

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 26

Article 18

10-1-2004

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Recommended Citation

Kelly, James R. (2004) "Talking Back: I Had Bellah as a Teacher Almost Four Decades Ago...," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 26, Article 18.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol26/iss1/18>

TALKING BACK

Robert Bellah's article, "Education for Justice and the Common Good," in our most recent issue, has become one of our more talked-about essays. It began as a talk given to Jesuit scholastics in training for their own teaching experiences in regency, a few years ago. Like many works which begin as talks, it went through several versions before it reached our readers with its up-to-date critique of American foreign policy. Faculty discussions at several institutions have concentrated on Bellah's ideas. With this in mind we have invited three professors — James R. Kelly of Fordham, John F. Freie of Le Moyne, and John W. Danford of Loyola Chicago — to offer their reflections.

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-science intellect. His own profes-*

sional life was as much pilgrimage as career.

In his Harvard undergraduate days he turned from his Presbyterian " parched 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 woefully lacking in thinking that their contribution to 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 is as 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 virtue 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 32.

Engagement with questions of justice is, for Bellah, the *telos* of social scientific education. All this might well strike 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. Demystification 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* conjoined 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 conjoins 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 comforting illusion that facts speak for themselves.

So, what are the implications of Bellah's arguments for us? In no special hierarchical order, save for the all important last one, here are seven:

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.

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.

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

Challenge students with the *consistent ethic of life*.

Explain to them the research you do, how you selected your topics, and how they contribute

to justice and the common good.

Cite pertinent sections from the Documents of the Thirty Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus. For example: *The integrating principle of our mission is the inseparable link between faith and the promotion of justice of the Kingdom (#39)*; and *Being friends of the Lord then means 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 preferential love of them (#34)*; and to ensure that we cast no shadow of any sectarian fundamentalism, *In our positive approach to religions 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 heart of the culture. It should be conducted among people who regard each other with respect, and who look together towards a shared human and social freedom (#17)*.

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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