

**"Something like conversion is essential":
The Concept of *Metanoia* in the Writings of James Luther Adams**

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Introduction

The latest publication from the Unitarian Universalist Association's Commission on Appraisal is a study on the meaning of membership in Unitarian Universalist congregations. The report's initial chapter—"The Process of Commitment"—includes this observation:

Our congregations consist overwhelmingly of members from other faith backgrounds. We used to always call them come-outers. Some now refer to them as come-inners. Technically they would be called converts, a term we tend to avoid and with some justification. The word *conversion* implies a turning about or a turning around, a gradual or sudden shift in perspective. Yet most of those joining our congregations speak less of an experience of conversion than of confirmation: "This is what I always was, but I didn't realize there were others like me, who felt the same way."¹

Those who speak this way, who suggest that membership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation reflects "less of an experience of conversion than of confirmation" will find no support for that preference in the writings of James Luther Adams (JLA). Adams was not only the most significant theological voice of the twentieth century for Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists, but was also one of the initiators of the original American Unitarian Association's Commission of Appraisal process.² While he was well acquainted with this Unitarian Universalist attraction to the notion of "confirmation" and avoidance, even dismissal of the concept of "conversion," he most assuredly neither shared in, nor approved of this bias. In fact, Adams repeatedly derided this very perspective as one of the primary weaknesses of liberal religion.

Can the dominant perspective on Unitarian Universalist church membership be summarized in this claim: our congregations are places where people go primarily to feel comfortable about who they have always been? One certainly finds evidence for that view in a

"pop-up" advertisement on the Unitarian Universalist Association's web page³ in which the image of a smiling woman is accompanied by the caption: "Instead of me fitting a religion, I found a religion to fit me." Such a prevailing perspective would surely sadden, even distress JLA; he explicitly deplored this way of thinking. Adams (who, incidentally, referred to himself as a "come-outer,"⁴) did not dismiss or avoid the notion of "conversion." Rather, he wrote often and eloquently about the regrettable absence of this fundamental concept in liberal religion. For example, he asserts:

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 prophetic genius. We need conversion within ourselves. Only by some such revolution can we be seized by a prophetic power that will enable us to proclaim both the judgment and love of God. Only by some such conversion can we be possessed by a love that will not let us go.⁵

My intentions in this paper are to explore James Luther Adams' focus upon this notion of "conversion" or, as he often referred to it, "*metanoia*," and to use these writings, in part, as a critique of the above characterization of contemporary Unitarian Universalism. After briefly examining the terms themselves, I will address what JLA does *not* mean when he uses these terms. I will then explore at some length the experiential and conceptual sources that led Adams to assert the centrality of this concept. And finally, I will offer a couple of particular passages from JLA's writings in which the notion of conversion, or *metanoia*, is evident in his description of the truly faithful liberal religious community. Before addressing this agenda, however, a few comments about James Luther Adams as a converter are in order

JLA and the act of conversion

In his Introduction to Adams' memoir, *Not Without Dust and Heat*, Max L. Stackhouse depicts JLA in this way:

James Luther Adams was an inveterate raconteurial philodoxist for most of a century. He was constantly telling stories about the favored opinions or doctrines of others. He loved meeting people, getting them to state their convictions and to reveal their resolutions of the contradictory elements. Then he would use these stories with their inevitably fragmentary manifestations of creativity, mutuality, insight and justice—or the betrayal of these—to illustrate the possibilities and vicissitudes of history.⁶

Adams, consistent with this characterization, is often portrayed as a consummate conversationalist. Let us then note, here at the outset, the work of this *conversationalist* in the act of *conversion*. As much as any other objective, Adams' con-versing in person and in print intended to con-vert. This is to say, JLA's narratively-based theologizing endeavored to bring about change in the thinking and ultimately in the actions of those with whom he engaged in spoken or written conversation.

