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TALCOTT PARSONS'S FAVORITE STUDENT: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT N. BELLAH

ARVIND RAJAGOPAL

January 6, 2014— The recent death of Robert N. Bellah signaled the passing of an era. An acclaimed sociologist of religion and a scholar of Japan, Bellah achieved his reputation in both of these fields, but spoke across them to a general audience. His training in “grand theory” at Harvard’s Department of Social Relations in the years after World War II taught him to regard the whole world—and, in his later work, human history from the Paleolithic era on—as an open field for investigation. His doctoral dissertation on Tokugawa religion, published in 1957 became a classic in the sociology of modern Japan, but it was his essay “Civil Religion in America,” published in the wake of the 1960s antiwar protests, that established his fame in the US.

In this essay, the first of many works on the US,¹ Bellah found a way to transcend narrow political differences and yet to express a profound critique of US race relations and Vietnam-era imperialism rooted in a shared moral discourse that invoked theology but was not sectarian. Durkheim, who criticized Marxism for what he felt was its crude stress on interest, was perhaps Bellah’s deepest influence within the sociological tradition. In Bellah’s view, morality has to be regarded not only as an object of analysis, but also as a personal commitment.

Bellah captured the most subtle and powerful aspect of his teacher Talcott Parsons’ work: the intuition that society was nothing if not a moral order. Sociology’s marginalization of the study of religion was in his view connected to a tendency to compartmentalize research, sometimes at the cost of what was most valuable in the sociological tradition. Bellah’s own ability to both embody and transcend this tradition for a general public provoked criticism that he emphasized consensus over conflict, as well as jealousy that he got more fame than he deserved.

In this connection, Bellah once described a revealing interaction he had with Erving Goffman at a conference. Before a group of acquaintances, Goffman was describing what he thought was necessary to establish one’s reputation academically; it involved doing a few things that were not strictly motivated by intellectual interests. In response, Bellah protested that he would not do such things, nor had he ever done them. As Bellah told the story, Goffman’s face contorted as he angrily replied, “That’s because you’re Talcott Parson’s favorite student!” And Parsons was of course, the most influential sociologist of the postwar period.

Parsons’s favorite student became one of the best-known sociologists of *his* generation, and arguably more widely read than Parsons ever was, certainly in the United States. Parsons epitomized post-war American optimism, building an open door into Max Weber’s iron cage and transforming it into a theory of harmonious value-neutrality. His structural functionalism however, was grand theory with a short life, arguing for U.S. exceptionalism and defending modernity as if it were a system. Bellah to his credit, only partially absorbed this influence. He never became

a functionalist epigone and spurned narrow specialization.

The last book Bellah published, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Harvard, 2011), was a product of 12 years of work and possibly his greatest achievement as a scholar. Here he sought to locate the development of ritual and myth in the natural evolution of our species, and to examine the social evolution of religion up to the Axial Age.² Engaging in a comparison of the origins of the world-religions that survive today, he provided an insightful analysis of religion, one that offers important conceptual resources for confronting diversity in our time, while avoiding the Christian-centric accounts one often encounters in such studies.

Bob was on my PhD committee, and later became a trusted friend and correspondent on all manner of things. The following interview is a highly edited version of a conversation carried out over email in December 2012, seven months before the heart operation from which he did not recover.

Arvind Rajagopal (AR): May I start by asking for a very brief account of technological evolution—or your view of the idea of technological evolution—and how that looks alongside your argument about religious evolution? That is, how do these two forms of evolution differ? Do they mutually reinforce each other?

Robert N. Bellah (RNB): Evolution takes place when new capacities are attained but how those capacities are used and how they are related to earlier capacities is very complex and not at all unilinear. Even the notion that the attainment of new capacities is “progress” is doubtful, since it all depends on how these capacities are used. And much of history is cyclical, with rises and falls, and though basic capacities are “never lost,” substantive cultural and even technological losses occur.

AR: Although there has been religious and moral evolution, their zenith might have been reached a millennium or two before modern scientific and technological developments. In this sense, our problem is not only about our own unrequited modern values, but also about the unrequited values of the Axial Age. Can you comment on this?

RNB: My position is very close to Charles Taylor's in *A Secular Age*. He rejects the “subtraction theory” that modernity peels away all the superstition and prejudice of the past to get down to real human nature. He insists the modern project in its ethical form is unintelligible except as coming out of the Jewish-Christian-Greek traditions. He then argues that in some ways modernity has actually gone farther in institutionalizing “the Gospel” than the previous traditions ever had, but that the price [for this institutionalization] is high. New capacities allow new evils, and the denial of the great traditions threaten to trap people in an immanence that may be a modest “bourgeois happiness” but can also be a devastating nihilism.

One of my tasks is to formulate “the modern project” more clearly than I can at the moment. Habermas has spent his life doing this, yet he has come more and more to respect religious traditions that cannot in the end be entirely “translated into rational argument.” For him, Kant is close to everything, and to a degree [Habermas] is right [about this]. But I also need to think about Adam Smith (no simple utilitarian, and with a lot of anxiety about what the market would do), Hegel, and popular religious and ideological movements. But the notion that there was ever one simple clear modern agenda that simply marches through history with a few detours like the Holocaust, I can never accept.

