James Luther Adams and the Spirit of Liberal Theology

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This occasion is beautiful, and rare, because very few theologians inspire a society that keeps alive their name and work. The Paul Tillich Society has been rolling for decades, and nine years ago a handful of us belatedly formed a Reinhold Niebuhr Society. But I can't think of another modern U.S. American theologian who has a society, and I am grateful to Stephen Mott and his board members, to Galen Guengerich and David Robb at All Souls Church, and to Kevin McGee and Joey Longley at Union Theological Seminary for organizing this year's gathering.

This is a great place to remember JLA, because Union is thriving today. Union has a strong, creative, and brilliant president in Serene Jones. We have an outstanding faculty infused by bunch of new faculty and led by a stellar dean, Mary Boys. We have Cornel West and James Cone--how great is that? Above all, Union has wonderfully passionate, contentious, and challenging students whom we boast about constantly, although in truth, they were already that way when they got here. JLA would have loved it here, and it would have gratified him to see that Union is flourishing.

Tonight I'm going to focus on one of his favorite topics, the spirit of liberal theology. I will try to say "Adams" a few times for the sake of variety, but his friends called him Jim and the rest of us called him JLA. JLA was by far the most influential Unitarian religious thinker of the twentieth century, even as he criticized the anti-theological humanism that dominated Unitarianism in his time. His youthful religion had almost ruined him for religion; he was grateful not to miss his theological career; and he was a legendary teacher of things theological and ethical.

He grew up in a fundamentalist home in Ritzville, Washington, where his father was a Baptist minister and farmer. James Carey Adams abhorred the liberal turn in the Northern Baptist Convention. He believed passionately in the fundamentals; he came to believe that dispensational doctrine was fundamental; and so he joined the Plymouth Brethren in 1914, when JLA was thirteen years old. J. N. Darby and the Scofield Reference Bible explained how to understand the Bible. The world is hopelessly

depraved. The Bible describes how the world will end. To be saved is to be snatched by God from the burning, and true Christians will be raptured out of the world.[1]

When JLA was fifteen his father caught typhoid fever and lost his health. Adams had to support his parents and two sisters. By day he studied at the University of Minnesota; by night he worked at the railroad. By his senior year JLA decided that he really hated religion. In a speech class he railed against religion in every speech. His teacher gently observed that perhaps he protested too much, because he was obsessed with religion. Since religion was his great passion, why not study it at a seminary, preferably a liberal one? That advice propelled JLA to enroll at Harvard Divinity School, on the theory that Harvard was sort-of Unitarian and thus the most liberal of all seminaries.

JLA studied theology with William Wallace Fenn, scripture with George Foot Moore and Henry Cadbury, and church history with Kirsopp Lake. He admired the scholarly seriousness of his teachers, but he chafed at their detachment. Did these people believe in anything besides scholarly achievement? It wasn't clear that they did. Harvard Yard beckoned to him, where Adams studied under Alfred North Whitehead and Irving Babbitt. Whitehead, at the time, was moving from physics and the philosophy of nature to metaphysics, although his religious views were still pretty vague, even to Whitehead. Babbitt was a famous literary critic—opinionated, cheeky, eccentric, conservative bordering on reactionary, and prolific.

Babbitt was obsessed with Rousseau, whom he despised. In class he pored over Rousseau's *Confessions* line by line, blasting its Romantic individualism as the triumph of stupidity. Babbitt told his students that Rousseau's celebration of spontaneity, naturalness, and individuality gave the modern age the idiotic philosophy it deserved. Rousseau epitomized what was wrong with modern thought. He played a major role in making the modern age stupid, so he had to be taken seriously, like a disease. On the other hand, admittedly, Rousseau wrote shimmering prose.

Babbitt believed in a universal humanism that spurned theology and metaphysics. Sophocles was his hero, and religion was useful only in teaching humanistic values and the "saintly" virtues of renunciation and peace. By that standard, the best religions were Roman Catholicism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. For Babbitt, humanism was about the triumph of the disciplined "higher will" over triviality and ignorance. He looked down on the Hebrew prophets, he persuaded JLA that Paul was

wrong about the bondage of the will, and he taught JLA to appreciate the Catholic doctrine of original sin. In politics, Babbitt was a Burkean defender of privilege and tradition. Babbitt took no interest in his students, except for the three or four that he selected every year to be his disciples. JLA was enthralled to be one of them. He questioned whether any congregation would pay him to preach Babbitt's gospel, and Babbitt advised him against ministry. Teaching was better than ministry because teachers gave exams. But JLA had come to Harvard to give religion a try, and he judged that the kind of ministry he had in mind could only take place in the Unitarian Church.

