James Luther Adams: Religious Liberalism at the Intersection of History and Biography

George W. Pickering / The University of Detroit Mercy

When Ronald Reagan talked about the "L" word, everyone knew what he meant. Well, at least everyone knew he meant to suggest no compliment to anything represented by it. He intended to conjure up the prospect of a creature who ate your taxes, endangered your job, disrespected your opinions, trashed your values, opposed religion, had run and expanded the government for most of the twentieth century, and was thus responsible for most everything that ails us. By the time Reagan was through with it, everyone except the few liberals who had not jumped the ship or gone into hiding "knew" what the "L" word meant. Taxandspendliberals had become one word in the world of political rhetoric, synonymous with secular humanists. Such was the Conservative Revolution in the English language and its usages.

Gone were the days when liberalism of *some* sort was thought to be the historic source of democracy and human rights in partnership with deep religious impulses.

In fact, of course, liberalism has been an exceedingly complex and internally contentious movement, identifiable as an historic force at least since the sixteenth century. When or where or whether it has ever been "in power" is a good question. But most liberals in the twentieth century have thought of themselves as struggling against powers much greater than themselves.

This theme was laid down early in the century by William James in a speech to the New England Anti-Imperialist League:

> In every national soul there lie potentialities of the most bare-faced piracy, and our own American soul is no exception to the rule. Angelic impulses and predatory lusts divide our heart exactly as they divide the hearts of other countries. It is good to rid ourselves of cant and humbug, and to know the truth about ourselves. As a group of citizens calling our country to return to the principles it was suckled in, I believe that we Anti-Imperialists are already a back number. . . The country has once for all regurgitated the Declaration of Independence and the Farewell Address and it won't

> swallow again immediately what it is so happy to have vomited up. . .

This makes the old liberalism and the new liberalism of our country two discontinuous things. The older liberalism was in office, the new is in opposition. Inwardly it is the same spirit, but outwardly the tactics, the questions, the reasons and the phrases have to change. American memories no longer serve as catchwords. The great international and cosmopolitan liberal party, the party of conscience and intelligence the world over, has, in short, absorbed us; and we are only its American section, carrying out the war with the powers of darkness here, playing our part in the long, long campaign for truth and fair dealing which must go on in all countries of the world until the end of time. Let us cheerfully settle into our interminable task. Everywhere it is the same struggle under various names - light against darkness, right against might, love against hate. The Lord of Life is with us, and we cannot permanently fail.

This is more like the "world of liberalism" as James Luther Adams came upon it, took up residence within it and decided to champion the cause. His life is a case study in the travails of liberalism and especially of religious liberalism in twentieth century America, and beyond. In 1901 he was born in Ritzville, Washington, a land of dusty farms and down-home religion, far from the agitations of William James' international and cosmopolitan liberal party. He died in 1994 in Cambridge Massachusetts, across the street from the Harvard Divinity School, one of the bastions of liberalism if ever there was one, where he had enrolled as a student seventy years before.

How this son of a dedicated, biblical literalist preacher-father made his way to the dread Harvard Divinity School is the story, first, of a very entrepreneurial boy who kept testing the boundaries set by his family and who, the more he did it, the more he found the lure of the wider world too enticing to resist. In high school he found himself having to support the family because of the combination of his father's health and his father's beliefs. He worked for the railroad and then he took the railroad out of town, off to the University of Minnesota on the strength of connections he had made workin' on the railroad.

When he arrived at the University of Minnesota, he had not left his religious fundamentalism behind. But as his student years progressed, his obsession with religious ideas increased, even as his hostility to the religious ideas with which he had grown up surfaced. Finally, one of his professors put him on the spot right in class by saying he was destined, if ever anyone was, to be a minister. Shocked, Adams went to see the man. His name was Frank Rarrig. He taught speech and he was a Unitarian. He told Adams that, as far as he could see, Adams was never going to be happy until he came to terms with religious ideas. The problem was,

Rarrig told him, that he did not know what the options were. He was hung up on what he used to believe (and his family still did). Rarrig talked with some Unitarians and arranged a scholarship for Adams at the Harvard Divinity School, should he want it. Adams was exhilarated by the prospect. By the time he got to the Harvard Divinity School, he was already a Unitarian and already a critic as well as a missionary of religious liberalism.

He arrived in Cambridge as a convert to religious liberalism, "the freedom of the Christian mind and conscience in a just order of society." At the core of his commitment, even from his student days, was the idea that liberal religion was the true heir and the best representative of the historic Christian tradition in the modern world. The rest of his life was spent criticizing, expounding and extending the substance and the reach of liberal religion. That was his vocation from the time he turned his eyes toward Cambridge during his last year as an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota. He never wavered from that vocation, not as a divinity student (1924-1927), nor as a Unitarian pastor (1927-1935), nor as a professor at Meadville/Lombard Theological School and the Federated Theological Faculty at the University of Chicago (1936-56), nor at any of his subsequent posts at the Harvard Divinity School (1957-1968), Andover-Newton Theological School (1969-1972), nor on his returns to Meadville and Chicago in the 1970s. He retired from several institutions, but never from his vocation.

