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(doi: 10.2383/74862)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2013

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# Robert Bellah (1927-2013)

*by* Ezra Vogel

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When I arrived as a graduate student at Harvard in 1953, Bob Bellah was already a leading star among the devotees of Talcott Parsons. Talcott had just completed *The Social System* and the “Yellow Peril,” the effort of scholars from sociology, social anthropology, social and clinical psychology to find a common language to build an integrated behavioral science theory [Parsons 1951; Parsons and Shils 1951]. Talcott had passed his stage of focusing on pattern variables and had begun his “AGIL stage” which dominated his work over the next decade, while Bob was a graduate student and during his faculty days from 1959-1967.

Those years at Harvard were intellectually exciting as we believed we were creating a new theoretical base for behavioral science. Talcott, the son of a minister, was a secular preacher of the new religion of behavioral science, just as Bob Bellah, also deeply religious, would later show his convictions as he talked about civil religion. I remember at one anniversary of the founding of Social Relations Department, Talcott gave his usual intense and totally sincere presentation on how the Department was founded: a theoretical convergence of several disciplines. On that occasion, George Homans followed saying, “Now Talcott, that is not the way I remember it at all. We founded the department because of ‘hate’ and I mean personal hate. You hated Sorokin, Gordon Allport hated Boring, and Clyde Kluckhohn hated Hooten.” Those of us who remembered those days believed that there was considerable truth in what Parsons said and what Homans said.

But in the early 1950s all of us in the sociology wing of the Social Relations Department at Harvard, including Homans, believed that in the field of sociology the *momentum* as the pre-eminent institution had passed from the University of Chicago, the great center before the war to Harvard, the great center after the war. Sam Stouffer who had led the great team of sociologists during the war to write *The American Soldier* [Stouffer *et al.* 1949] had joined the Harvard faculty to be the great methodologist along with Talcott the high level theorist and George Homans the mid-level theorist. While Bob Bellah was a student here, we had an extraordinary array of talented students that included Chuck Tilly, Cliff Geertz, Neil Smelser, Ed Tiryakian, and Jesse Pitts. If there were a respected elder brother in this group, it was Bob Bellah. Before long Talcott had attracted an extraordinary faculty that at one time included not only Bob Bellah but David Riesman, Alex Inkeles, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Dan Bell.

In Parsons' AGIL days, he devoted his seminar for one year to the A cell (economy), the next year to the G cell (government), the next year to the I cell (integration). He kept trying to think systematically about a total social system and the sub-systems, and their respective interchanges. We acolytes, 25-30 of us, including Bob Bellah, crowded into Parson's seminar year after year. Only the new students took the seminar for credit. If one were to ask, did we succeed in creating a systematic theory, an honest answer would be "No." If one were to ask what period in the history of sociology was there an exciting intellectual community of bright people that gave rise to creative work for decades thereafter, could this era not be considered one of them?

Not long after he entered graduate school, Bob became preoccupied with the questions Max Weber raised about the relationship between society and its religion. Weber did not have a deep knowledge of non-Western traditions, but Bob, intellectually ambitious, decided to spend many years studying other ethical systems, including the languages and history. He began with Japan to learn how it had sprouted a modern industrial society without a Protestant ethic. He pursued a joint degree in Social Relations and Far Eastern Languages and Civilizations, including a study of Japanese language and history. He found his answer in *Shingaku*, an ethical system founded by Ishida Baigan (1695-1744) that was widespread among Japan's merchant class during the Tokugawa Period. Instead of individualism as in the Protestant Ethic, *Shingaku* stressed asceticism and a commitment to the overall political system, but it allowed for an appropriate accumulation of personal profit that underpinned Japanese modernization. Bob's PhD thesis, on *Tokugawa Religion* became his first book, before he turned thirty [Bellah 1957].

