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Introduction to the Symposium: Views on Ritual, Religion, and Human Evolution

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Introduction to the Symposium

Views on Ritual, Religion, and Human Evolution

by Matteo Bortolini

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Ever since its publication in 2011, Robert N. Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* has been at the center of serious and deep, and sometimes hot, debates. And justly so. The crowning achievement of a long and distinguished intellectual and academic career, Bellah's *opus magnum* aims at summarizing a couple of centuries of discussion about religion, evolution, and their relationships – a *Problemstellung* that almost reads as the home address of modernity itself. Yet Bellah's accomplishment does not seem to focus modernity at all. It starts at the very start – the Big Bang and the birth of life on this planet – and stops at the edge of the so-called Axial Age, some hundred years before the beginning of the Common Era. On the one hand, thus, *Religion in Human Evolution* is a rich and complex treatise on the essence and role of religion in the development of basic human capabilities which takes its main examples from primitive and archaic religions, tribal societies and ancient empires, Greek philosophy and ancient Hebrew prophets. On the other hand, modernity – our condition, our way of life, our destiny – is everywhere in the book. When we read about tribal upstarts and “reverse hierarchy dominance,” we really are reading about ourselves, about the relationship between power and equality, about what makes us moderns unique in the history of Being. One does not have to be particularly learned or creative and evoke the ghosts of Max Weber and Talcott Parsons, or even the spirit of old Hegel himself, to make sense of this *unheimlich* condition – being the object of a book that speaks of anything else.

It occurred naturally to the editors of *Sociologica* to plan a contribution to the ongoing discussion on *Religion in Human Evolution*. We had some ideas in mind. First, we wanted to assemble a group of distinguished sociologists who had a good knowledge of Bellah's work – our symposium was to be the first entirely dedicated to sociologists. Second, we wanted to have, among our authors, a diverse group of good intellectual friends, people with whom we have fruitfully collaborated in the last fifteen years. Last but not least, we did not want to give strict guidelines: given the richness and multilayeredness of Bellah's effort, we knew that different commentators would find different themes to reflect upon, and we did not want to reduce their freedom or creativity in giving too strict a guideline for their contributions. We are now happy to present a rich and varied collection of essays which both take issue with and have been inspired by Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution*. Jeffrey C. Alexander's and Johann P. Arnason's papers can be read as two parts of a dialogue on the potentially disruptive consequences of the Axial break and the similitudes between different Axial traditions. Edward Tiryakian and Adam B. Seligman both start from themes typical of the sociology of religion – the Durkheimian legacy, the definition of the Axial Age, the role and importance of ritual – but only to trace more general conclusions for sociology, anthropology, and even theology. Seligman, in particular, criticizes and extends Bellah's treatment of the relationship between ritual and play, opening up new interesting pathways for sociological theorizing. Mark Gould uses a version of Parsons' voluntarism to analyze how Bellah's theoretical decisions and definitions interact in creating a wide understanding of the Axial Age and its consequences. Last but not least, Victor Perez-Diaz embeds Bellah's work in a larger view of Western modernization and proposes a post-secular argument centered on the possibility of creating a process of mutual learning of religion and secularism.

As the reader will see, all of the papers raise interesting questions which, just like Bellah's book, transcend the delimited range of topics and themes that a single work might include. One of the great merits of *Religion in Human Evolution* is to present, in an almost reckless way, a vast array of themes, theories, and empirical explorations which push the reader to reconsider and re-draw established borders – those between science and the humanities, object and subject, personal and scholarly narratives, erudition and imagination. As the papers by Alexander, Arnason, Tiryakian, Seligman, Gould, and Perez-Diaz show, *Religion in Human Evolution* pushes its readers to “go beyond” – to perform an acrobatic spectacle in the crossing and transcending of boundaries.¹

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Matteo Bortolini is assistant professor of Sociology at the University of Padova, Italy. He is a co-editor of *Sociologica* for 2013-2015, and has been a visiting fellow at the universities of California, Berkeley, Harvard, and Yale. He is currently writing an intellectual biography of Robert N. Bellah from the standpoint of the sociology of individuals. His interests also include the history of the social sciences in Italy and the US, and the sociology of fame and success.