Now I mean vocation in the full theological sense. He was called of God and he answered that call with his complete commitment, however insufficient his powers may have been for the task. It was not, after all, a task for one man alone, and he knew that. He was a man sent by God to call others into the Lord's covenant, not primarily into membership in a liberal church, but into the covenant of free and equal, responsible and related human beings. That covenant was like the Promised Land to him as he wandered and worked his way through the wilderness of liberal churches in this country and around the world. It was a covenant which God had made with humanity, a covenant which promised both deliverance and fulfillment to any and all who would give themselves to the creative quest for a wider democracy by accepting the judgment against their egotistical self absorption and owning the grace of the new possibilities which thereby presented themselves. Giving concrete testimony to both the reality and the promise of that covenant was his vocation and, as he understood it, the true vocation of the liberal churches.

In any era but his own, Adams was a man who would have proclaimed, "Thus saith the Lord." And some of us, at least, would have said, "Amen!" But that was not the style of the academic community in his time or ours - though it

did and does accept equivalent pronouncements in alternative languages from much less reliable sources. Nor was that the language of liberal religion in mid-twentieth century, lost as it was in the subjectivism, individualism and nationalism of wherever it found itself.

Calling liberal religion back from that abyss to an objective world of historic responsibility in which the divine is truly present, both in its judgment against sin and ignorance and in its gracious and redeeming presence, was central to the theistic humanism which Adams preached and taught. By the same token, he was relentless in his persistent unveiling the god-like pronouncements of would-be secular humanists and disguised polytheists. Good faith required a receptiveness to the prophetic word of judgment against all false and partial faiths and against the institutions which they sustained, beginning with those regarded as liberal. Judgment and grace were not two different things for two separate worlds. They were an event in history which opened human beings to their own full possibilities and therefore to a deeper knowledge of their own partial understandings and flawed lives. "Thus saith the Lord."

In an age when willfulness passes for faith, the liberal religious voice has seemed weak to others and, worse yet, riddled with doubt about the validity of its own message. For Adams, its message was simple and profound; but it was easily lost even on those who would be its proponents. To serve God is to have a principle of self-correction. A deceptively simple-sounding and ordinary thing, a principle of self-correction, yet it is the heart of religious liberalism because God is the principle of self-correction, confronting human beings with their own shortfalls and downfalls (judgment) while at the same time opening up to them their own prospects for redemption (grace.) Liberal religious faith is not a faith in the sufficiency of the self but in the existential depth, the historic possibilities and the eschatological reality of the covenant of all being, which is to say, the inexhaustible possibilities of friendship even in the midst of enmity, absurdity, injustice and the egoism of person, place, gender, social class, race - any of the partial goods in which human beings can take inordinate, destructive and self-righteous pride.

When he arrived at the Harvard Divinity School in 1924, it was a liberal school. It was committed to the historical critical method in the study of all religions. Adams embraced the method and never gave it up, but he launched immediately on a critique of the individualism which seemed to go with it. To be properly applied, it seemed to him that the method should not terminate in a relativism of abstract religious ideas from which individuals might choose those which pleased them most. It should shed some light on present as well as past social and institutional conditions. To see how others had been conditioned and

limited by their own times was not enough. If otherwise well-meaning people in times past had hidden their own faults from themselves under idealistic justifications, then why should moderns consider themselves exempt? If historical inquiry could expose the power of incomplete ideas to blind those who held them to the limits their own freedom and self-understanding, then why not take it as a warning to search out the blinding glow of modern ideas and ideals?

Adams left the HDS complaining that the religious liberalism of the churches was class-bound, individualistic, and inattentive both to its own social location and to the social issues swirling about them. But the fact is that he had cast his lot with religious liberalism, for all its perceived weaknesses, rather than with liberal humanism. While still in the Divinity School he had become very close with Irving Babbitt, the literary critic and doyen of the academic humanists. Adams appreciated Babbitt's cosmopolitan approach to literature and history, his critique of Romantic Individualism, his attention to the "voluntaristic" tradition of writing interpretive of the human condition. In this tradition (Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Tillich, to cite only a few theologians) reality is understood as dynamic and the will is the decisive element in human nature. But he could not agree with Babbitt's banishment of the gods from serious discourse. Babbitt loved Augustine and translated the Buddhist *Dharmaparda*, but he treated their religious reflections and expressions as trivial addenda to their wisdom. Adams, on the other hand, concluded that humanism was not defensible apart from a theism, apart from a metaphysical concept of God to whom all things were relative. The alternative seemed to him to be a wanton relativism which could only be resolved by a resolute, but groundless, willfulness.