For eight years he ministered at Unitarian churches in Salem and Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, which did not go well. JLA struggled with a crisis of belief. Every week's sermon was torture for him, because he didn't know what he believed. Certainly he was some kind of humanist, but what kind? Christian? Post-Christian? Vaguely religious? Stoicist? He read theologians in search of an answer, plus Baron von Hugel, a scholar of mysticism. He went back to Harvard to study philosophy of religion, ruing that Babbitt had been right about ministry. If he couldn't preach religion, maybe he could teach it as an academic. In that frame of mind Adams joined the Harvard Glee Club and spent a lot of time with Johann Sebastian Bach. One night, singing Bach's *Mass in B Minor* at Symphony Hall in Boston, JLA had an epiphany: "My love of the music awakened in me a profound sense of gratitude to Bach for having displayed as through a prism and in a way that was irresistible for me, the essence of Christianity. Suddenly I wondered if I had a right even to enjoy what Bach had given me. I wondered if I was not a spiritual parasite, one who was willing to trade on the costly spiritual heritage of Christianity, but who was perhaps doing very little to keep that heritage alive. In the language of Kierkegaard, I was forced out of the spectator into the 'existential' attitude."[2]

To get unstuck, and thus go forward, JLA had to go back to the Christian tradition, and not as an observer. Grounding himself in Christianity was a spiritual necessity, but he could only do that on modern terms, allowing liberal theology to interpret Christianity. JLA respected the 17th and 18th century rationalists who paved the way to liberal theology. He took pride that a lot of them were Unitarians—Joseph Priestley, Samuel Clarke, Charles Chauncy and all that. But the rationalists lived in their heads. They did not historicize their own theories or even the biblical text, and they had an inflated idea of what reason could prove and cure.

Modern theology began with Kantians who deconstructed the scriptural text and with Immanuel Kant himself, who revolutionized modern thought by thinking rigorously about thinking. Kant redefined the limitations of reason, he made a colossal attempt to unite reason and experience, and he had a place for religion, in moral reason.

Kant compelled philosophers to stop conceiving the mind as a passive receptacle, arguing that the mind is active in producing experience out of its transcendental categories. We view the world as spatial and temporal because time and space are necessary conditions of experience, not because they are out there somewhere as objects of perception. We experience anything only in and through the pure forms of sensibility, which are space and time. These representations are unified by the understanding, which contains pure concepts that Kant, following Aristotle, called categories. Human reason makes sense of the world by applying its apriori categories of quantity, quality, relation and modality to phenomena perceived by the senses.

Before Kant came along, the march of materialism in philosophy seemed unstoppable. Kant stopped it in its tracks by dethroning the things of sense, showing that powers of mind are fundamental to human life. On the one hand, metaphysics had a limited role in Kant's thought, and so did religion. On the other hand, Kant rehabilitated metaphysical reason around two conceptual pivots: The ideality of space and time, and the idea of a knowable and yet supersensible freedom. The idea of freedom belongs to practical reason and is the basis of true morality.

Emphatically, Kant based religion on morality, not the other way around, because religion is essentially moral and it has no claim to knowledge except by its connection to moral truth. In the realm of faith, Kant argued, something has to happen. Faith is personal and subjective, holding convictions that by their nature cannot be proved. The idea of God is a condition for the possibility of the highest good, the ground of moral truth. We cannot pursue the good if we do not believe it is real and attainable. Kant put it personally: "I am certain that nothing can shake this belief, since my moral principles would thereby be overthrown, and I cannot disclaim them without becoming abhorrent in my own eyes." He could not imagine living with himself if he did not live in a moral universe. The alternative was moral nihilism and despair. Life has no meaning on these terms, and his passionate endeavors would have been pointless.[3]

Above all, Kant argued that freedom is the keystone to the vault of reason. All other ideas gain reality only by attaching themselves to the idea of freedom. If we do not insert the keystone of freedom, the vault will not work. Freedom is autonomy, the self-originating of moral law—the very desire and capacity to do the good. Freedom is a type of causality that determines laws for the intelligible world and causes actions within it. If we do not believe in our freedom, we cannot trust anything that our reason tells us. Kant believed that human beings have radical evil within them, and we cannot bind our will to the good if we are not free. Kantian idealism was obsessed with the moral necessity of freedom and the necessity of freedom for reason, notwithstanding that the entire so-called Enlightenment was grievously infected with white supremacism and Eurocentric conceit.[4]

A great deal of liberal theology has been Kantian in a narrow sense of the term and virtually all of it has been Kantian in a broad sense. Horace Bushnell, the great American 19th century theologian, once recalled that as a young man, in his early thirties, he realized one day that he had apparently become an atheist. He had never really intended this outcome, but he realized that he had lost any real conviction of divine reality. The world looked blank to him, and he felt that existence was getting blank to itself. The heavy charge of his mortal being oppressed him, and he found that a kind of leaden aspect overhung the world. Finally, one day, he asked himself, "Well, in that case, is there nothing that I do believe?"[5]

As soon as he said it, Bushnell realized that he had one belief, a moral intuition. He did believe there is such a thing as moral truth. He could doubt God, but not the good, which raised a question. Had he ever given himself to the good? Did he act like someone who believed that the good, whatever it is, is transcendently important? No, he had never done that. His life was superficial and pretty selfish. That gave him something to do. The idea of venturing forth in faith to pursue the good struck Bushnell as a kind of revelation. Devoting himself to the good was good in itself, and if he gave himself to it as he understood it, perhaps he would find God on the way. If he had lost God in selfishness and skepticism, perhaps he would find the divine in giving himself to the good.

