

To the Editor of *The Journal of Liberal Religion*:

While reading the superb article and response about James Luther Adams by Kim Beach and Robin Lovin in the Spring 2006 edition, two things came to mind. JLA once corrected my doctoral thesis on William James by inviting me to read his article on James's methodological deficiency: "James's exclusive concern for 'the personal and private' in religion...neglects corporate religious experience with its institutional influences, disciplines, and responsibilities." Combine this with Robin Lovin's allusions to the similarity between Mircea Eliade and JLA, and one has a stinging critique of the modern liberal: "...Mircea Eliade's 'method' for studying the history of religion [was] 'read everything, remember everything you read, and be very, very smart.' Adams, I think, had pioneered the method before him."

Note the emphasis on the "religious." It is what distinguishes our task in the twenty-first century from Adams's task in the twentieth. He was teaching liberals to see the religious in the political through advocating a theological reading of culture. Now, though, theologically speaking, the liberal can't even read.

Adams was a Tillichian theologically. That is, to Adams as to many of us, theology is a creative enterprise practiced by identifying the revelations a particular faith tradition represents, analyzing the current existential situation within which one exists, and correlating those revelations to the existential situation to produce a creative understanding of what choices lie before people of faith. Kim explains this process better than I can:

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

This paragraph contains not only an accurate explanation of Adams's view of the task of theology, but also the way in which Adams's existential situation, and hence the conclusions he reached theologically as pertaining to his time, differ from our own. A little later Kim explains the concern of Adams for his time, one that no longer holds in the same way for ours:

Note that the book is not called "Transforming *Religious* Liberalism," for Adams was not only, or even primarily, concerned with "liberal religion," a tiny, sectarian outlook found among "we few." He held that it is just this inward-looking preoccupation that works to marginalize us within the larger religious and secular world. For a taste of his anguished and

sometimes angry critique of “liberal religion,” hear these words from his Berry Street Conference lecture—words no less true today than when he spoke them, in 1940:

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

Today, liberals are committed but still a self-frustrating people. Today liberals are committed to a political liberalism dressed up in religious vestments. They hold to liberal political policies and programs, religiously. And they do this largely out of a total ignorance of theology. Kim's interpretation that liberals are good at the existential situation, and his historical analysis of the collapse of the distinction of the secular and the sacred in liberal circles, are both on target. But we live in the aftermath of that collapse. In Adams's time liberal religionists were using the transformative capacity of religious symbolization to turn away from the political ramifications of their world and the existential choices for redemptive living in the face of those very real political demons. To "proclaim the judgment and the love of God" then required applying the revelations of a faith tradition to a different existential situation, in order to muster the courage to step out of an isolating self-obsession and into the world of choice and consequence.

So, for Adams, a pragmatist, and for the time he lived in, it was paramount that the concern William James evidenced for the variety of individual religious experience be balanced by seeing the "corporate religious experience with its institutional influences, disciplines, and responsibilities." Thereby could one see the "religious" hidden inside of Nazism and Marxism. Liberal *religionists* could see the religious (the ultimate, transformative capacities of human life) in the political, and how the political distorted God.

But in our time liberals have abandoned religious symbolization and its historical roots altogether. It is the distinctive way liberals today do not "take time seriously." Liberal religionists are "liberal" but not "religious." The political has swallowed the religious for them through their neglect of the Spirit. Liberals are psychological in their symbolizations. Liberals freely adopt the religious symbolizations of other cultures and the faiths they have produced. Liberals can be political and sociological in their language and analysis. And, like others of our time, liberals yearn to be transformed, desperately yearn to be transformed. But, when it comes to religious symbolization as it is derived from the faith of their forebears, liberal ignorance is their impotence. They want the fruits of a tree that they have not tended, do not nurture, and wonder even whether it exists! Liberals do not take the time of their faith tradition seriously enough to put themselves under its theological influence, the spiritual disciplines of language bequeathed to them by it, and the religious symbolizations that outlined the boundaries and aims of free community as a manifestation of the Spirit. Hence, it is the loss of the

religious that marks the modern liberal's particular situation brought about by the liberal's own abandonment.

Thus, like others today, the liberal has been co-opted by the idolatry of the times, but with a distinctive twist. Liberals have abandoned the revelation they represent and have abandoned the God they once extolled. But just like the fundamentalists, liberals have substituted the political for the religious. Fundamentalists exhibit Adams's prophecy about how politics blinds one from selfolatry. Liberals claim they can rid themselves of the judgment of God entirely. They long for spiritual transformation, but ignorance, not awe, has rendered them mute. Our times are held captive to the political. But, a disregard for history and an abandonment of the liberal *religious* way, marks our century and the existential situation as the liberal experiences it as different from JLA's.

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