This is what he found in Heidegger, in the Nazis, and even in Barth - not to equate them all - and across Germany in the thirties. In his mind Tillich, Otto, Leese, and Schweitzer were exceptions. And in Troeltsch, who had died in 1923, he found someone who brought together all his concerns, maybe not fully worked out - that was asking too much. But here he found a healthy historicism which combined an attention to the ways in which religious ideas both qualified and were qualified by their social and institutional setting. To focus on their time-bound character one did not need to deny their possible witness to the eternal. In fact, Adams admired Troeltsch's insistence that the historian's work is not finished until the questions of truth and value have actually been raised and faced, difficult as they may be to resolve even partially. While Adams drew heavily in his own work from Troeltsch's colleague and friend, Max Weber, he embraced Troeltsch more because Troeltsch refused to let go of the question of truth and to settle for an historical relativism. For Troeltsch as for Adams, one did not study religious ideas simply to find out what kind of work they had done in the past. There was always

a question of what value they might have for all time. And that seemed to depend on what was true in them. If people are universally willful, then what distinguishes some from others is the range and the content of the ideas they are willful about and the manner in which they exert their wills. Even in a world of clashing wills, reason still had a substantial, if difficult, role to play.

His trip to Germany in 1936 crystallized these convictions with the force of a revelation. Even before that trip Adams had complained that religious liberals had lost any sense of sin. They were obsessed with ideas of the sublime which, for middle class liberals, had degenerated into a superficial and self serving belief in an underlying and progressive harmony of life. Those religious liberals, who only wanted to hear about how much everything was getting better, were caught up in a celebration of middle class comfort as if it were a spiritual achievement which allowed them to transcend both Greek and Hebrew warnings of the flaws which beset the human spirit in all seasons. Yes, he had said things like that. But in Germany he stared into the Face of Evil and he was never the same again.

Adams went looking for his Harvard classmate, Peter Brunner, who had been uncharacteristically unresponsive to Adams' correspondence. He found Brunner's wife in a hospital, openly fearful of being visited by him, made arrangements for a clandestine meeting with Brunner who was about to be released from a concentration camp where he had been sent because of his activities in the Confessing Church. The meeting took place and Adams traveled with Brunner as he resumed his pastoral and teaching responsibilities in the underground. Adams witnessed first-hand the tactics of the fascists, the ease with which the general population accepted them, the heroic courage of the pastors, seminarians and congregations of the underground church and their mostly secret supporters, some in high places. He signed on to do what he could while he was there, returning again in 1938 only to find himself under Gestapo surveillance. He took stock of the fact that the liberal churches were no more immune to the blandishments of fascist nationalism and anti-Semitism than the conservative ones. He argued with his friend Brunner about the role of the churches and the clergy in the war that was impending. It seemed incredible to him that Brunner, a leader in the underground church and a target of the fascist regime, was still thinking it was his duty to be a chaplain in the event of war. (It was only after the war that Adams heard from Brunner that he had changed his mind and openly preached resistance.) But it was back home in America that he could raise his voice in a land which he had come to view through new eyes.

Adams returned from Germany to begin his teaching career in Chicago. He was a man on fire, on the lookout for any seed of fascism and any weakness in answering it which he could find. If Father Coughlin was spouting anti-Semitism

on the radio, Adams would take to the radio, the pulpit, the lectern, and the printed word, lest it go unanswered. If pacifists could not see what it was going to require to deal with Hitler, then he would take aim at them as well. He would not allow to pass as high-minded idealism what was nothing but squeamishness about the exercise of power. He was furious that religious liberals had given up their claim to the full resources of the Christian tradition because this renunciation enfeebled their minds and left the tradition to these others who wrapped themselves in its apparent legitimacy.

In his 1941 essay on "The Changing Reputation of Human Nature," he formulated his response to "the fact that the so-called Age of Liberalism has culminated in a terrifying crisis." He was not about to exonerate liberalism in any of its forms, political, economic or religious. But he thought it "advisable for the sake of clarity to follow the practice of referring to the eighteenth and nineteenth-century philosophy of individualism and progress as Liberalism (with a capital L) and of referring to the ongoing broader movement for the freedom of the Christian mind and conscience in a just order of society as liberalism (with a small l)." In his mind, it was this broader liberalism which had more resources for self-correction and cultural creativity and which had a legitimate claim to draw from and represent biblical religion in the modern world. It was at once an appeal to liberal religionists to take up their whole heritage and to assume a prophetic stance in relation to a culture gone wrong, partly under their own guidance.