That is the Kantian option, and nearly all of JLA's intellectual heroes had a version of it. The great Boston Unitarian, Theodore Parker, was one of them. Parker's idea of true religion rested on three claims, which he called transcendental. The

intuition of the divine creates consciousness of divine reality; the intuition of moral right creates consciousness of a moral law transcending human will; and the intuition of immortality assures the continuity of individuality. To be sure, Parker exaggerated his Kantian credentials, since Kant did not spiritualize the categories of understanding in Parker's fashion. But Parker had very good company in making that move—the entire post-Kantian tradition of Friedrich Schelling, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. JLA took pride that early American Unitarianism was soaked in the richest tradition of modern religious thought, post-Kantian idealism, and he lamented that so many Unitarians opted for mere humanism after Parker died. There was a better option within the Unitarian tradition, he thought—blending Kant and Coleridge with Schleiermacher's understanding of religion, which left plenty of room for theology.

Schleiermacher understood religion better than Kant did. Full-orbed modern theology began with Schleiermacher because he showed how to interpret Christian doctrines without making *any* appeal to an external authority. Schleiermacher accepted about 85 percent of Kant's system, but he argued that Kant misconstrued religion by reducing it to moral intuition. The wellspring of religion is spiritual feeling. True religion consists of an immediate relation to the source of life, a sense of the spirit of the whole. Spiritual feeling is a deeper aspect of human experience than reason or sensation. Rationalists looked down on feeling as a low form of knowledge; Kant described feeling as a third faculty alongside pure and practical reason; Schleiermacher said both were wrong. Feeling is not a form of knowing and it is not a third faculty. It is self-consciousness as such, the autonomous, unifying dimension of the self that pre-reflectively apprehends the world as a whole. Kant reduced religion to moral control, the ordering impulse. Schleiermacher replied that true religion is not fundamentally about grasping something. It is openness to the mystery of the whole and a sense of its infinite nature. Religion is about awe, worship, appreciation, mystery.[6]

In any moment, Schleiermacher argued, we are aware of our unchanging identity *and* its changing character. Self-consciousness always includes a self-caused element and a non-self-caused element, the Ego and the Other. The Ego expresses the subject for itself; the Other expresses the coexistence of the ego with an other. The self is an active subject *and* an object that is acted upon. This double movement of self-consciousness makes possible the feeling of being in relation with God, which Schleiermacher

famously called the feeling of absolute dependence. We exist as feeling, active creatures in coexistence with each other, thrown into a world we did not make. The world is the totality of being, to which all judgments ultimately refer, and God is the idea of the unity of being, to which all concepts ultimately refer. Thus, the idea of God is inherent in that of the world, but the two ideas are not the same. Both are transcendental terms marking the limits of thought, and each is the terminus of the other. They meet at the common border of God and the world—the unity of God and the world in feeling.

These ideas were foundational for three of the four religious thinkers of his time that JLA admired above all others: Ernst Troeltsch, Rudolf Otto, and Paul Tillich. The other thinker was Whitehead, who did not read theologians, but Schleiermacher and Whitehead held a similar belief in the primacy of feeling. JLA found his voice by reading these religious thinkers, plus von Hügel. He was still supporting his sisters and widowed mother, so he had a heavy load, but he wrote articles on modern theology and he aimed for a doctorate at Harvard. Then Meadville Lombard offered him a faculty position, in 1935, and JLA worried that he was not ready for an academic career.

He proposed to teach church and society, but Meadville wanted him to teach psychology and philosophy of religion, never mind that Adams knew very little about psychology of religion. He begged off for a year, vowing to get ready for a teaching career. He traveled in England, Germany, and Switzerland, befriending members of the Confessing Church in Germany. He lugged a movie camera to Germany and Switzerland, interviewing Rudolf Otto, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Karl Barth, and Emil Brunner. Husserl told JLA that Barth's theology was unbelievable, but at least Barth had the guts to denounce Nazi Christianity, unlike most theologians. Jaspers told JLA that if he were religious, he would be orthodox, because liberals didn't believe enough to keep a vital religion going. By then, Tillich was teaching at Union and Adams admired Tillich for having offended the Nazi government. For the rest of his life, JLA showed his home movies to students, which is how I met him in 1975. He never tired of cautioning that Germany's glorious liberal tradition no longer meant anything in Germany, because German liberals rolled over for Hitler when it mattered.

