

LOVE EACH OTHER OR PERISH

In Nazi Germany, the Rev. Clemens Taesler, minister of the largest Unitarian church in Germany, the Unitarian Free Religious Society of Frankfurt, espoused the values of American Unitarians William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker and German rationalism and idealism. Yet when Hitler came to power in 1933 he gravitated toward the spirit of the times, proclaiming the need for a new German Christianity that would renew the soul of the German people, Nazis showing the way. The Nazi regime rewarded him and his church with a freedom earlier denied Unitarians by orthodox established church authorities. Taesler even gained a position to teach religion in the public schools. By 1936 other liberal ministers in Frankfurt shunned Taesler for allowing himself to be coopted by the Nazis, but Taesler thought he was helping the survival of liberal religion by adjusting to the Nazi reality. His church remained packed with 1,200 worshippers seeking a way to reconcile their liberal values with the Nazi wave sweeping over them.

Taesler survived World War II, and in 1946 wrote to his American Unitarian friend, James Luther Adams: “An immense guilt has come over our German nation.... Though we were forced here in Germany to live since the fall of 1938 more and more as in a prison, all of us became accessory to the crimes.... We have gone through an ocean of blood and tears [and] we as Germans are despised ... in the world.... A short time after your visit in Frankfurt [1936], Nazism began to show its right [true] face. Till then a man ... could still believe that one had the intention to act fairly in politics, especially in the Jewish question. But then the black day came, the day of the burning synagogues and of the persecution of the Jews, and soon all the religious societies were persecuted and oppressed. Our liberty of action too, as a Unitarian Free Religious Society, was limited more and more. And the war brought Nazi fanaticism to the boiling point.”

The Nazi phenomenon and the ease with which many adjusted to it became a transforming moment for James Luther Adams, a great Unitarian theologian of the 20th century. Adams realized that to each comes a moment to decide – to go on adjusting or to take a stand. “We must love each other or perish,” Adams preached in 1939. “Hitler could have been stopped. Anti-Nazis begged us to stop him. We are all to blame for him and his actions.” Religion, he emphasized, “offers peace only as a reward of struggle and suffering.” Adams implied for Americans whether one could meaningfully oppose Nazi anti-Semitism without working for full social justice against prevailing U.S. racism.

In the 1960s Adams was in Germany with anti-Nazi friends watching television images of dogs and fire hoses keeping African Americans down. As liberal Germans had not escaped complicity in Nazism, Adams had to confess to them that “yes, it was true, I could not deny complicity in the venerable tradition of maltreatment of the African American in the USA.” “I became acutely aware of the necessity for *explicit* commitment, in contrast to a vague sort of liberalism opposed to prejudices and promoting openness of mind.” The Rev. James Reeb of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington faced the same choice. In contemplating the complicity of the Catholic Church with Nazism, he wondered if we protect our lives and treasured institutions “at too high a price?” “Did not silence mean violating the essential purpose of the church? I think the answer is yes.” Reeb made his commitment explicit, went to Selma, and was beaten to death in witness to the purpose of the church.

Ref: James Luther Adams, *Not Without Dust and Heat: A Memoir* (Chicago: Exploration, 1995, pp. 202-207; Duncan Howlett, *No Greater Love: The James Reeb Story* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966, pp. 151-153.

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