it goes. Such statements, however, don't reveal a loss of confidence in the writings at all (and even if they did, this is not the issue), they merely present a fact: as the subject had been studied more, Adventists realized that Ellen White's use of other writings involved more than they had previously recognized.

How Much?

So what does all of this mean in light of the plagiarism charge? Having established that she had utilized more of other writings than they thought, the question became "How much DID she use?" In 1983 the Ellen White Estate underwent an extensive "marking project" using all of Ellen White's published works. They would highlight each and every line that was known to have a parallel in another author's book. The definition of "parallel" included all lines which showed a clear verbal connection, including paraphrasing. The Estate incorporated not only their own findings but everything that was in *The White Lie* and anything else that critics could bring forward. The end result? Although this is an ongoing project, after 17 years of compiling data the studies show that **less than 2% of all of her published work contains parallel lines.** To get a better understanding of their methods and to see a breakdown of the percentages in each of the books, **click the link below:**

[Percentage of Parallel Lines: The Results \(click here\)](#)

Keep in mind that this research is ongoing and the White Estate's database will be updated as more information comes in. Anyone is welcome to present their findings to the Estate for inclusion in the project. At least one critic has challenged Adventists to prove that Ellen White wrote more than 20% of the content in her books. In any court of law the burden of proof is on the accuser. If 80% of her writings can be shown to contain similarities, then let the accuser freely bring forth the evidence and add it to the less than 2% that has already been discovered by the combined efforts of her most vocal critics and supporters alike.

As pointed out earlier, the "reaction of Adventists" seems to have become a focal point in the presentation of the charges. Suppose in 20 years from now it is discovered that Ellen White's use of other writers was actually double what we believe it to be today. The quotes of astonished Adventists in that day might paint a grim picture, but this increase would actually raise the total volume to only 4% (meaning 96% did not contain parallel lines). Even if all of her critics accumulated enough evidence over a 20 year period to *quadruple* the current percentage it would still mean that 92% of her work did not contain parallel lines. But what about parallel lines themselves...

A Copyright Attorney Examines the Writings

In 1981 the church hired copyright attorney Vincent L. Ramik of the law firm Diller, Ramik and Wight to examine Ellen White's writings and present them with his conclusions. Two factors should be considered here, which make the story even more fascinating:

- 1) Ramik had been raised a Roman Catholic (though not a "practicing" Catholic at the time of his research [read interview below]) and one of the books he examined was, in fact, *The Great Controversy*—not exactly flattering to that Church or the Pope.
- 2) Ramik later admitted in an interview that he had been biased against Ellen White when he went into the project, for he had read the work of many of her critics from D.M. Canright right up to the pre-publication manuscript of *The White Lie* itself.

Nevertheless, after more than 300 hours of researching approximately 1,000 relevant cases in American legal history, Ramik's conclusions were as follows:

"Based upon our review of the facts and legal precedents, we conclude that Ellen G. White was not a plagiarist and her works did not constitute copyright infringement/piracy." (*Adventist Review*, Sept. 17, 1981)

"Considering all factors necessary in reaching a just conclusion on this issue, it is submitted that the writings of Ellen G. White were conclusively unplagiaristic." (*Ibid*)

Regarding the specific portions of other writers that she had used, Ramik said that she had "modified, exalted, and improved" the writings of others in an ethical, as well as legal, manner. (*Ibid.*)

In Ramik's conclusion he points out several factors that should be carefully considered when one attempts to accuse Ellen White of literary theft or deceit.

- 1) Her selections "stayed well within the legal boundaries of 'fair use.'"
- 2) "Ellen White used the writings of others; but in the way she used them, she made them uniquely her own"--adapting the selections into her own literary framework.
- 3) Ellen White urged her readers to get copies of some of the very books she made use of--demonstrating that she did not attempt to conceal the fact of her use of literary sources, and that she had no intention to defraud or supersede the works of any other author.