In 1936 he moved to Chicago to teach at Meadville, a bastion of Unitarian humanism. Faculty quoted the Humanist Manifesto approvingly; they took pride in having no theology; and JLA said that anti-theological humanism was not a good idea.

Humanism was good, but Unitarianism was becoming insular as a consequence of being merely humanistic. That contention won Adams a faculty position at Meadville, as an antidote to insularity. He loved his new home and he became a popular teacher there. But intellectually, JLA identified with the theologians at the University of Chicago Divinity School, not his Meadville colleagues.

Liberal theology, from the beginning, denied that an external authority should establish or compel matters of religious belief. Nineteenth century liberals accepted Darwinian evolution, biblical criticism, and an idea of God as the personal and eternal Spirit of love. Every mainline denomination had a battle over these issues, and most had a major split over them. Conservatives charged that liberals betrayed the faith and broke the line of continuity with historic Christianity. Liberals replied that religion had no future if it did not come to terms with modern science and historical criticism, and they usually denied that they broke the line of continuity with historic Christianity.

But the Chicago School gave up the latter claim about continuity. The founders of the Chicago School—Shailer Mathews, George Burman Foster, Edward Scribner Ames, and Gerald Birney Smith—contended that modernity was a revolution. If theology was to be truly modern, it had to rest on modern experience and critical tests of belief. The Chicago theologians were committed to historicism, history of religion, pragmatism, radical empiricism, and religious naturalism.

Historicism: All knowledge is historical; every idea has a history that is the key to its meaning and truth. History of religion: religions must be studied by scientific standards not derived from any particular religious tradition. Pragmatism: Knowledge is instrumental; concepts are habits of belief or rules of action; and ideas are true according to their practical usefulness. Ideas are like knives and forks, enabling useful action. The Chicago theologians got their pragmatism from William James and John Dewey, and they got radical empiricism from James. Enlightenment empiricism studied experience, contending that sense data about things is all that we have in claiming to know anything. James added that experience is relational. Experience has a flowing, immediate continuity that cannot be captured by focusing on atomistic units of experience. Life is a continuous flux or stream of experiences lacking distinct boundaries. By focusing on the relational flow of experience, the Chicago School practiced a form of process theology long before the term existed.

For thirty years the Chicago School liberals debated how far they should take their commitment to religious naturalism. Most of them conceived God as an expression of ideals, and they equivocated on whether God should be conceived as a cosmic reality. But is God merely an analogical expression for an idealized concept of the universe? If you are reduced to John Dewey's God—an idealized social convention—is it better to just give up the idea of divine reality? At Meadville, some said yes, while others sided with Dewey. At the Divinity School, the Chicago theologians puzzled over what they should say about God.

In 1926 they heard that Whitehead had published a new book titled *Religion in the Making.* With excitement the Chicago theologians vowed to read the book. With total bafflement they turned the pages. The book was advertised as a primer in religion, but they could not understand a single page of it. Ames and Case dismissed the book as completely unintelligible. Smith reported that he felt some affinity with it, but he could not explain why. Mathews confessed: "It is infuriating, and I must say embarrassing as well, to read page after page of relatively familiar words without understanding a single sentence." But Mathews added that perhaps the problem was not with Whitehead. Did anyone claim to understand this purported genius?[7]

Yes, it turned out, there was one American expert on Whitehead—Henry Nelson Wieman, who gave a brilliant lecture at Chicago on Whitehead's thought and was promptly appointed to the faculty. Wieman told the Chicago theologians that Whitehead's religious philosophy was perfectly intelligible and extremely important. It showed that the existence and nature of God are revealed in the inherent structure of physical nature. It proved that the universe exists only by virtue of its order, which is aesthetic, loving, and not accidental. Bernard Meland later recalled: "It was as if shuttered windows in one's own house had been swung open, revealing vistas of which one had hitherto been unmindful."[8]

Wieman admired his new colleagues for pioneering an empirical, naturalistic, pragmatic approach to theology, but he could not fathom why they took so much interest in history, and he chided them for letting go of God's objective reality. History doesn't matter, because history doesn't prove anything. What matters is, What is it all about? In Wieman's view, liberal theology had become too sentimental; it shrank from defending God's existence; and it tried to make itself attractive by appealing to social

concerns. That strategy was a loser; it drove the strong and intelligent people away from religion.

Wieman admonished that theology had to become tough-minded again. Religion is pointless without God, but modern science negated traditional ways of conceiving God's existence. Wieman argued that whatever else the word "God" may mean, at bottom it designates the Something upon which human life and the flourishing of the good are dependent. It cannot be doubted that such a Something exists. If there is a human good, it must have a source. The fact that human life happens proves the reality of the Something of supreme value on which life depends. Wieman made that the object of theology. He conceived God as a structured event and theology as the analysis of the total event of religious experience.

