

James Luther Adams and the Transformation of Liberalism¹

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Transforming Liberalism is the first book-length treatment of Adams's thought since John R. Wilcox's doctoral dissertation, published in 1978. Which is odd, considering the frequency with which we invoke the name, James Luther Adams. Do we invoke his name because he charmed us, and ignore his thought because it offends us? Let's see.

I want to do three things. First, to say a few words about Jim Adams for those unfamiliar with him. Second, to say three things about how the book deals with his thought. Third, to say six things about the transforming liberal faith that he articulated.

Part I

Who was James Luther Adams? He tells that he was once asked by a Boston matron, "What branch of the Adams family are you from, Dr. Adams?" He replied, "The poor white trash branch, ma'am." His forebears had migrated from Southside Virginia to eastern Washington State, where he was born in 1901. His father was a Baptist minister, who switched to the Plymouth Brethren when he decided he must be a "tent-making" minister, after St. Paul's example, and no longer accept pay for preaching the Gospel. (What? No wedding fee schedule?) Jim learned from an early age what Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant by "costing commitment." To further his "deprovincialization" (as he called his college education) he went to the University of Minnesota—chosen so he could continue working on the railroad, supporting himself and his family. He passed in quick succession from his childhood fundamentalism, to adolescent atheism, to the Humanism of John Dietrich. Deciding, then, to be a Unitarian minister, he attended Harvard Divinity School, where his mature religious identity was formed. He came to call himself a "liberal Christian," but any label is a rough approximation; he fits no previously defined position. No wonder, for he set out to do a new thing: to transform liberalism and to generate a liberalism that *is* transforming.

The briefest story of Jim Adams would be incomplete without noting "the marriage of true minds" he found with Margaret Young Adams, his beloved wife of fifty years. Margaret died in 1977; Jim continued his personally engaged and charmed life until his death in 1994.

Part II

Three things about the book, *Transforming Liberalism*. First, it is organized around Adams's recurrent and fundamental themes, providing a synthesis of his thought as a whole. He was not "systematic" (thank goodness!) but he was deeply coherent. As important as *what* he said is the way he teaches us *how to think* about theological and ethical questions.

Doing theology, Adams says, *is interpreting the major symbols of a religious tradition in the light of the present situation*. Simple, clear, helpful. We like the part about "the present situation"—we're good at the experiential side of religion. But here's the rub: We are also asked to identify particular symbols, saying: *these* are the central, luminous, and even *sacred*, within our tradition. Of course, if the distinction between sacred and secular has been dissolved, as the Humanist Manifesto of 1933 declared, then what's left to identify? Symbols become sacred by being cherished and used, interpreted and reinterpreted, through generations. Adams calls attention to the way a loss of sacred tradition undercuts our very ability to sustain theological discussion.

What particular symbols did Adams point to? In the Jewish and Christian tradition, he said, theologies invariably hold some conception of *an original creation*, of *an historical fall* away from the goodness and innocence of the creation, and finally, of *redemption*—a restorative, healing Power, upheld and renewed by a “redemptive community.” The book is organized around these three themes, forming a basic narrative background to “the human story,” the story that tells the meaning of human existence.

Second, *Transforming Liberalism* is a source-book of the stories for which Adams is justly famous. My recent Minns Lectures, entitled “The Parables of James Luther Adams,” are incorporated in the book. According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus “did not speak without a parable,” and we can say, *ditto Adams*. So preachers will want this book, I said to myself, just so they can find some ear-catching sermon illustrations. But. . . *caveat emptor!* Adams’s lively rhetoric is *not* mere illustration or embellishment. It is *substance*. It arises from his conviction that religious meaning is inherently embodied in persons and events, communities and histories. From this angle of vision theology is inherently narrative: it is telling a story that uncovers an otherwise hidden meaning. Adams often told stories of brash people who “interrupted the meeting,” and of heedless people who were delivered a “shock of recognition.”

“Narrative theology” is one proposal of the post-modernists; I have proposed the idea of “parabolic vision.” In this mode Adams refers to Jesus’ parable of “The seed growing secretly.” He read it as pointing to hidden forces that produce righteousness, mercy, and peace—the kingdom (or perhaps better) the power of God at work in the world. What keeps these divine energies “hidden” is our own fear, and hatred, and grief—all those things that render us deaf and blind. That disempower us. To “have ears to hear” the parable is to experience a break-through, a moment of insight, a revelation. If we do not deal with the dark sides of human existence (the fear, hatred, and grief), then revelation will have no place in our theology, and transformation will have no place in our religious experience. We will sit complacently among those William James called “the once-born.” (Or as Jim’s famous Boston matron also asked, “Why should I be born again? I was born in Boston!”) I am saying: with Adams we can learn to “unfreeze the knees” and do theology in a parabolic key.