Perhaps nowhere is this intent to effect change better exemplified than in his conversations about conversion. Adams was an avowed liberal religionist, one who specifically identified with, and energetically supported, Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism. And yet, he reserved his most pointed critique for liberal religion. Often, that critique took the form of attempting to rescue, redeem, or, (to put it more directly,) *convert* liberals rejection of particular terms from traditional Judeo-Christianity into a more informed appreciation of the power behind these disregarded words.

As we will discover, this was most certainly his project where the notion of *metanoia* was concerned. Far from concurring with the liberal distaste for this seemingly evangelical experience, Adams talked and wrote continually of its importance. In that effort, we might say, he was attempting to create converts for "conversion," fellow liberal religionists with a shared appreciation for and commitment to the importance of the experience of comprehensive change in the liberal church.

Another related image comes to mind. JLA devoted an early chapter in his memoir to "The Lure of the Railroad." In it he describes how, as a young man in Spokane, he "entered the

mystique surrounding the world of working on the railroad."⁷ Writing some six decades later,

Adams virtually gushes in his recollections of working for the Northern Pacific line:

For me, working on the railroad thrust me into a new world, the peripheries of which had fascinated me since childhood. . . . I was becoming familiar with the railroad during its heyday, and it thoroughly captivated my imagination . . . I began to think about the different cities and towns scattered across the country. The imagination develops when exposed to drama, but it may be empowered in another way when given a taste of something grand and specific.⁸

We might observe, in general, that JLA seemed never to lose this capacity for fascination and imagination. The same enthusiasm with which he approached working on the railroad is later evidenced in his approach to his studies at Harvard and abroad, his work in churches and universities, his involvement in the politics of Chicago and the social problems of Boston, his attention to the transcendent meaning of art and music, and his consideration of the implications of law and psychology for the work of the theologian.

But, more specifically, one might posit that, metaphorically, JLA was a railroad man his whole life. He was forever creating links, making connections, conveying notions from one place or tradition to another. In particular, in his attention to and advocacy for the notion of conversion, Adams was trans-*porting* trans-*formation*, attempting to move this notion into a more central role within liberal religion. JLA left his work on the Northern Pacific line to go to Harvard but he never lost his fascination and imagination for things both grand and specific, a drive that enabled him to make connections between one station along the line of the religious spectrum and another. It is this "train-*ing*" that propels a Plymouth Brethren fundamentalist to a position as an official observer at Vatican II, and enables an avowed religious liberal to become an articulate spokesperson for, of all things, conversion.

"Conversion" and "Metanoia"

Throughout his writings, James Luther Adams uses the terms "conversion" and "metanoia" interchangeably. Other than acknowledging the problematic character of the word "conversion" based on its misuse by evangelicals, Adams makes no distinction between these terms when he points to and calls for a particular kind of religious experience. A brief exploration of the meaning of *μετανοια* seems to justify this choice.

μετανοια comes from *μεταγνωσις*, which "is literally 'know after'" and "has first to do with a change of mind or feelings resulting from this after-knowledge."⁹ However, *metanoia* is more than a mere rethinking, an intellectual reconsideration. When *metanoia* appears in the New Testament

there is no longer any question of distinguishing between change of thoughts, of heart, of actions. The change is that of the soul, of the whole person (the new creature) . . . ¹⁰

When JLA refers to the need for "conversion" or for "*metanoia*," he is, as we shall find below, issuing the summons for precisely this kind of comprehensive change.

Thus, we should emphasize that Adams' explicit understanding of the kind of holistic change brought about by conversion entails more than a simple alteration of an individual's self-understanding. Conversion brings about a change of behavior. One finds justification for this view in a definition of *μετανοια* as "a coming to one's senses, resulting in a change of conduct."¹¹

In the use of "conversion" and "*μετανοια*" below, I will follow JLA's practice of interchanging these two terms. Further, in using these terms, I am also following his understanding of both of them as referents to a religious experience that brings about an all-encompassing change both in individuals and in institutions and society as well.