Wieman had a complex and conflicted relationship to Whitehead, and he later broke away from Whitehead's metaphysical system, although not as much as he claimed. Under Wieman's influence, Chicago theology became more objective, tracking the flow of experience in organic terms, describing empirical patterns of events. When JLA came to Meadville in 1936, he befriended Wieman and defended Wieman's basic approach. Wieman versus Whitehead soon became *the* issue at the Divinity School. JLA played a mediating role in this debate, and Wieman later became a Unitarian. But in the 1930s, you had to be a Chicago Schooler to believe that Wieman versus Whitehead was *the* issue in theology.

In Europe, World War I had obliterated the moral idealism and cultural optimism that fueled liberal theology. In the USA, World War I was experienced very differently, and thus the war did not destroy liberal idealism here. It took the Great Depression to do that. By 1932, a new generation of American theologians began to say that liberal theology was not a good idea. Reinhold Niebuhr was the leading debunker. Niebuhr's favorite epithet was "stupid," followed closely by "naïve." Repeatedly he charged that liberal Protestantism was both. Liberals actually believed that the world could be saved by reason and good will. Niebuhr explained: "Liberal Christian literature abounds in the monotonous reiteration of the pious hope that people might be good and loving." That was pathetic, Niebuhr said. To make any sense in the 1930s, American Protestantism had to move sharply to the left politically and to the right theologically.[9]

Unitarians had an especially hard time with Reinhold Niebuhr. He ridiculed the things they treasured, he blasted John Haynes Holmes very personally, and JLA spent a lot of time urging Unitarians that they could not just say no to Reinhold Niebuhr. I cannot take the time tonight to explain Niebuhr's complex theological vision or the zig and zag of his politics. But the best theological liberals of that generation realized that they had to grapple with Niebuhr. They were a stubborn bunch—JLA, Wieman, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Edgar Brightman, Benjamin Mays, Georgia Harkness, George Buttrick, Norman Pittenger, John Haynes Holmes, Bernard Meland. They identified with Fosdick's self-description; for them it was either liberal religion or no religion at all. They believed in the liberal faith of reasonableness, openness, modernity, and the social gospel.

The old liberals understood that their language of progress and idealism seemed like sentimental mush in the Depression era of collapsing economies and political turmoil. But they stuck with liberal reformism in politics, resisting radical ideologies, and they shook their heads incredulously that Karl Barth was regarded as a great theologian. Liberal theology, whatever its problems, was still the only option that held together reason and faith. It had the right project, even if it did not have all the answers. If liberalism was too deferential to modern culture, it had to be more critical. If the Social Gospel was too idealistic and sentimental, maybe it needed a dose of realism. If liberal theology read too much of its middle-class moralism into the gospel, that could be fixed. Fosdick gave sermons on all these topics. The mid-century liberals were willing to make adjustments of this kind, but they would not disown liberalism, because to them, there was no better place to go.

The crucial thing was to be able to worship God as the divine Spirit of love without having to believe any particular thing on the basis of authority. Some alternative to orthodox over-belief and secular unbelief was still needed, even if liberalism needed better answers.

JLA mediated a Christian version of these convictions to the Unitarian community. He enrolled in Chicago's doctoral program when he moved to Meadville. In 1943 he made an obvious career move, joining his friends at the University of Chicago, where he founded the program in ethics and society. Once again, Adams scrambled to learn a field while teaching it. In 1945 he finally completed his doctorate, writing a dissertation on Tillich's theology of culture. When he founded the social ethics

program at Chicago, JLA kept three things in mind. One, social ethics was invented by the social gospel movement. Whatever problems the social gospel had, it was right to focus on reform movements for social justice and to use social scientific methods. Two, JLA vowed not to replicate his Harvard experience. His students would know what he believed and what he cared about. Therefore, three, he featured controversial topics in his classes and he required doctoral students to pass exams in four social sciences. Knowing theology was good; knowing social theory was good too. The ideal was to fuse prophetic theology and social theory to understand and change the world.