A third thing about this book. A central thesis is expressed in the title: Adams set out to transform liberalism—the liberalism he knew as a Unitarian minister, and as an activist in liberal social and political causes, and as a seminary professor. He was a “Renaissance humanist” in that he was interested in every aspect of life—politics and ethics, the arts and the social sciences—and drew all of them into his theological vision. No wonder. With his intellectual mentor, Paul Tillich, he held that “religion is the substance of culture.”

Note that the book is not called “Transforming *Religious* Liberalism,” for Adams was not only, or even primarily, concerned with “liberal religion,” a tiny, sectarian outlook found among “we few.” He held that it is just this inward-looking preoccupation that works to marginalize us within the larger religious and secular world. For a taste of his anguished and sometimes angry critique of “liberal religion,” hear these words from his Berry Street Conference lecture—words no less true today than when he spoke them, in 1940:

“The element of commitment, of change of heart, of decision, so much emphasized in the Gospels, has been neglected by religious liberalism, and that is the prime source of its enfeeblement. *We liberals are largely an uncommitted and therefore a self-frustrating people.* Our first task, then, is to restore to liberalism its own dynamic and its prophetic genius. We need conversion in ourselves. Only by some such revolution can we be seized by a prophetic power that will enable us *to proclaim both the judgment and the love of God.* Only by some such conversion can we be possessed by a love that will not let us go.”

Part III

“Okay,” you say, “so let’s transform liberalism. But tell us, from what, to what?” Here follow six elements of the transforming liberalism that Adams affirmed in no uncertain terms.

First, consider the nature of religion: why does it concern us at all? To count in terms of commitment, Adams says, religious ideas must be existential. Existential questions are questions calling not for information or opinion but for a decision. They are *yes* or *no* questions. Religious consciousness is “alive with feeling,” he said, when we recognize that our most personal understandings and choices (the intimate dimension of life) are caught up in transcendent meanings and values (the ultimate dimension). Religion comes alive for us where “the intimate and the ultimate” intersect.

“The intimate” and “the ultimate” are not opposites; they are polar terms, in creative tension with each other and forever seeking resolution, a synthesis. Think of Jesus’ “great commandment”—one coin with two sides: *Love God with all you’ve got, and love your neighbor at least as much, if not more, than you love yourself.* These two twins must cleave together, for if you sever one from the other, you sever the very nerve of religion. A transforming liberal faith will not substitute critiques of everybody else’s religion for attentiveness to the God who, in Martin Luther’s words, “is closer to the creatures than they are to themselves”—who is *that* ultimate and *that* intimate.

Second, consider the human condition. To be human it means to be blessed with the freedom to choose and to create. But because we have these miraculous capacities within the limits of our own finitude—because we are frail, and faulty, and forgetful—we often choose badly and often terribly destroy. Then our wills must be transformed and our hearts revived.

Adams calls special attention to the New Testament term, *metanoia*: “*change your mind.*” The usual translation is “repentance;” I call it new-mindedness. Then Adams adds another term that jars our liberal ears: “the primacy of the will,” referring to the philosophical tradition of “voluntarism,” as distinct from “intellectualism.” A voluntarist holds that what we think—especially in the realm of our deepest hopes and intentions—is framed and driven by our volition, our will, and ultimately, by what we love. He cites St. Bonaventure’s luminous definition of theology: “The science of the love of God.” And he does not call it an oxymoron. Don’t get hung up on the word “science.” Get hung up on what Adams called “a love that will not let us go.” A transforming liberal faith will call us to be transformed in heart and mind, not to be once-and-for-all “born again,” but to be born again and again and again—to the end of being a committed (not a self-frustrating) people.

Third, consider the world-age within which we live, and our struggle to influence history—and not, as Jim said, “just be pushed around by it.” Recall the Bible story of Jacob wrestling through the night with an “angel” at the ford of the River Jabbok. He prevails but comes away limping; he has won the blessing of. . . but who is this mysterious figure? Angels and demons are close kin. Adams often cited Paul’s word, that “we wrestle not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers.” We can say: the world is a field of forces, “powers” seeking to entice us or master us, and we, if we are strong enough and not “conflict-averse,” may yet overcome them. Power, he said, is not only active, but also receptive; to be “blessed” it must be “power with.” So James Luther Adams “ventured a new beatitude.” He said, “Blessed are the powerful.”

Dealing with the world in these terms, we are able (better than before) to deal with the reality of evil, and its dark companions—tragedy, the demonic, and idolatry. Tragedy: the recognition that our highest achievements are tinged with guilt and grief: think of Hiroshima and

Dresden. The demonic: the recognition that the goodness of this world is often twisted to destructive and self-serving ends. And idolatry: the recognition that our very religiousness is often given over to deaf and dumb objects of our own devising. A transforming liberal faith confronts the world as a field in which divine and demonic forces have play, and empowers us on the side of the divine.