What JLA does not mean by "conversion"

Given the aforementioned Commission's claim that there is justification for our avoidance of the term "convert," given liberal religion's inclination to hear this term "conversion" negatively, it is important to be clear about what James Luther Adams does *not* mean when he

refers to conversion. While he regarded this notion as essential, he was hardly a defender of all uses of it. Rather, JLA himself was critical of a number of the ways in which conversion has been used and even acknowledged, at one point, "I don't like the term 'conversion' because it has been badly used and misused by the revivalists."¹²

Adams in no way countenanced an association of conversion with coercion. He writes:

The liberal asserts that free inquiry, persuasion, and mutual consent are the only methods consistent with the dignity and the limitations of human nature and also that these are the methods that will obtain the maximum of discovery and criticism.¹³

True to this claim, JLA's insistence on conversion took the form of carefully measured argumentation designed to persuade. One must not, therefore, hear the appeal to conversion from Adams as, in any way, justifying tactics that could be regarded as manipulative or devious. Though some might assume otherwise, for JLA, coercion is not only unnecessary for conversion, coercion undermines any intent to convert.

Further, in more than one setting, JLA criticized an understanding of conversion that he found exemplified in William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Simply put, he regards James as far too narrow in his thinking, summarizing with disapproval:

Conversion, the once-born and the twice-born man, the reorientation of values, are not dealt with in the context of institutional behavior, but rather as inner-personal and interpersonal phenomena. James's interpretation of pragmatism led him to look for the influence of religion as almost entirely in the personal sphere.¹⁴

JLA focused on religion as collective, as institutional, and regularly insisted that "we need to develop an alternative to the privatization of piety."¹⁵ For Adams, no religious notion could be sufficiently expressed in purely personal terms. *Metanoia* was, of all concepts, no exception to this emphasis.

This understanding led JLA to distance himself from the conception of conversion offered by evangelicals. In writing about the need for conversion, he states clearly that he is not

touting "a 'conversion' of the evangelical order, a conversion that takes place at one moment and then is complete."¹⁶ *Metanoia*, for Adams, was not the kind of thing that transpired in the heat of some momentous once-and-for-all rush of emotional fervor.

He further decries: "Conversion is for individuals; according to the gospel of Billy Graham, institutions will change if the individuals are 'converted.'"¹⁷ Again, with even a cursory understanding of JLA's expansive thinking, one would know that he always disapproved of this kind of completely individualistic understanding. While Adams certainly regarded conversion to be of personal import, he in no way limited its scope or meaning to the private domain of the individual's solitariness. It is only genuine conversion if it "affects our social relations and brings about some conversion in society."¹⁸

Finally, it is important to note that JLA's rejection of the conversion of the evangelical did not mean he embraced the liberal's contentment with a tepid sort of tweaking that leaves one essentially as she or he has always been. Echoing a Kantian view, he contends: "What is needed . . . is not piecemeal reformation with minor adjustments of character and conduct, but an alteration of the basis of character and of the habitual way in which the mind works."¹⁹ I will return to this holistic emphasis on essential change below. For now, let us note that, in Adams' writings, conversion is something other than both the evangelical's claim that one's whole life can be permanently changed by a single experience and the liberal's contention that there is no real need for comprehensive life change at all.

JLA's experiential sources for his valuation of "conversion"

In James Luther Adams' writings, theology and biography are tightly interwoven. For all of his acumen with abstract theological concepts, as suggested above, much, perhaps most of JLA's theologizing initiated with a personal story, with some narrative referent to his own experiences. Clearly, his emphasis on conversion was rooted in particular life experiences, at least three of which he delineated explicitly.

First, Adams often referred to his childhood and adolescent religious experiences and the impact they continued to have on his thinking. "I came from a fundamentalist background, the Plymouth Brethren,"²⁰ he told a group late in his life. While, over the course of his adult life, his theology would venture far from this conservative starting point, he continued to appreciate certain aspects of that church in which his early perspective on faith was shaped. The generosity of JLA's spirit is evidenced in his observation that "sometimes the religion from which one is alienated may nevertheless have at its core something profoundly vital, something prodding us to ask fundamental questions even if the answers are unacceptable."²¹

Such was the case in Adams' wrestling with the notion of conversion. In reflection on his experiences with the Plymouth Brethren, he acknowledged: "I now have a new appreciation for these roots, largely because they imply a radical criticism of 'the world.' Having these roots, I must confess that I think that something like conversion is essential . . ."²² Adams heard in his fundamentalist father's preaching a fiery denunciation of the evils of the world. Though his own critique shifted to a different understanding of the ways in which evil manifests itself, it was an appreciation for, and engagement in this same sort of criticism that led him to continue to assert the need for *metanoia*.