JLA's intellectual models were big thinkers who wrote big books. Troeltsch, Otto, Tillich, and Whitehead wrote on a vast canvass, ranging over religions, philosophies, and disciplines, they were not afraid of metaphysics or feeling, and they had a sense of transcendent mystery. JLA was like them, except he was not a book-writer. He wrote short essays on big themes, and he had a religious ideal, "faith for the free," which blended Whitehead's lure of divine love with Tillich's principle of ultimate concern. Human beings depend for their being and freedom on a creative power and process that are not of our making. God is the "commanding reality" that sustains and transforms all life. Following Tillich, JLA taught that God is a name for the infinite depth and ground of all being. To speak of God is to refer to one's ultimate concern. Atheism is the notion that life has no depth. That is a very strange idea, JLA would say. Sometimes he put in Wieman's fashion, not Tillich's: Who really believes that reality does not sustain meaning and goodness? Divine reality finds its richest focus when human beings cooperate for the common good. Freedom, rightly used, seeks freedom and social justice for others, and freedom in community cannot be achieved without "the power of organization and the organization of power."[10]

Adams despaired of the kind of religious liberalism that encouraged individuals to believe whatever they wanted. Often he admonished that individualistic liberals dropped the first principle of good religion, the existence of a commanding divine reality. They got stuck in a halfway house to nihilism by treating liberty as the only spiritual truth. JLA insisted that genuinely free religion is always about life-giving community and it takes place within one. A faith that creates no community of faith is merely a protection against having a real faith. JLA loved to quote Whitehead on this theme: "Definition is the soul of actuality." A group that cannot define itself or get its act together cannot do any good in the world.

There is no real faith without a community and its structures of accountability. To do the good, one must exercise power in a manner that is enabled and limited by its divine ground. JLA said that power has a theological ground as an expression of God's love and a human sphere of action as the exercise of freedom, a response to the possibilities of being. Freedom is participation in power, and power is the ability to achieve a purpose. To be a moral agent, one has to take responsibility for the power that one possesses. All can be free, but only if all are empowered to participate.

Every year JLA surprised a new crop of students by telling them he believed in natural law. Check your prejudices, he would say, because natural law does not have to be conservative or dogmatic. No one actually knows the law of nature. To approach it you must be patient, humble, keep an open mind, root out your prejudices, be aware of your context, and remember that every interpretation is fallible. But however difficult it may to grasp the one within the many, the value of trying should not be denigrated. We must at least be open to the possibility that the moral life has a universal ground.

JLA made most of his impact by befriending people, teaching popular courses, and working in civic organizations. In the 1930s he helped to revitalize the American Unitarian Association, which produced new programs and outreach efforts that led to the founding of the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1961. In 1944 he threw himself into Chicago politics, cofounding a powerful reform organization, the Independent Voters of Illinois. This organization campaigned for international cooperation, racial integration, civil liberties, and liberal politicians, notably Adlai Stevenson, whom JLA befriended.

In 1954 Adams cheered the *Brown* decision and urged Stevenson to support the civil rights movement. Sadly, that was not to be. The 1956 presidential campaign marked a low point for liberal politics. Lightning had struck in Montgomery, but the busing issue was singular and hard to replicate. The civil rights movement floundered; Martin Luther King didn't know what to try next; the South boiled over; and Stevenson carefully avoided outflanking President Eisenhower, who did nothing. Reinhold Niebuhr counseled Stevenson not to outflank Eisenhower. Some liberals who campaigned for Stevenson—notably Pauli Murray and Joseph Rauh--did so with clenched teeth, mortified that he sold out civil rights. JLA got caught in the crossfire between the regular Democrats and reformers. Years later, he felt the shame that history conferred on the Stevenson campaign.

Meanwhile Harvard Divinity School called, and JLA agreed to come home. Harvard Divinity School had declined in the 1930s. It further declined in the 1940s and it kept declining in the early 1950s. Harvard had only one theology professor, and he was a humanistic atheist who didn't want to teach theology. But in 1953 the university got a new president, Nathan Pusey, who revived the Divinity School. JLA, Paul Lehmann, Krister Stendahl, and Frank Moore Cross joined the faculty, Tillich moved from Union to Harvard Yard, and JLA grew into his later legend, teaching afternoon seminars that often sprawled into the evening and his living room. He told students that he regretted having neglected his scholarship, but in the next breath he urged them not to lock themselves in the library. Give yourself to at least one activist organization, he would say. The best ones made democracy work for all citizens—groups like the NAACP, the ACLU, and Americans for Democratic Action.

When I got to HDS in the mid-1970s, JLA was very much a local presence and legend, like Harvey Cox is today. Adams did not like it when students gushed over him as the grand old man of HDS. He was too committed to his causes to be sentimentalized or not taken seriously. He once told me that he could live with a lot of theologies, but people with bad politics really teed him off.

