

Response to George Kimmich Beach, *Transforming Liberalism*¹

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George Beach has given us a remarkable survey of the theology of James Luther Adams, but in the spirit of Jim Adams, what we have here is more than just an interesting story. It is also, as he has made very clear in his presentation, an analysis of the discontents of liberalism at the beginning of the 21st century and an agenda for its transformation. I want to address three points of that agenda in a very general way, but I think the connections to Adams and to Beach's book about Adams will become clear enough as I go along.

First—to begin where George did—thinking about the major symbols of a religious tradition, and identifying some symbols in particular.

Those of us who like to think broadly about religion—to think about it liberally, if I may put it that way—learned long ago not to be too restrictive about where we find religious insight. But if those insights are going to be more than fleeting moments of illumination, they have to be tied together in some way.

My colleague Charles Curran suggests that moral theology begins not with doctrine or rules, but with what he calls a “stance,” or what we might also call a perspective on the world around us. A “stance,” he says—and this is the important part—has to be “broad enough to encompass all of reality, but narrow enough to provide some critical understanding of how all aspects of reality fit together.”

Curran would no doubt say that many of our religious communities do quite well with the narrow and critical part, but they fall short when they come to the part about encompassing all of reality. We can see clearly enough what they mean to reject, but there are just too many things that are true in thought and action that they cannot accommodate for their critical stance to be plausible.

Liberalism, by contrast, tends to suffer from the opposite problem—open to all of reality, but with no critical understanding of how it all fits together.

The stance that Curran offers as a starting point for his own approach to ethics draws on the five Christian “mysteries” of Catholic theology: creation, sin, incarnation, redemption, and resurrection. The language may be somewhat different, but you'll recognize the sequence of original creation, historic fall, and redemption that Beach identifies as central for Adams and that structure the six chapters of his book.

Renewing liberalism begins by identifying a stance. This one is not excessively narrow. As Curran's liberal approach to Catholicism suggests, it is broadly shared and understood across the Christian traditions, and perhaps more generally among the biblical faiths or the “religions of the book.” But it does provide a perspective on how reality fits together. You have a story or a narrative, and when you look closely at any aspect of human experience you have to decide where to fit it in the story. When you talk about humanity and its divisions, you have to decide whether that's part of creation—that's just the way it is—or whether it's part of the fall: “inevitable,” as Reinhold Niebuhr would say, “but not necessary.” And if not necessary, how do you understand it in relation to redemption or to the mystery of resurrection?

A transformed liberalism has to find a stance, or as Adams might have suggested, has to realize that it already has one. Its openness to all sources of insight is part of that stance, but openness is not the whole of it.

Second, I think, a transformed liberalism will not be shy about affirming that this stance is deeply embedded in our culture. Both Adams and Tillich affirmed the proposition that religion provides the substance of culture—not merely the emotional energy for it.

One hesitates to repeat Adams and Tillich too loudly these days, for fear of being misunderstood, but let's be clear that the outset that what they had in mind was something quite different from the sort of legal sanction for religious beliefs and practices that we are hearing so much of from the religious right today. The fact is that when churches start talking about giving legal status to their beliefs about creation, or marriage, or sexuality, they've usually already failed in the larger task of shaping culture.

But I think that the real problem is not with the small minority of religious people who think that they can create a Christian nation by legislation. The real problem is with a kind of religious cultural pessimism that can no longer see the connections between faith and life that Adams and Tillich saw. Adams and Tillich thought that biblical symbols could illuminate culture because religion is the substance of culture. But they also thought that people who were deeply involved in the culture could grasp the meaning of the biblical symbols because they were already living them in some way.

By contrast, my colleague in Christian ethics, Stanley Hauerwas, began his 2001 Gifford lectures by warning his audience that key Christian assertions are unintelligible to anyone who is not already a Christian. A transformed liberalism ought to be appalled by that thought, and not merely because, as Hauerwas freely admits, it appears a little arrogant. A transformed liberalism ought to be appalled because that sort of cultural pessimism has so far lost the element of creation in its stance that it can no longer offer any meaningful redemption. The culture, understood on those terms has to be abandoned, because there's no religious substance there to redeem or restore.

I suggest to you that the stance with which a great deal of contemporary religion approaches culture is not the biblical sequence of creation, fall, and redemption that I outlined a moment ago, but a dualistic, Manichean stance that says that things have to be sorted into good and evil, and once you've got them separated, you've got two different moral universes that have nothing in common between them, not even a common creator or a common destiny.

Now, in keeping with a generally liberal affirmation of all religious symbols, I do not want to suggest that there is nothing to the Manichean symbolism. In light of what is going on in the world today, I do not find Manicheism unintelligible, in the way that Hauerwas thinks non-Christians should find Christianity unintelligible. But there is a reason why there are Christians, and Jews, and Muslims in the world today, and there aren't any Manicheans—and the reason is that although that symbolism appeals to a deeply pessimistic streak in all of us that can take over whole cultures at particular points in time, in the end Manicheism just isn't a very plausible way of interpreting the substance of culture. It all shares too many of the marks of its common creation to deny any of it the possibility of redemption. It all shares too much of the sin that is in need of redemption to deny any of it a connection to a common creation. A transformed liberalism has a great deal to contribute to our general understanding of those connections, which are too often denied today, both in religion and in the wider culture.

That brings me to one last point about transformed liberalism, which is less evident in any one part of James Luther Adams' thought than in the whole of it, taken together. The hard part about living this stance is that it's not enough to be opinionated. You have to know a lot, too.

And, of course, James Luther Adams did. Wendy Doniger once described Mircea Eliade's "method" for studying the history of religion as "read everything, remember everything you read, and be very, very smart." Adams, I think, had pioneered the method before him.

When I was a PhD student at Harvard, Adams had already retired, but he was very much in evidence around the Divinity School and most of us graduate students in ethics got to know him well enough to be intimidated by his more comprehensive knowledge of everything that we thought we knew. We weren't particularly alone in that—most of the faculty was intimidated, too. But we developed small strategies to avoid being quizzed about things where we knew our knowledge was going to come up short. At one point, still early in my first year in the PhD program, I watched his house for a few days and brought in the boxes of mail that quickly accumulated in his absence. He of course gave me a few dollars for the service, and I was careful not to spend the proceeds on books, about which I knew there would be a quiz. I went for music—Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition, as I vividly recall, because when I thanked Prof. Adams and said that I was grateful to have the recording, he grinned broadly, said I was quite welcome, and then asked, "Say, do you know about Mussorgsky's correspondence with Rimsky-Korsakov? Very interesting."

I suppose that Adams was about 72 or 73 at that point, which seemed a lot older to me then than it does now, but it is still sufficiently along in years. I encouraged myself then with the thought that he had had a long time to acquire all that knowledge, but some months later, still in my first year in the PhD program, I encountered him on Francis Avenue one morning (when a student could still park his car on Francis Avenue if he got there early enough in the morning). He knew that I had been a pastor before returning to graduate school, and he asked me whether I was then working in a church while I was studying. I told him that I wasn't, because I'd decided that I really needed to be a full-time student. He replied, "Oh, that's very wise. You know, I think I learned most of what I know during those first two or three years of intensive study." I suppose he meant that to be encouraging, but all I could think was "I'm doomed. I'll never make it."

And certainly I didn't, and I haven't yet. But it's part of my stance with respect to redemption that maybe if we all live long enough, and approach the task with the same eagerness and generosity of spirit that James Luther Adams brought to it, we may acquire the knowledge we would need to transform liberalism along the lines that Adams laid out. It's a transformation that is desperately needed in both church and society today.

¹ Presented at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, June 2005.