JLA's stint as a student at Harvard presented him with a second source for his focus on *metanoia*. While there, he studied extensively with Irving Babbitt, professor of French literature. Adams acclaimed Babbitt's influence on his life more highly than any other teacher he encountered at Harvard and makes explicit mention of the ways his esteemed professor's worldview helped expand his thinking.²³ Unlikely though it may seem, in Irving Babbitt's literary humanism Adams experienced another kind of summons to conversion. As overagainst scientific humanism's exuberant confidence in progress, JLA observes:

Literary humanism, to my mind, had a more realistic conception of human nature: It envisaged the central problem of civilization as that of ethical standards and without being obscurantist, it stressed the necessity of something like conversion,

of a change in the will whereby a person would develop an inner ethical control and work toward a richly human, universal norm.²⁴

Hailing his intellectual mentor, he continues:

Through Babbitt's stress on these ideas I came to understand and value Greek and Chinese humanism, the Christian doctrine of sin and grace, and the Christian emphasis on conversion and humility. I also thus acquired a skepticism of the romantic liberal conception of human nature which was later to be so severely scrutinized by "realistic theology."²⁵

The third and most influential source for JLA's emphasis on conversion arose in his years of study in Germany. This experience became a primary touchstone for Adams throughout his life. He reflects, "the major thing that happened to me was my experience of Nazism in 1927, 1936, and again in 1938."²⁶ "Nazism," he wrote, "induced in me a kind of conversion."²⁷ In the sermons of his childhood, JLA heard about evil in the world; in a between-wars Germany careening toward Nazi domination, he witnessed that evil explicitly. He documented his experiences in a remarkable set of grainy home movies in which casual sequences of key theologians of the time—Rudolph Otto, Karl Barth, Rudolph Bultmann—are interspersed with ominous images of young Nazis marching and of Nazi religious spokespersons touting the virtues of Hitler's perspective.²⁸

Years later, continuing to reflect on these encounters, JLA wrote in his memoir:

One way to describe my stance in Nazi Germany would be to say that I became acutely aware of the necessity for *explicit* commitment, in contrast to a vague sort of liberalism opposed to prejudices and promoting openness of mind. So the idea of *metanoia* became important to me . . . *Metanoia* . . . is to be understood as a change of heart, mind, soul—*total* personal orientation.²⁹

While he returned neither to the form nor to the method of the conversion of his fundamentalist childhood religion, his experience of Nazi Germany deepened Adams' early belief that an appeal to confirmation rather than conversion was an inadequate response to the world's capacity for horrific evil. Nothing short of *metanoia*, of complete reorientation, will suffice in such a world as this.

These three seemingly disparate influences—the fundamentalism of the Plymouth Brethren, the literary humanism of Irving Babbitt, and the Nazism of 1930s Germany—coalesced in James Luther Adams' experience and thinking. The collective impact of these three sources convinced him that "something like conversion is essential." This resolute conviction then informed one of JLA's primary criticisms of liberal religion. He decried:

[R]eligious liberalism, in the name of *intellectual* integrity, tended to neglect the deeper levels both of the human consciousness and of reality itself. As a consequence, it gradually became associated with an ascetic attitude toward the imagination as well as toward enthusiasm and gripping loyalties. Instead of confronting people with the demands of inner commitment to the ideals of prophetic religion, it more and more provided a cosmic or religious sanction for the interests of a "respectable" group. Conversion was relegated to the underprivileged classes or taken as a sign of ignorance. In the end "the attitude of distance" won the day, and liberalism achieved poise by living at the low temperature of "detached, middle-class common sense," as Whitehead called it.³⁰

JLA's conceptual sources for his valuation of "conversion"

James Luther Adams, true to his typical form of theologizing, found the impetus for his focus on *metanoia* in his own life experiences. Whether in childhood religion, student days at Harvard, travels and study in Germany, or beyond, he was repeatedly led by his experiences to confirm that conversion is necessary. But, Adams' attention to the importance of conversion also derived from fundamental conclusions, not just about his own experiences, but about the way the world is. An exploration of certain of these claims will demonstrate clearly why JLA felt mere confirmation was an inadequate religious response to the way things are.