He was a critical and comparative thinker, not someone who developed the logical implications of a single point of departure. JLA was a master teacher, even though many of his protégés did not think in his fashion, and most had trouble describing what it was. Max Stackhouse said there was no thread connecting JLA's thought; at least, he could not find one. Jim Gustafson said the same thing, but then Gustafson reconsidered, realizing how that sounded. If anything held together JLA's work, Gustafson said, it was the idea that "free women and men put their faith in a creative reality that is re-creative."[11]

Actually, that put it very well. Although JLA drank deeply from big thinkers, he did so in a way that left their systems in the background. His faith in a "creative reality that is re-creative" smacked of Whitehead, but metaphysical scholasticism was foreign to him. JLA was as deeply indebted to Troeltsch and Tillich as he was to Whitehead, but he never stuck with one big thinker or one big idea. He was a back-and-forth guy, comparing alternatives, and bringing people together. In his last years he marveled that his former students--Stackhouse, J. Ronald Engel, and Kim Beach—worked hard at fashioning his scattered essays into books. That was a beautiful thing. JLA, who

collected Tillich's essays but never collected his own, had disciples who understood the importance of keeping him in print.[12]

Social gospel idealism burned in JLA to the end of his days. So did the deeper wellspring of religious idealism that he shared with Schleiermacher, Schelling, Parker, William Ellery Channing, Troeltsch, Otto, Tillich, and King. The great "I AM" of Exodus 3:14, God telling Moses to tell the Israelites that "I AM" had sent him, expresses the identity of thought and being, the keynote of idealistic thought. All knowledge participates in divine self-knowledge. On the level of Spirit, subject and object are identical, each involving the other. A subject becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself. But a subject is not an object except for itself.

Idealistic theologies theorize this self-reflection of Spirit overcoming the dualism of subject and object, as in the classic theologies of neo-Platonism, Augustine, Meister Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa. Kant did not set out to revive that tradition, but he did so anyway, on modern terms, by thinking about how the mind intuits objects of sense data and constructs a world. Grinding his way through a notorious tangle of dense transcendental argument, Kant resorted to a concept of intellectual intuition, which scared him. He employed this idea in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and he featured it more explicitly in the *Critique of Judgment.* He needed an idea that that helped him reason about beauty, organic relations, the wholeness of creation, and the manifold of intuition. But the idea of intellectual intuition felt dangerous to Kant. He didn't follow through on it because the more he relied on it, the less he felt that he was in rational control.

To follow through takes some daring. Ultimately the principle of subject-object identity is not about the self-knowledge of a finite subject. It is about the self-knowing of the divine within a finite subject. Once you head down this path, it is hard to avoid metaphysical theology. Spirit realizes itself as a perpetual self-duplication of one power of life as subject and object, each presupposing the other. If God is the "I AM" of truth, reality is the self-thinking of Spirit. In that case, as Hegel argued, what matters is not so much that we know the divine, but that the divine knows itself through us.

Hegel was the greatest thinker who followed through. He put dynamic panentheism into play in modern theology, his rationale for a universal religion of Spirit unified the ambitions of modern thought, and he inspired nearly every great philosophical movement of the past two centuries. For Hegel, God's infinite subjectivity was an infinite inter-subjectivity of holding differences together in a play of creative

relationships not dissolving into sameness. God is the inter-subjective whole of wholes, irreducibly dynamic and relational. Spirit becomes self-conscious in religion. Religions select the shapes that fit their Spirit, and Christianity is a picture story about Spirit embracing the suffering of the world and returning to itself.

But Hegel, the most powerful of all idealistic thinkers, was also the most problematic, because he threw away the two greatest strengths of the idealistic tradition—its emphasis on ethical subjectivity and its insistence that all thinking about God is inadequate, a mere pointer to transcendent mystery. Hegel sublimated God and selves into a logical concept and he ridiculed Schleiermacher for theologizing about mere feeling. He treated notions as ultimate reality and real things as exemplifications of notions. Hegel notoriously lacked humility in tracking the world process, which he called the realization of Spirit as self-conscious reason.[13]

So JLA did not count Hegel among his intellectual lodestars, even though there was a great deal of Hegel in Troeltsch, Otto, and Tillich. Hegel's intellectualism spurned the emphasis on feeling, willing, and ethical struggles for justice that define and fuel religious idealism at its best. And Hegel's thoroughgoing Trinitarianism was too much for JLA, although Adams had Trinitarian-like dialectics of his own.

The post-Kantian tradition had a long run in philosophy and theology until the natural sciences took over the academy, philosophy turned positivist, and Karl Barth steered theology away from the puzzles of subjectivity. This tradition would have fallen even further in theology had Tillich not kept it alive, and JLA treasured Tillich for that. Today, however, the debate that cuts across the sciences and humanities is an echo of the very arguments that post-Kantians pressed for decades. In the language of today, it is the debate between dead matter materialists and proponents of relationality, holism and emergence.

The school of Whitehead has played the leading role among theologians in battling a powerful reductionist tide in the academy and popular culture. From a common sense standpoint, the world consists of material things that endure in space and time, while events are occurrences that happen to things or that things experience. In the Whiteheadian view, events are the fundamental things, the immanent movement of creativity itself. Minds are real but thoroughly natural. The universe is oriented toward beauty and the intensification of experience, demonstrating an inherent tendency toward complexity, self-organization, and the production of emergent wholes

that are more than the sum of their parts. God is the lure of love divine for creative transformation and the flourishing of life.