We should keep in mind that Ramik's conclusions were based on studying not only Ellen White's writings, but approximately 1,000 cases involving literary property rights from the years 1790-1915. While we realize that the conclusions of one attorney will not convince everyone, we do think that his research was valid, fair, and extensive.

For more information on Ramik and his research, **choose a link below**. Read the conclusions prayerfully and then decide for yourself:

[Summary of Ramik's Conclusions](#)

[An Interview With Ramik](#)

[Ramik's Full Report](#)

[The Story Behind Ramik's Investigation](#)

Ramik's examination and conclusions are usually mentioned only in passing (if mentioned at all) by the critics when their allegations are presented. His research is treated in such a non-chalant way that it would be easy to underestimate the significance of his findings. One brother who took issue with Ramik points to the fact that in one of the cases studied a defendant was found guilty. Ramik had, however, studied 1000 cases in his research, and many are referred to in his full report above. What is important is Ramik's *conclusions* after studying all of the case histories and comparing them to Ellen White's writings, not the outcome of one of the cases studied. When that many trials are examined, inevitably the results will show both guilty and not guilty verdicts. We hope that by making the reports and interviews available many seekers of truth will be blessed and many questions will be answered.

When asked how he would sum up the legal case against Ellen White as far as charges of plagiarism, piracy, and copyright infringement were concerned, Ramik answered:

"If I had to be involved in such a legal case, I would much rather appear as defense counsel than for the prosecution. There simply is no case!" (*Adventist Review*, Sept. 17, 1981)

"What About the Veltman Report?!"

In 1988 Fred Veltman, Ph.D., finished his eight-year study of Ellen White's use of literary sources in writing *The Desire Of Ages*. The October and December, 1990 issues of *Ministry* magazine (a magazine for Adventist pastors and theologians) ran a two-part article, written by Veltman himself, which summarized what was in the full report, known as "The Desire of Ages Project." Critics have circulated this article and highlighted certain statements Veltman made that seem to help their cause. In light of the entire article, however, Veltman's words hardly do Ellen White damage. Ellen White.com wants to get permission from magazines, etc. before we upload any copyrighted articles. We will either have the article uploaded here in its entirety or inform our visitors where they can receive a copy of it. Critics of Ellen White will even be able to freely share it with others if they wish. In the next few days we will be looking at some of the statements Veltman made and examine them in their context.

Robert Olson of the Ellen White Estate was asked how he felt about Veltman's study. His response was as follows:

"I am totally satisfied with this study. No one could have done a better job—no one. He did it as a neutral person would have and not as one who is an apologist." (*Ministry*, Dec. 1990, p. 16)

When **Veltman himself** was asked if he thought Ellen White was guilty of plagiarism, his answer, after eight years of study was:

"As I pointed out in my report, the investigation did not treat the issue of plagiarism. While we cannot settle that issue here, nor do I wish to minimize its importance, my personal opinion is that she was not guilty of this practice." (Ministry, Dec. 1990, p. 14)

Veltman's final conclusions:

"While I do not have all the answers to the questions being addressed to the writings of Ellen White, my belief in her inspiration is not seriously compromised." (*Ministry*, Dec. 1990, p. 15)

"Actually, as a result of my reading many of her writings in their handwritten and typescript form, I find that my respect for and appreciation of Ellen White and her ministry have grown." (*Ibid*)

"I find compelling reasons for viewing her as a nineteenth-century prophetic voice in her ministry to the Adventist Church and to the larger society as well. Her voice out of that Christian community of the past still deserves to be heard today in those timeless messages that speak to the realities of our world at the end of the twentieth century." (*Ibid*)

Check back soon for a look at Veltman's most frequently quoted statements. As time goes on we will be looking at other aspects of the plagiarism charge as well and will be adding to this page as the research continues.

We hope that the information provided has been helpful. When earnest souls are allowed to see the entire scope of the evidence they then have a better opportunity to prayerfully make up their minds regarding this issue. May the Lord continue to bless us all as we progress in our studies.

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