Let others, he said, construct "a scapegoat that they call 'liberalism'.... [but] it is the essence of liberalism to criticize itself " Religious liberalism was continuous with the Christian tradition, but it was also supported, he claimed, by "a new idea of the character of the universe and of man as a part of that universe." And while all sorts of fault and tragedy could be laid at the middle-class-bound character of all liberalism, "this criticism does not involve a repudiation of the liberal ideal of liberating the human spirit from the bondage of economic, social and ecclesiastical tyrannies." It was a mistake for anyone to have supposed that this liberation could be achieved through some kind of leave-me-alone "autonomy," or without conflict or through unambiguous progress without tragedy. These were the versions of liberalism that had brought discredit on the name and disaster to the human community. They left history out of their account of the human spirit, just as their detractors abandoned creativity in their account of the human condition.

> Through the use of this creative freedom man expresses the highest form of vitality that existence permits. Indeed, since this creativity is a manifestation

> of a divinely given and divinely renewing power, we say that man is created in the image of God, that is, he participates in the divine creativity. This and not reason alone is the basis for the liberal's faith in man, and no change in the reputation of human nature could involve a denial of this fact without repudiating the very essence of the liberal doctrine of man.
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> Because of this freedom, human history not only exhibits a singularity that transcends all a priori conceptions of the intellect, it also provides a more complex and spiritual form of conflict than that to be found on the level of nature. For history is a theater of conflicts in which the tensions between the will to mutuality and the will to power appear in their most subtle and perverse forms . . .
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> When we say that history is tragic, we mean that the perversions and failures in history are associated precisely with the highest creative powers of man and thus with his greatest achievements.

Liberalism should, therefore, claim no exemption for itself or anyone else from the tragedies of history, nor should it try to evade its responsibility for them. If liberals did not like to hear this from the prophets or from the cross because of " a 'cultured' antipathy or a 'philosophical' hauteur toward the Bible," Adams advised them to "Leave your Bibles closed then, and open your Sophocles."

But he reminded them, there was a lot at stake for the world in the recovery of a more profound liberalism.

The picture of man as a purely logical machine, who first thinks of some desirable end and then calculates the means by which this end can be attained, has given way to an infinitely more complex social concept of man as a creature of impulse and passion and emotional preference, who only through strenuous social discipline can transcend his incompatible desires and direct them toward some intelligent end. Indeed, reason is now seen to occupy an ambiguous position of being at the same time the umpire among unruly, conflicting impulses and the producer of ideologies, that is, the rationalizing instrument whereby selfish interest is given a plausible but false justification. . . This destruction of the older belief in the immaculate conception of ideas is for the liberal a far more significant turn than the destruction of belief in the immaculate conception of Jesus."

The human spirit was beset with contradictions which could not be cured and these were rooted in its freedom, "a freedom to exercise the infinitely higher powers of human nature in terms of creative love, and a freedom to waste them in mere lassitude and triviality, or pervert them for the sake of a will to power." This was no moral problem, though it was the source of moral problems. It was a given in human nature. While in every exercise of freedom one has the possibility of seeking mutuality, one also has the necessity of seeking power. What makes sin "original" is not that Adam and Eve, the first human beings, did it and thereby corrupted the rest of us. It is that this possibility of merely seeking power for the self and the proclivity to do only that is part of our very own freedom. His message was clear. It was time for liberals to face up to the historic complications and deep spiritual implications of freedom.

To long for a time when freedom will not be perverted is to long for a time when life shall have lost its meaning, for the moment freedom can no longer be perverted, it will no longer be freedom. This is not pessimism; it is simply the recognition of the fact that freedom, the basis of meaningful human existence, is also the ever-present occasion for the perversion of existence.

That was why Adams was convinced that liberalism had to recover its religious heritage. It was god-given freedom which made redemption an issue and faith in God's creativity and covenant a live option in the midst of a bungled existence and the tragedies of history. A liberalism without a real God of judgment and grace was reduced to an irrational willfulness which might call itself freedom but only by avoiding the question of its own character and refusing the responsibilities of its own exercise. There is some kind of love even in the most brutal will to power; and human beings become what they love. And above all, their loves stand in need of self correction, "but the raising of the affections is a much harder thing to accomplish than even the education of the mind. . . This 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."

The defense of freedom required a credible call to repentance as much for liberals as for Nazis, and maybe more so for liberals because it was going to require the commitment and leadership of the liberals to deal effectively with the Nazis. There were, after all, plenty of people who did not see what was so bad about anti-Semitism, so awful about crushing socialists and jailing gays and gypsies, so wrong with a strong police reaction to disorder, so undesirable about a strong leadership principle or untoward about expecting churches to be engines of loyalty to their nation. "We liberals, " he lamented, "are largely an uncommitted and therefore self-frustrating people. Our first task, then, is to restore to liberalism

its own dynamic and its own prophetic genius.... And when that has taken place, we shall know that it is not our wills alone that have acted; we shall know that the ever-living Creator and Re-creator has again been brooding over the face of the deep and out of the depths bringing forth new life."