Drawing, in part, on his appreciation of the work of Alfred North Whitehead, Adams wrote often about his view that the world is in perennial process. He declared that the first characteristic of liberal religion is the claim that "no human achievement is complete or perfect."³¹ "Religious liberalism," according to Adams,

depends first on the principle that "revelation" is continuous. Meaning has not been finally captured. Nothing is complete, and thus nothing is exempt from criticism.³²

From this starting place, we can see how simply confirming who people have always been is not only inadequate, it is impossible. Life is flux, revelation is continuous; no one has reached a point of perfection where mere affirmation alone is sufficient. We are, all of us, continually confronted, criticized, and challenged by new understandings. Thus, JLA concluded that the liberal church cannot then settle for undemanding approval; it must offer the summons to constant reevaluation and recommitment.

As a corollary to this initial claim, Adams adds: "There is only one infallible truth for the liberal, and that is the assertion that man is a fallible creature."³³ To assert our ubiquitous fallibility in no way necessitates a claim of original or complete depravity. Adams shared Reinhold Niebuhr's awareness of the good in our evil and the evil in our good. He made it clear in his Preface to Henry Nelson Wieman's book *The Directive in History* what he means by "evil." There he echoed Wieman's view that "Evil appears when man produces situations that prevent further creative transformation from occurring."³⁴ Tainted as we all are by fundamental fallibility, Adams knew that simplistic and all-encompassing affirmation was a thoroughly unsatisfactory religious response. It is only by allowing for, and insisting upon, creative and complete transformation that we humans can most adequately address our fallible condition.

But, of course, for JLA, evil is present not just in individuals but in society as well. "In history and in the human heart" he wrote, "there are, then, destructive as well as creative powers."³⁵ He continues:

These destructive powers are manifest in the social as well as in the individual life, although they are most subtly destructive in the social life where the individual's egotism fights under the camouflage of the good of the nation, the race, the church, or the class.³⁶

This is precisely what JLA observed in Germany: destructive forces were incarnated in both individuals and throughout the social order, including within Germany's religious community.

Because of this encounter, never again would Adams be able to deny or downplay the human capacity for what he, even as a liberal, did not hesitate to call "sin." He states clearly:

[W]hether the liberal uses the word "sin" or not, he cannot correct his "too jocund" view of life until he recognizes that there is in human nature a deep-seated and universal tendency for both individuals and groups to ignore the demands of mutuality and thus to waste freedom or abuse it by devotion to the idols of the tribe, the theater, the cave and the marketplace. . . . We may call these tendencies by any name we wish, but we do not escape their destructive influence by a conspiracy of silence concerning them.³⁷

Even if had he not held this view before, seeing the destruction caused by the "conspiracy of silence" in Germany forced Adams to insist upon explicitly naming and owning the specter of human evil in the world. Just as he could never stop thinking about, writing about, reflecting upon those experiences, so too, he would, from then on, be unequivocal in his insistence upon the necessity of *metanoia*. The undeniable presence of social and individual sin "is precisely the reason for the need of the redemptive, transforming power."³⁸

This brings us to one of the crucial notions in the writings of James Luther Adams. Because of his contentions that "no human achievement is complete," that humans are fallible creatures, that destructive forces are both individual and social realities, he insists that life necessitates decision-making. JLA repeatedly wrote about the human capacity and requirement to choose. In his 1941 Berry Street Conference address at the May Meetings of the American Unitarian Association, he argued:

Our actions must be of a certain kind in order to be relevant and also in order that we may avoid destruction. We cannot act merely in accordance with logical canons of an *a priori* order. Even our ethical ideals emerge through our experience of being and of history. . . . Yet, despite these conditioning factors, humanity is fated also to be free; we are compelled to make decisions. For we can transcend our situation and in some measure we can freely change it; we can even change ourselves.³⁹

He echoes that assertion again and again: "we humans must *choose*. We cannot escape making a choice . . ." ⁴⁰ "Being a human being means that one has to take the risk of making a decision." ⁴¹ Reflecting on the anti-Nazi movement, he states: "So the word *decision* became a kind of slogan in these circles: You have to make a decision and not be content with apathy, for that is a decision by default." ⁴²

Alongside the prominence of "choice" in his writings is the related notion of "commitment." Again, in his Berry Street lecture he insists:

the decisive quality of a personality is its commitment, for the basic commitment determines the self and its interests, instead of being determined by them. ⁴³

These absolutely crucial qualities—choice and commitment—are what JLA found underrepresented in, and even absent from, religious liberalism. To return to an earlier citation, Adams deplored this neglect in his critique: "The element of . . . decision, so much emphasized in the Gospels, has been neglected by religious liberalism . . . We liberals are largely an uncommitted and therefore a self-frustrating people." ⁴⁴

Significantly, JLA contended that a call for decision and commitment is not at odds with liberalism's emphasis on freedom. Is freedom, as some liberal religionists seem to imply, equated with keeping one's options open, trying to hear all sides with (purported) objectivity, refusing to make definitive claims? Returning to the Commission on Appraisal citation, is freedom evidenced by a congregation's intent to focus primarily on affirming its members as they are and, thereby, to resist calling for "a turning about or a turning around?" These tendencies do not, in Adams' estimation, represent real freedom. "Freedom, at its most profound levels" Adams declared, "is ironically, closer to responsibility and purpose than to license and anomie." ⁴⁵

To this list of conceptual influences on James Luther Adams' thinking about the import of *metanoia*, we must consider an additional and particularly religious notion. Though he clearly identified himself as a religious liberal, JLA, as we have seen, was often at odds with the tenor of religious liberalism. Perhaps nowhere is this conflict more evident than in Adams' understanding of the inherent and unavoidable quality of judgment that is always present in authentic religion.

In his memoir, JLA offers a complementary summary of Erich Fromm's comments in a visit to the Harvard campus by that prominent psychologist. In this summary comment, (which is about as far from the notion of religion as confirmation as one can get,) Adams contends:

[R]eligion properly understood is not a sanction for easy inspiration or easy conscience, but rather the source of radical questions regarding our behavior, not only as individuals but also as members of collectives and corporations.⁴⁶

This too hearkens back to JLA's early religious background. He recalls that the image of God he received from his father was one of both love and judgment. "God's judgment," he learned early on, "extended not only to one's personal existence, but also to social existence."⁴⁷ While his own notion of God would be dramatically transformed over time, Adams never lost the sense that our individual and corporate lives are lived under a sense of divine scrutiny and expectation. "The first tenet of the free person's faith," he therefore argued, "is that our ultimate dependence for being and freedom is upon a creative power and upon processes not of our own making."⁴⁸ In this same essay JLA makes an assertion that he often repeated as both a guide for, and a critique of, liberal religion:

Doctrinal tests are not the way to determine the character of the community, but if the community possesses no recognizable form and criterion (except that it offers absolute freedom) then it will be utterly undependable.⁴⁹

We hear, in this central assertion, the way in which, for JLA, the religious community must be both free and responsible, both affirming and judging, at work to both confirm and to convert.

To offer acceptance without responsibility, to offer the comfort of welcome without the challenge to change, ultimately undermines a religion's dependability and discount its claims to freedom.

