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Kelly: Talking Back: I Had Bellah as a Teacher Almost Four Decades Ago...

By James R. Kelly

Especially with economists, political scientists, psychologists as well as his fellow sociologists in mind, Robert Bellah's subtitle to his Conversations (Spring 2004) essay "Education For Justice And The Common Good" reads, "Most of us with any insight into what we are doing know that we are seldom neutral. Nor will my remarks be neutral. I had Bellah as a teacher almost four decades ago and I remember him warmly, as one of the very few (actually, he was alone) who did not teach, as was the academic gospel of the time, that value-judgments were a kind of leprosy of the social-scientist intellect. His own professional life was as much pilgrimage as career."

In his Harvard undergraduate days he turned from his Presbyterian 'parochial Protestantism' to Marxism and, it being the McCarthy era, when after finishing his joint Ph.D. in Sociology and Far Eastern Languages, for employment he had to go to McGill University in Canada. By the late 1960s, now back at Harvard, he held that an authentic social science might draw on what he called America's civil religion to challenge such national excesses as the Vietnam War. By the early 1970s he regretted his too easily co-opted civil religion construction and turned to substantive religious 'communities of memory' as critical moral resources. Following Tillich, Bellah once characterized his earlier work as exemplifying the "Protestant Principle," overly focusing on the individual as free and autonomous, and his later work as moving toward the "Catholic Principle," focusing on the pursuit of the common good and community. Indeed, his Conversations essay tempts the reader to an

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unearned complacency. I don’t think all (most?) social scientists at Jesuit Universities would find, as Bellah does, something worrisome in thinking that a liberal arts curriculum is fulfilled by their promoting a critical thinking modeled on the natural science model of universal doubt and the criticism of all received opinions. Helping to shape a detached, critical mind as is likely, he suggests, to produce a cynical as an engaged mind. Besides, detachment by itself does not produce objectivity. Bellah knows, of course, that, while interdependent, knowledge is not virtuous nor vice versa. And so he forthrightly says that a liberal arts education includes attention to the moral formation requisite for character. He even cites Decree Four of Jesuit Congregation 52.

Engagement with questions of justice is, for Bellah, the ethos of social scientific education. All this might well make a typical social scientist, even at a Jesuit University, as “sentimental,” “muddled” and even “dangerous” chatter, given the human penchant to find in the real world what we psychologically need to find and, worse, the fear of adding to the world’s abundant supply of fundamentalisms. Denaturalism alone and the empirical puncturing of illusions fulfill the professional vocation of many of the social scientists I have met. But Bellah’s model of modern liberal arts strikes me as a nuanced and sophisticated appropriation of the classical notion of prudence connected to the more contemporary sense of praxis. He writes that there are three phases in higher education. The starting point is formation that begins in childhood but continues more critically and reflexively in humanistic social science education. The second movement is concerned with methods, analysis and criticism. The third phase he calls the performative, which concerns ethics and expertise in the doing of just actions. These phases, it goes without saying, are interconnected, reciprocal, dialectical, etc. To think that actions can be moral without a disciplined objectivity, he writes, would remain at the level of a romantic activism. Similarly, to remain at the level of methods and critique risks the professionally forming illusion that facts speak for themselves.

So, what are the implications of Bellah’s arguments for us to no special hierarchical codes, save for the all important last one here are seven:

1. The social scientist committed to justice and the common good will especially promote service learning and do what she can to help community service flourish on campus.

2. He will make sure there is available for social science majors a course on Catholic Social Teaching and consider co-teaching it with the theologian who is more likely to have curriculum responsibility for it.

3. Tell the students about such engaged and activist groups as Divis Cristi (and make sure the college has a local affiliation), the Center of Concern, the Catholic Worker, etc.

4. Challenge students with the constant ethic of life.

5. Explain to them the research you do, how you select your topics, and how they contribute to justice and the common good.

6. The pertinent section from the Documents of the Thirty Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, examined. The integrating principle of our mission is the inescapable link between faith and the promotion of justice of the Kingdom (§30) and being friends of the poor, and we cannot turn aside when our friends are in need. We are a community in solidarity with them because of Christ’s preëxistent love of them (§34), and to ensure that we cast no shadow of any sectarian fundamentalism. In our positive approach to religious and cultures, we recognize that all of them — including the “Christian West” throughout its history — have also found ways of being closed to the true freedom offered by God. The dialogue between the Gospel and culture has to take place within the history of culture. It should be conducted among people who regard religious solidarity, and who look together towards a shared human and social freedom (§17).

7. Finally, acknowledge to our classes that the moral and intellectual formation we so readily urge on them is a life-long pursuit, and that on this long and winding journey professors too remain students. Usually freshman.

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