Religious liberals, in losing a real God who transcended their ideals and imaginations and was the source of their ideals and imaginations, who brought them to their knees in repentance and then lured them into the creative and re-creative ways of a the covenant, had lost their faith. Moral exhortation would not suffice. Morality and justice were always incomplete even when they were not faulty. Only from the stance of religious faith could one comprehend both the limits and the importance of morality and justice without giving in to cynical relativism and power-play impotence.

Liberals, he was sure, did have something to defend and advance if they were properly chastened by coming to terms with their own complicity in the tragedy of history. But that required two things: enlightened minds and raised affections. Of course, those were the armies that had been arrayed against each other for two hundred years in American religious history. Unitarianism was the descendent of the "enlightened minds" regiment. Had there ever been a "raised affections" version of religious liberalism? Perhaps there had. Adams called it "the feeling for democracy," but complained that it was lost. In his critique of liberalism, Adams found the loss of this "feeling for democracy" the most serious of its faults and the most difficult to correct, even to imagine and propose a correction. It was this "feeling for democracy" that had opened up for Adams in Germany, that he had seen operating, even if not articulated, among the Confessing Church members, that he had seen smothered in the acquiescence to the Nazi regime of most of the German people, that he found missing in the complacent, if not downright supportive reaction of many Americans to the rise of Hitler in the 1930s and that he found threatened by the "raised affections" of the Coughlanites and other American right wingers.

Without the "feeling for democracy," liberalism and the radical freedom for which it stood - a certain independence from God, not as sin but as part of God's creation of humanity - was only marginally better than the alternatives. Adams was at an impasse in his thought and he spent the rest of his life trying to find a way out of it. This "feeling for democracy" was the substance of liberalism and, in Adams' mind, the substance of Christianity as well. Feeling for democracy was the modern translation of "the love of Christ," Agape. But without a theory of revelation, it could not finally be accounted for, articulated, represented, advanced. When he was writing a piece on “Legitimacy” for the *Encyclopedia of Religion* , the last of his really major articles, he wrote to Milton Konvitz that he just hoped

he could get the thing done without having to deal with the troublesome issue of revelation. At that point he had been encountering, avoiding, driven by that troublesome issue for fifty years.

There is an ongoing argument whether American culture was more decisively shaped in mid century by its response to the Great Depression or to World War II. In the case of Adams and, I think, American liberals generally, the war was more formative and reformative because it was a confrontation with evil, and liberals as well as others, were split in their understanding of what that evil was. For Adams it was fascism and anything like it and anything that might lead to it and anything that might prevent groups and individuals from mounting their full opposition to it. Having seen its face in Germany, he looked for its traces everywhere. In "The Changing Reputation of Human Nature," he made this surveillance of the human condition a theological task because sin and evil were obviously not just German problems; and liberals were not the only ones who had trouble identifying them

Back in the U.S. Adams warned "The Axis is Longer Than You Think." For his efforts in that piece the US military stopped asking his help in training and orienting officers on the war aims. To some extent, he said, the United Nations themselves had to take some responsibility for blocking the development of democracy in Germany. At home the "Poll-tax" Democrats were allied with the anti-labor front. Labor was being asked for give-backs while industries were being subsidized by the government. "Even during the war for the Four Freedoms the proportion of Negroes on relief is increasing" and some AFL unions refused Negroes membership while the armed forces practiced segregation. The country was docile in the face organized anti-Semitism. "The old American Way of Life is not what we are defending in this war. That ruse will not work. . . It will not work because too many people are convinced that there will be little gain if the short Axis of Berlin, Rome and Tokyo is broken and the longer Axis of economic injustice and racial discrimination is not broken at home. Total war for democracy must include the struggle for democracy within the democracies." For him, the war raised the whole liberal democratic agenda for a just order of society to an urgent status.

In his 1944 essay, "Liberal Religion in a United World," he said "The decisive question is whether religious liberals can effectively assist in the organization of economic and political power for the liberation of the underprivileged and oppressed who are struggling for a world of shared natural resources and of justice for all." This would have to be done, he warned, against a "rising tide of anti-Negroism and anti-Semitism."

Beginning in the early 1940s Adams was among the founders of the Independent Voters of Illinois, a forerunner of the Americans for Democratic Action, an organization dedicated to providing an electoral alternative to machine politics, Chicago-style. He remained on officer in the IVI as long as he remained in Chicago. It became, among other things, the political base for Senator Paul Douglas. He also associated with the National Council for a Democratic Germany which drew down the wrath of super-patriots who believed that talking about how a peace should be made undercut the war effort. From 1943 to 1967, The Red Squad of the Chicago Police department kept a file on his activities.