Bob then went on to study Islam, undertaking the study of Arabic and middle-Eastern history. By the time he received his PhD he was in political trouble for his

undergraduate leadership in Communist activities through the John Reed Society. It was the height of Joseph McCarthy's witch-hunting of leftist intellectuals. Though Bob gave up his Communism, he refused to give information on his friends in the movement. As a result he lost his scholarship at Harvard and was exiled to Canada. Bob later said that as much as he was upset that he was pushed out of American academic life that the intellectual experience of studying Middle-Eastern history under the great Arabic scholar at McGill, William Cantwell Smith, was a great opportunity. Smith, paradoxically, came to Harvard to teach in 1964 when Bob was on the faculty but three years later Bob gave up his tenure at Harvard to go to Berkeley. As Bob told me, his main reason for going was that as much as he learned from Parsons and remained his friend, he had more freedom to grow intellectually on his own.

Those of us who knew Bellah know what a thoroughly moral and decent person he was. He was vigorous in his argumentation but he was not aggressive. And yet three times in his life Bellah suffered from serious attacks on himself as a person and his work. For five decades he remained upset at Harvard for not backing him in his fight against the attacks on his radical period. As he told me a few weeks before his death, fifty years after his problems at Harvard, he was allowed to open the materials on his case. Only then did he discover that Dean McGeorge Bundy whom he had suspected for fifty years as being at the center of attacks on himself, had in fact vigorously fought for Bellah internally but as dean did not feel he could reveal internal matters to the public [Bellah 2005]. By the time Bob's two years in Canada was over, support for Joe McCarthy had plummeted, and Parsons was able to invite Bellah to become a junior faculty at Harvard.

A second time Bob was attacked was several years later when he came up for tenure at Harvard. Barrington Moore, Jr., who had great distaste for Talcott Parsons' sociology, opposed granting tenure for one of Parsons' favorite students. Moore wrote a long paper, based on the work of E. Herbert Norman, arguing that Bellah had neglected the role of social class in overthrowing Tokugawa rule. Bob teamed up with his friend, the Japanese historian Albert Craig, in a carefully researched paper that showed that in fact social class was not a critical factor in ending Tokugawa rule. Soon thereafter Bellah was granted tenure.

The third time Bob was attacked was when he and his friend Cliff Geertz, then at Princeton Institute of Advanced study, developed a vision of making the Institute a great center for the sociological study of history. Others with a different vision for the Institute, attacked him. Geertz and Bellah had to give up their vision, and Bob remained at Berkeley. In a sense he became his own center as other outstanding scholars flocked around him wherever they were, in Berkeley, San Diego, Yale, Europe, or elsewhere.

Those of us who have known Bob over the years are dedicated to him because of his absolute integrity, his decency, and his intellectual vitality. He kept thinking about the basic issues of religion and society. Though Bob had not kept up with studies of Japan during most of his career, he returned to rethink the issues on Japan in *Imagining Japan* [Bellah 2003]. And he never stopped thinking about the evolution of religious structures, an issue he began thinking about in his early days with Talcott Parsons and into which he immersed himself for over a decade in his last years as he forged his last great masterpiece [Bellah 2011].

At age 76 Talcott Parsons returned to Germany where he had studied, to give a lecture. During the night after his lecture he passed away. At age 86, Robert Bellah returned to Harvard where he had studied, gave the Tillich lectures, and still full of intellectual vitality, died shortly thereafter. We will miss him.

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*Keywords: religion, comparative sociology, Japanese society, comparative history, modernization*

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At Harvard, he helped establish the U.S. Japan Program and served as its director. In 1972 he became John Fairbank's successor as head of Harvard's East Asia Research Center. Then, he became founding director of the undergraduate concentration of East Asian Studies and remained in that position until 1990. In 1993-1995 Vogel served during the Clinton administration as the National Intelligence Officer for East Asia on the National Intelligence Council. He is the only scholar from any country to have written a book on Japan that became a best seller in Japan (*Japan As Number One*, 1979) and a book on China that became a best seller in China (*Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 2011).