Fourth, consider ethics. Adams said that liberalism is yoked, from its birth, to concern for democracy and social justice. He is justly famous for lifting up awareness of the role of voluntary associations in the creation and sustenance and renewal of democratic institutions. He put it more concretely: Every one of us, within our human vocation, should be active in some group at the cutting edge of contemporary issues. "Being on the library board doesn't count," he added, "unless the librarian is under attack as a communist." (Today we would say: by the enforcers of the Patriot Act).

As an ethicist Adams dealt with the great, embracing issues: racism and poverty, warfare and conscientious objection, nationalism and xenophobia, political repression (and apathy) and civil liberties. He did not offer moral prescriptions, but described the processes by which the great issues of social justice are confronted. In a word, by groups; in a phrase, by "the organization of power and the power of organization." An *authentic* voluntary association, he said, brings diverse people together around a shared social concern. Jesus said, "By their fruits you shall know them." Adams said, "By their *groups* you shall know them." A transforming liberal faith redirects our energies from individualistic spiritualities and the privatization of religion to public ministries, emphatically including "the ministry of the laity," to the end of confronting injustice.

Fifth, consider the human necessity of community, and our continual need to renew and extend community in its many forms: fellowship and friendship, marriage and family, citizenship and church-person-ship. (What Robert Bellah called "ontological individualism," I would call "ideological individualism"—individualism that serves our wish to be insulated from each other: We'd rather "bowl alone.")

Adams is clear: In community we become persons; in turn, authentic communities respect and nurture individuals. This miraculous doubleness—the interdependence of person and community—underlies the seminal idea of *covenant*. In 1975 he put "covenant" on our "intellectual agenda," and we've been talking about little else ever since—from the "we covenant" of the UUA Principles statement, to "covenant groups," to "right relationship" within our churches and between our "partnered" international religious communities.

It is not a new idea. Adams also said, "By their *roots* you shall know them." He reminded us that the liberal church is rooted in the covenanted congregations of Puritan New England, *and* in the prophets' eschatological vision of a "new covenant," a time when God's law and love shall be written in every human heart. In Adams's thought eschatology points to transcendence: the covenant, he said, is finally a "covenant of being." This term is not unlike our UUA Principle, "the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part." They are metaphysical metaphors. Still, our covenants are necessarily enacted—created and broken, renewed and extended—in history. A transforming liberal faith is covenantal and historical; it understands the present in the light of its vision of the final meaning of history. It "seeks first" the community of God that is "at hand," that is now and always available.

Sixth, finally, consider faith and its renewal. Everyone puts faith in something, Adams said, unless we are nihilistic or utterly despairing. The problem is to discern *authentic*, as distinct from a spurious, an idolatrous, or quite simply, a "self-frustrating," faith. Adams affirmed the ancient definition of theology, "faith seeking understanding," in this sense: Faith is an "original decision," an orientation of heart and mind from which new understandings come to birth. The other way around,

the rationalist way, will never generate a positive faith but only qualifications and negations. Adams spoke of himself as “a theologian of grace,” for he thought of God as “the love that has laid hold upon us, and will not let us go.” He offered the simplest and most profound definition of God I know—“the community-forming power.” Just this, he said, is sacred and sovereign, and at work in history, and worthy of our devotion.

When Senator Barack Obama to the Democratic National Convention, “We worship an awesome God in the Blue States,” was he making an empty claim? If not, his liberal friends must rise to the challenge and begin to use the language of faith. *You mean “awesome,” as in “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge”?* (Proverbs 1: 7) Jim Adams would have liked that theological note within the keynote address. Lest you feel coerced, know that Adams also said: More important than any particular idea of God is a belief that history has meaning, and its corollary: our responsibility to be engaged. Or there’s hell to pay—it’s that awesome. In sum, Adams’s life-long quest was to articulate a faith that “takes time seriously.”

Conclusion: *Gift and task*

If we “take time seriously” we will know ourselves as rooted in a sacred tradition—a tradition that is both our “gift” and our “task.” Adams characterized his faith in these few words: “The liberal Christian outlook is directed to a Power that is living, that is active in a love seeking concrete manifestation, and that finds decisive response in the living posture and gesture of Jesus of Nazareth.” That is the gift. He continues: “In a world that has with some conscientiousness turned against this kind of witness and its vocabulary, the effect of this witness will in a special way depend upon the quality of its costingness in concrete action and upon its relevance to the history that is in the making.” That is the task.

In two sentences Jim Adams sounded two notes together—the tradition in which “the living posture and gesture of Jesus of Nazareth” is a central symbol and *our gift*—something given out of love—and the present, costing commitment that is *our task*. A transforming liberal faith is a faith that “takes time seriously,” that does not view faith as an escape hatch from the vicissitudes of personal life or communal history, but as pathway into the community of God. Its faith is both “gift and task,” a gift of grace and a task of personal and social responsibility.

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