In 1942, he assumed responsibility for teaching the course, "The Church and the Social Order." Until then his teaching had mostly been in the areas of psychology and philosophy of religion. He had always steered his teaching in the direction of the social psychology and the social philosophy of religion, but he found all his interests better integrated in the context of "The Church and the Social Order." By 1952, this had become one of the Fields in the Federated Theological Faculty, no longer a course but a field of study, one of the ways to do theology. While he worked on the history of natural law theories and the varieties of religious socialism, translated Tillich's essays on "The Protestant Era" and brought them out, he remained active politically in the IVI, supported CIO unions, became involved in a strike at Montgomery Ward, and was on the board of Claude Williams Institute for Applied Religion. Throughout all this he and his wife Margaret pushed for the desegregation of the University of Chicago Lab School and Hospital.

It was this combination of academic concerns and community activities which he hoped to combine in his new field of Ethics and Society. It included theological and philosophical ethics, Biblical studies, and the history of Christian social teachings. Students were required to delve into the study of one particular period in church history with emphasis on the interplay of social and institutional factors with ethical and theological ideas. In addition, students were expected to become conversant with the social sciences at least to the point of understanding where they and social ethics could be mutually enlightening. Studies of Marx and Marxism were also required as well as some original empirical research on specific social problems.

He reached out to his counterparts in Germany, England and Japan to draw from their experience and to provoke the development of similar studies in those countries. He remained active in the International Association for Religious Freedom, supported the American Christian Palestine Committee and the Societe´ European de Culture. In 1952 he traveled to 12 countries, meeting old friends and acquiring new ones. On his return to America, the Unitarians in Little Rock

withdrew their invitation for him to speak. He had been named by an Illinois legislator as one of eleven subversives at the University of Chicago. Through the machinations of one of his former students, The Disciples Church in Little Rock invited him. Just as he had supposed, the religious liberals were not all to be found in one place

It is true that Adams was much more concerned with the harm that anti-communists might do to American democracy than he was with what communists might do. They were outcasts anyway. It was the McCarrans and the McCarthys and the people who let them get away with their inquisitions that bothered him. Whenever that got going, he saw the specter of fascism and a weakness to resist it. In his mind, that weakness was worse than the demagogues who worked it. It showed a dangerous softness in the religious liberalism on which he was sure democracy rested. He was a man of the ACLU, not the HUAC.

And he was a man of boundless energy. More and more throughout the fifties, his theory of voluntary associations began to crystallize as the middle term or middle principle between the multiple vocations which diverse individuals might have and the larger covenant in which they all might participate, as the engines of democracy and the embodiments of the human spirit. He was a man of the Left Wing of the Reformation, the Free Church in a Free State. Churches and other voluntary associations bore all the ambiguities of freedom. Yet they were the vehicles of creativity in the social order, revealing what people really cared about and giving them occasion to really care about each other and the conditions of their existence. He expounded on some of this in his William Belden Noble Lectures at the Harvard Divinity School in 1953, “Religious Forms of Organized Irrelevance, Social Consequences of Religious Belief, Conflicting Patterns of Group Life and Some Axioms for the Achievement of Relevance."

In 1957, Adams moved from Chicago to Cambridge where, in addition to his teaching in the Divinity School, he was also involved in a seminar in the Business School on Religion and Business Policy and in the Law School in a Seminar on Law and Religion. It seems that he lost interest in the Business Seminar because it tended toward an applied ethics. He was not comfortable with the Business School's famous "Case Method," with its focus on the immediate and the impending at the expense, he thought, of the enduring and the underlying. But the Religion and Law Seminar with Harold Berman went on for twenty years and reached for the depth at which Law and Gospel interacted, eventuating in the establishment in 1977 of the Council on Religion and Law.

Meanwhile he had been involved in the founding of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Association for the Teachers of Social Ethics in Seminaries. This latter was a milestone. Until the mid 1950's there could not

have been such an association, at least not much of one. In 1934, when Paul Douglas surveyed Protestant seminary curricula in America, he found that less than 5 per cent of the courses dealt with social ethics at all. But with Reinhold Niebuhr and John C. Bennett at Union , his brother H. Richard Niebuhr at Yale, Adams at Chicago for twenty years and then at Harvard, and Walter Muelder at Boston University (all advising doctoral students and each in his own way presenting a vision of the work to be done as a full-fledged theological task), the field of Christian social ethics had emerged and produced teachers and scholars from coast to coast and then some.