Thus we see how James Luther Adams' personal experiences and conceptual understandings led him to his conviction that *metanoia* is necessary, that "something like conversion is essential." He could not hold his views that revelation is continuous, that humans are fallible, that "sin" and "evil" are ubiquitous individual and social realities, that choice and commitment are essential, and that religion and ultimate reality are both accepting and judging, without also concluding that conversion—that comprehensive life transformation—is an absolutely requisite part of religious experience.

Once again, JLA did not mean by "conversion" some once-and-for-all decision. His summons was not to a singular, emotion-laden experience of religious resolve. Experience and reflection combined in him in such a way that he insisted upon ongoing conversion:

I would make a generalization: *metanoia* should be a continuing process. The function of a vital church would be *metanoia* as a continuing process. There should be an increasing awareness, a raising of consciousness with regard to the evils around us. There should be a specification of evils . . . there should be moments of commitment . . . ⁵⁰

This citation both summarizes his view of *metanoia* and provides a bridge into a brief exploration of the implication of his views for the religious community. If church as confirmation of who one has always been is unsatisfactory, then what did JLA proffer as a more adequate conception?

" . . . the function of the church"

James Luther Adams spent the majority of his professional career in the academic community and a significant portion of his energy in the academic tasks of teaching and writing. And yet, Adams was a theologian whose efforts were always intended to have a practical, and

especially institutional impact. He was no esoteric thinker, sequestered away in some ivory tower. Rather, JLA forever sought, not simply to explore the implications of his thinking about community, but to embody his reflections in the life and message of actual communities. While his passionate pursuit of justice and freedom led him to both join and found a wide variety of associations, his primary focus was always upon the church, especially the liberal church.

Thus, his message on conversion was never offered simply as an item in a systematized theology. Rather, Adams intended his thinking to change the structure of the American Unitarian Association, the Unitarian Universalist Association, and the local Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist congregations to which he belonged throughout the span of his lengthy life.

So, we can best understand JLA's insistence upon *metanoia* as it is expressed in his larger view of the role of the church. While these implications have been implicit throughout this exploration, I now offer two of the many passages in Adams' writings in which he is most explicit about the purpose of the religious community.

JLA asserts:

The free church is that community which is committed to determining what is rightly of ultimate concern to persons of free faith. . . . When alive, it is the community in which men and women are called to seek fulfillment by the surrender of their lives to the control of the commanding, sustaining, transforming reality. It is the community in which women and men are called to recognize and abandon their ever-recurrent reliance upon the unreliable. It is the community in which the life-spirit of faith tries to create and mold life-giving, life-transforming beliefs, the community in which persons open themselves to God and to each other and to commanding, sustaining, transforming experiences from the past, appropriating, criticizing, and transforming tradition and giving that tradition as well as newborn faith the occasion to become relevant to the needs of a time.⁵¹

One hears in this eloquent description the distance that lies between JLA's view of religious community and that of those who would hail Unitarian Universalist congregations as places where people go to realize "This is what I always was." His language of "surrender," of a

"transforming reality," of the "call to recognize and abandon reliance upon the unreliable," of the creation and molding of "life-transforming beliefs," of "transforming experiences," and of a "criticizing and transforming tradition" is replete with the implications of conversion. To be sure, as "life-giving" and "sustaining," this church includes affirmation along with its call for change. But, without calling for and embodying *metanoia* as an ongoing and comprehensive experience, one that results in a change of both understanding and action, the church cannot, in Adams' estimation, be a faithful community.

Perhaps it is now appropriate to give James Luther Adams the final say in this exploration of the concept of conversion in his writings. In an even more compelling description of the liberal religious community, one that so clearly demonstrates his sense of *metanoia* as essential, JLA writes:

[T]he function of the church is to bring people into communion with a group wherein the divine power of transformation and the ethical standards rooted in it are operative. When we say operative, we mean that this power is capable of changing people, of eliciting commitment to a way of life that makes a difference in their attitude toward themselves, others, and God . . . Only by some such commitment can we, in Channing's words, be always young for liberty. And without such a commitment, we become content with "philosophic" objectivity and "distance" that insulate us from the source of true vitality, from openness to the power of the Spirit. We become attached to the forms that have given us our cherished securities . . .⁵²

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