

Bio-cultural evolution, seen from the study of religion

In his new book, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Harvard University Press, 2011), Robert N. Bellah, the renowned American sociologist of religion, makes a strong argument for a reintroduction of the concept of cultural evolution in the history of religion. Traditionally, since World War 1, an overwhelming majority among scholars has regarded evolution as a factually irrelevant and morally unacceptable category for understanding and explaining religious and other cultural phenomena. However, as early as in 1964, Robert Bellah wrote a sketch of a possible cultural-evolutionary scheme from the earliest religions and up to religion in modernity: "Religious Evolution" (reprint. in: *The Robert Bellah Reader*, Duke UP 2006, 23-50). The essay was passed over in silence, and Bellah turned to other matters; but in the last decade, Bellah has returned to his original idea. In the new version, the sketch has grown into a major book; and the cultural evolutionary development is supported with bio-cultural arguments, mainly drawn from Merlin Donald's theory of the three major 'cultures' in the development of modern human beings. Bellah's developed scheme combines sociological classics, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, with Roy Rappaport's and others' ritual theories. The construction may be of relevance for semioticians, inasmuch as it includes both a basic Peircean inspiration (provided through Rappaport) and an interest in the difference between oral and literal communication.

In my presentation I shall explain Bellah's main line of argument and give an example of how this way of thinking can put texts from my own field of expertise, The Old Testament, into a new perspective.

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