In 1958 Adams had a slight heart attack, but he assured his friend Leslie Pennington that he was "resting strenuously." He explained, "As I look back at the summer I have to confess it was a heavy one; Seminar at the Harvard School of Business, Colloquium of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, The Congress of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) in Chicago, The Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions in Tokyo (two papers), lectures in Burma and India, and then trying to pick up the work here after returning two weeks following the opening of the Autumn term. " He neglected to mention that he had become the Director of B.D. studies for the Divinity School and was also that year the President of The Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. And yet, except for the extensive travel, his years had been like that since his return from Germany in 1938. It seemed that for every academic interest which he had, there was at least one corresponding national or international association.

Nor did he noticeably slow down. He built a Christian Social Ethics program at Harvard while continuing all his associations and agreed to give the Hibbert Lectures in England in 1963. All the while, the civil rights movement was gaining momentum and prominence in this country, a dream come true for Adams. In 1954 he tried to give some witness against white violence in Trumbull Park, a Chicago public housing project where African Americans were being driven out by white riots. He went down there by pre-arrangement to spend the night with one of the African American families, but the police feared the worst and took him back home. One of his students was deeply involved in the events in Little Rock, Arkansas; and in 1960 Adams had served on a commission to investigate Vanderbilt's treatment of James Lawson, a student in the Divinity School there who played a leadership role in the Nashville sit-ins. But as Tim Black of the Negro American Labor Council said, "Birmingham changed all time and space." And Adams was in Marburg, Germany visiting with friends he had known since the thirties when Birmingham took its place on world television.

> Newsreels depicting the notorious scenes in which American police officers, accompanied by dogs, were shown mowing down Negroes and others by the use of fire hose. Previously I had been perplexed by the reluctance of these anti-Nazi friends to talk about the crimes of the Nazi period. But now I was confronted by something I was compelled to talk about however little I was willing to take the blame. Yet I could not deny complicity in the venerable tradition of maltreatment of the Negro in the U.S.A.
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> How does one assess guilt of this sort?

I do not think Adams ever answered that question, though he wrestled with it ever after. Taking the blame, assessing the guilt, assigning and accepting culpability - these were the underlying issues which emerged with raw emotion in the sixties with fateful consequences for the liberal community, for the churches and for the then civil rights movement. Nixon squeaked into power in 1968 on a platform of self-righteous denial, aided and abetted by a liberal community splintered over the issue of culpability. It was a good question, how does one assess guilt of this sort - the culpability for collective, institutionalized, historic yet ongoing and morally blinding injustice in which individual acts and events seem only to be excerpts from some larger script whose meaning one cannot quite decipher. It was a good question all right, but not the kind of question liberals or anyone else wanted to deal with. The conservative caricature of liberals as guilt-ridden do-gooders has never really been answered with a structural analysis of culpability, a political agenda to deal with it and the spiritual vocation to a covenant of inclusive equality. Religious as well as political liberalism stalled, faltered and splintered in the face of this question of culpability.

The American script was at a turning point in the sixties, he was sure. Both the country at large and the liberals in particular were reeling from "The Shock of Recognition." But recognition did not always lead to resolution, reconciliation and the redemption of time. Adams pointed out that there are two classic patterns of response to the dramatic shock of recognition. On one hand there is the tragic Greek pattern of recognition followed by an endless and relentless fate, visited unto the nth generation, a recognition which does no good, seals a fate and cannot open a new future. It is a recognition of hopeless horror. On the other hand, there is the Hebrew and Christian prophetic call for a recognition of responsibility and for the changes of heart and behavior which would rectify the situation, reconcile the parties and redeem the time by breaking the fate, the fatalism and the fatality

which their own history had conspired to inflict on them. This was the Prophetic pattern of Judgment, Contrition and Grace. Which way would Americans go? It all depended on the status of the will to mutuality, not as an abstract but as an historic possibility.

As Adams wrote that essay, the shock was much more in evidence than the recognition. The civil rights movement set out to eradicate racism from American society; and while its victories were substantial and did change the whole system of racial protocols, it did not eradicate racism. In fact, it discovered racism in its own ranks. In a stunning reversal, the goal of integration became as suspect to social justice activists as it had ever been to committed bigots. Somehow a more inclusive covenant required at least a moment, an historic moment, of deliberate separation for group self development and the cultivation of difference. Inclusion, to be worth anything at all, required distance. It was a paradox. American religious liberals on both sides of the color line in the twentieth century had always opposed segregation. And in people like Adams, their support for black power in the sixties and African American distinctiveness could at best be provisional. Yes, empowerment was a liberal goal for all natural groups, African Americans, "other" Americans, women, and people of alternative sexual orientations. Equality requires empowerment; but, in every one of these cases, without the will to mutuality it is nothing but a will to power. In the late sixties he wrote in a note to himself, "The vitality of any religious movement depends on its power to recognize a new situation and galvanize conscience in the face of that new situation." The new situation as he saw it then required black empowerment, but it also required doing something about white racism and white culpability. For that part of his moral agenda, however, he was reduced to personal and interpersonal actions, just as the whole country was. The ground for institutional change had not been laid, not in the liberal religious (or even political) community certainly and not in the national community at large by any stretch of the imagination.