AR: Your argument, as I understand it, is that between the Paleolithic and Axial Ages, we can see evidence of a movement from mimetic to mythic to theoretic culture (drawing on Merlin Donald) that combines what went before it. This argument can offer an important response to arguments currently being made by

theorists like Bruno Latour, who conceptualize religion through distinctions of mind and world.

This response can be clarified if we specify the numerous connections between these two terms—"mind" and "world"—that are actually to be found in the practice of any given religion. The three phases of the mimetic, the mythic, and the theoretic offer a rigorous way to specify what these mediating entities might be.

Moreover, your argument that "nothing is ever lost"—that evolution is accretive—provides a more deeply historical and analytically precise way of thinking across different forms of mediation than anything currently available. What do you think about this reading of your argument?

RNB: You're absolutely right that I'm trying to make an end run around the debate over "religion" that has been going on, in religious studies and elsewhere, at least since Wilfred Smith attacked the term. By giving an evolutionary (even perhaps in Foucault's sense a genealogical) account of religion, I can avoid all that terminological chaos.

If religion is rooted in the body (body-mind-world continuum) as far back as animal play, then with mimetic culture [it] becomes ritual, elaborated richly when mythic culture is added. [Hence] it concerns "the general order of existence," Levi-Strauss's statement that myth must understand everything to explain anything. The Axial Age brings in a critical/transcendent perspective while reorganizing but not abandoning the mimetic and mythic. So the whole debate over the term "religion" falls apart. If Latour is doing something like this, I think we're on the same track.

Of course, my evolutionary story always relates ritual/religion to the social context and is especially sensitive to changing economic and political conditions, which, I think religion neither causes nor is caused by, but to which religion must adapt: in the archaic by grappling with the complex relation of god and king; and in the Axial Age by criticizing the simple fusion of religion and power, though that problem never goes away. As Bjorn Wittrock says, the promissory notes of the Axial Age have still not yet been redeemed.

AR: Do you think their distrust of idolatry leads modern, Protestant-influenced conceptions of religion to reify a single model of religion, valuing an abstract idea of religion while losing sight of religion's historic character? This reification results in making it hard to accommodate the plurality of religious traditions that in fact inhabit the world.

RNB: I totally agree with you about Protestantism as an effort to "lose" things that can't be lost without turning religion into some kind of quasi-theory that will then be refuted by science or turned into a kind of "religious naturalism" that loses what makes religion another reality beside the world of daily life. That *Religionswissenschaft* in Germany and the US was overwhelmingly Protestant set religious studies off on the wrong track from the beginning (the anti-Catholic animus was intense) and has resulted in many of our continuing problems.

AR: Taking a larger view of things, where do you think the discipline of sociology is going? Your long and very public engagement with it gives you a specific perspective on the question.

RNB: Whatever else one might say about Talcott Parsons, he was never provincial. He thought sociology included the world and its contents. His general theory of action included culture, society, personality, and the behavioral organism (the human organism insofar as it is capable of learning). I never heard him say, "That is not sociology." Law, psychoanalysis, even biology, were all included in the very big tent of "action." This generosity of interest was reflected in [Talcott's] relation to his students. He was permissive and supportive of almost anything a student might want to do. He was a teacher and later friend of Harold Garfinkel. He was a friend of Kenneth Burke, the literary critic. And one could name others one might not

expect.

Although Talcott contributed greatly to the elevation of Durkheim and Weber as founders of sociology, and used them as role models in the breadth of his interests, one has to wonder how much of that spirit survives in contemporary sociology. Even as a graduate student I was surprised when I was approached by a graduate student from another institution at an ASA meeting to be greeted with “I am a symbolic-interactionist” and “You are a structural-functionalist.” My immediate reaction was to deny that I was any such thing. In the Harvard department of social relations, anthropology and social and clinical psychology were included together with sociology, so I wasn't sure if I was even a sociologist, much less a follower of any other parochial “ism.” Today we have not only students of social movements, but followers of the resource-mobilization theory of social movements.

Of course, research lineages can be found in every science, yet in biology we have Stephen Jay Gould and E. O. Wilson, who have combined special fields and general approaches to biology, and have been challenged on both accounts. Such people are not absent in American sociology, although they are a little more frequent in Europe. A work like Randall Collins's *The Sociology of Philosophies* is magisterial in the grandest of traditions. Collins is exemplary not only in that great book but in much of his work for his serious concern with historical and cross-cultural comparison. So much of American sociology is bogged down in America alone, with a time span of a generation or less. Of course there's an infinite amount to know even within those limits of time and space, but so much is lost if you spend your life there. Weber famously declared that we are in the age of specialists and that work like his own will soon be outdated. Yet we still read Weber and not the specialists on whom he relied in his great comparative and historical works. We comment forever on him, but how many of us use him as a role model?

¹ Notably *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 1985, coauthored with Richard Madsen, Steven M. Tipton, William M. Sullivan, and Ann Swidler.

² The “Axial Age” (Ger. *Achsenzeit*, “axis time”) is a coinage of Karl Jaspers's to describe the period from 800 to 200 BC, during which, according to Jaspers, similar developments in religion and philosophy occurred in the Middle East, India, China, and Ancient Greece, although without any recorded communication between these regions. See Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953).

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