Whitehead's theory of creative complexity has a big problem with the second law of thermodynamics, and Whitehead's God can only be nice, unlike Yahweh, who was free to be terrible. A reliably nice God is a projection of human altruism. But no cosmology fits with everything we know, which is vastly exceeded by everything we don't know. The Whiteheadian school deserves credit for grappling creatively with big questions and having the sheer audacity to be a school and keep one going. It founded the religion and science dialogue, through Ian Barbour, and the Christian-Buddhist dialogue at the American Academy of Religion, through John Cobb. The Whiteheadian school has produced much of the most compelling feminist theology of our time, as in the work of Catherine Keller, Rebecca Parker, Marjorie Suchocki, Monica Coleman, and Mayra Rivera. It has UU advocates, notably Galen Guengerich, Thandeka, and Jerry Stone, and it has produced a gusher of ecological theory and activism. This school of theology began with Chicago School academics who privileged the liberal questions of skeptical disbelief, but today it is known for privileging the issues of ecology and social justice. How can our religious communities play a role in the environmental movement and in the struggles of oppressed and excluded people?

Today we are witnessing a new black freedom movement, in the wake of Ferguson. It is perfectly named, conveying immediately what must be said, that black lives have never mattered in much of white America. Today we are witnessing an upsurge of interfaith community activism against racism, poverty, and environmental destruction. PICO is thriving, IAF and Gamaliel are hanging in there, DART is training more organizers than ever, Interfaith Worker Justice is retooling for its second generation, and there is more interfaith community organizing going on than ever. JLA would have loved that. Community organizing is inherently limited, it has trouble scaling up, and it burns people out. But it builds personal relationships across racial, ethnic, sexual, religious and class lines. It empowers marginalized communities. And it does these things better than any kind of social justice activism I know.

The last time that Union had a JLA celebration, the year was 1981, JLA was 80 years old, and Don Shriver was president of Union. Don had studied under JLA in 1959, and he said that to study under Jim Adams was to be "graciously assaulted by the booming, buzzing confusion of historic, human reality." Don stressed that Adams did

not write very much; he used the word “fugitive” to describe JLA’s scattered articles. But that got Don rolling on a striking analogy. JLA wrote fugitive articles, and Jesus didn’t write anything. Jesus trusted his disciples to write things down, to the extent that he may have thought about it, and JLA left it to his protégés to create books out of his essays. JLA truly believed in incarnation, Don said—the Word becoming flesh.[14]

That was what made him an unforgettable teacher. His incarnational method fused the high ground of theology with the low ground of ordinary human relationships. His classroom was a place of hospitable community. JLA did not make learning painless; he made painful things possible: Exposing ignorance, testing tentative ideas, challenging students to reach higher. He was an apostle of putting back together the fragments of our humanity that pride, prejudice, oppression, and its sins have alienated. Don put it theologically. Truth, ultimately, bears a human likeness, is revealed in human shape, becoming our servant, colleague, teacher, friend. You might call it a Unitarianism of the Second Person. But whatever you call it, it is something remarkable.

Blessings and thanks, friends, to all of you.

1 This lecture adapts material from Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity*, 1950-2005 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 134-143; and Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 324-334.

2 James Luther Adams, *The Prophethood of All Believers,* ed. George K. Beach (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), quote 37; see Adams, *Not Without Dust and Heat: A Memoir* (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1995), 112-154.

3 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Macmillan, first corrected edition, 1933), A828/B856, quote 650.

4 Gary Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit: The Idealistic Logic of Modern Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 47-53, 531-536.

5 Horace Bushnell, “The Dissolving of Doubts,” in *Horace Bushnell: Sermons,* ed. Conrad Cherry (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), quote 168; Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion,* 1805-1900 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 112-118.

6 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers,* trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 77-140; Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith,* ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 3-34.

7 Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity,* 1900-1950 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 216-285, quote, 262.

8 Ibid, quote, 264.

9 Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), quote 108.

10 James Luther Adams, “A Faith for the Free,” in Adams, *The Prophethood of All Believers*, 43-56; Adams, “Blessed are the Powerful,” ibid., 267-273.

11 James M. Gustafson, review of *The Prophethood of All Believers,* by James Luther Adams, *Unitarian Universalist Christian* 43 (Spring 1988), quote 53.

12 See James Luther Adams, *On Being Human Religiously,* ed. Max Stackhouse (Boston: Beacon Press), 1976; Adams, *An Examined Faith,* ed. George K. Beach (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991); Adams, *The Essential James Luther Adams,* ed. George K. Beach (Boston: Skinner House, 1998).

13 This is a condensed version of my argument in *Kantian Reason in Hegelian Spirit.*

14 Donald W. Shriver, Jr., “Truth Befriended: James Luther Adams as a Teacher,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 37 (1982), 197-203, quote 198.