One of his students founded a group called FREE, the Fellowship for Racial and Economic Equality, a southern based operation dedicated to working with white evangelical working class people. Adams supported this effort from the beginning. Within a few years, it had become the Southeast Institute, an organization dedicated to transforming some of the techniques of psychotherapy into instruments of social and cultural change as well as personal renewal. That was a goal devoutly to be wished, and on that point Adams had been in significant correspondence with Erich Fromm for more than twenty years, a correspondence in which he was always on the lookout for any development in psychology or in therapy which might take an institutional turn. But he remained skeptical.

"Pietism," Adams' word for idealistic but inward-looking self preoccupation, was everywhere in the culture and the churches; and it was religious liberalism's most insidious enemy because it added idealism to the self's already loaded proclivity to turn away from mutuality. How could one address white racism without being swallowed up by the pietism which was part of it? It seems that for all its efforts, the Southeast Institute did not figure that out.

Adams always counseled "Taking Time Seriously" as a theological concern. On the one hand that meant seizing any opportunity to sharpen and expand "the freedom of the Christian mind and conscience in a just order of society." On the other hand, it meant realizing that there are seasons when the human spirit must wait upon the Lord for the fullness of time. American culture generally seemed to be progressively closing itself into the Greek pattern of racism as an endless and relentless fate during the decades which followed the shock of the sixties. Even for liberals, the will to "racial" mutuality was muted by the imbalances of power and the need to re-vision their ideals in the light of history. It was a time of re-positioning in the light of broken hopes.

When Adams left this country in 1936, he went first to England to work on a dissertation on the concept of the sublime. He ran into some difficulty with the materials he had intended to use; but after his months in Europe and his encounters in Germany, he never returned to that concept. Though he was at the time a student of Kittrege in the Department of English at Harvard, his interest was in the connection between ideas of revelation and ideas of the sublime. Germany cured him of that. He came home to work on Tillich, the beginning of a long and productive association for both of them. He tried an essay on Revelation in 1937 and was never satisfied with it. From the late sixties on, he was looking for a concept of the grotesque which might serve as a vehicle for making the idea of Revelation more intelligible in contemporary terms. His thought never quite came to closure on this. He thought of Charlie Chaplin's Tramp as a symbol of what he had in mind.

The Tramp was an outcast, whose pretentious and worn out and ill-fitting clothes sparked rejection and ridicule and obscured his gentle offer of affection and companionship in the midst of adversity. He seemed to be an embodiment of the grotesque, the right combination of the incongruous, unnatural and unexpected, always a bit out of context, but on reflection, quite revealing of the elements of humanity and inhumanity at work in the situation. Certainly the religious liberals of the Adams type have been the Tramps on the political and religious landscape, never withdrawing from engagement, holding out for a time when the will to mutuality might return and save us all, always looking and frequently enough being ridiculous.

I have an idea that men are just boys who got older. There is a story from Adams high school years that tends to confirm this. At the time a rift was opening between him and his father. As he recalled it many years later, this is what happened.

> I was having experiences in the world which were alien to him in many ways. He, for his part, felt that I was introducing too many abstractions into our discussion, that I failed not only to recognize that God had become flesh, but that he had also been crucified.
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> One evening after I had gone to bed, my father, recognizing that I had to arise at four o'clock to deliver newspapers, climbed the ladder in the closet that led up to where I slept in the attic. Making his way across the unboarded floor, to my surprise he crawled into bed with me and, taking me in his arms, expressed his fear that we had engendered a great distance between us. He assured me with an almost overpowering tenderness that he wanted us to remain in loving conversation with each other, no matter how much we disagreed.

That touching scene epitomizes the ecumenical hope of religious pluralism. But father and son were not able to realize that hope any more than American culture has. The father remained steadfast in his beliefs, so much so that he preferred to lose a son rather than sustain the loving conversation. It appears that all contact, let alone conversation, ceased when Adams entered the Harvard Divinity School, bastion of modernism, liberalism and all things not only alien but anathema to his father. But it also appears that the hope of a long and loving conversation across religious differences remained with the son no matter how difficult, and sometimes impossible, it proved to be. It was an eschatological hope and conviction that creative mutuality is a perennial, even if at the moment unlikely, possibility.

Adams liked to laugh and smile. Someone called him "The Smiling Prophet." But whenever I see those smiling pictures of him, I think of Charlie Chaplin: "Smile though your heart is breaking." Religious liberals of the Adams variety could have saved themselves a lot of heartbreak if they had just given up on their high hopes for a loving conversation across historic divides. But of course, that is what the smile was all about. They still believed it was possible, no

matter how unlikely at the moment. I suppose that is another way of "taking time seriously."´

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