



## Final Statement on Symbols, Myths and Religious Sense in Humans Since the First

Workshop of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences



This workshop, which brought together, under the authority of Monsignor Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, Chancellor of the PAS, nineteen speakers of many disciplines and six nationalities, was held at the Casina Pio IV in the Vatican, headquarters of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. Fourteen of us were present in person, and four – including President Joachim von Braun – joined remotely. The workshop was dedicated to the personality and work of Fiorenzo Facchini, Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the University of Bologna, who was present in person and gave a talk.

The purpose of the workshop was to bring together Scientists and Philosophers to reflect on the essential, delicate question of Religious Sense in Humans and to try to find a shared answer to it.

The meeting was split into 4 sessions, devoted respectively to Archaeologists, Ethnologists, Biologists and Philosophers.

The Archaeologists first of all brought some very ancient material evidence of symbolic thought in human fossils, starting from objects collected randomly to objects that were transformed, and then objects whose form is more and more appreciated and objects whose form is appropriated, to objects with which one scribbles on a wall on which one engraves or paints a great story; but these archaeologist colleagues also described protective rituals (ochre markings), burial practices (graves first, then burials), probable initiation ceremonies (music, dances), and undeniable acts of

compassion (care for the disabled, beginnings of medicine).

The Ethnologists in turn told us about the beliefs, called animist, and so-called shamanic practices of small contemporary populations, where nature and culture mingle, where animal spirit, plant spirit and human soul mean the same thing, where myths appease anxieties and bind the members of the same community. We can imagine that these forms of perception of the religious sense precede the great ancient polytheisms with their complicated pantheons and the brilliant contemporary monotheisms, where an omniscient, omnipotent God, agent and judge, is able to protect as well as punish. Some participants call the first societies horizontal (all Spirits are equal), and the second, vertical (with a hierarchy between Humans and Gods).

For Biologists, it is the increasing complexity of the brain, born of its adaptation to changes in the environment, that will eventually lead to a higher level of consciousness and to its product, reflection. Humans will know that they know, will be able to anticipate and apprehend death, will feel the resulting anxiety and will invent a remedy, “belief”, a simple by-product – called *exaptation* – of natural selection. The motor which drives the “evolution” of the whole living system is the one which causes the emergence of the religious phenomenon. Nature, they say, abhors a vacuum, whereas human nature hates emptiness of meaning! If we stop at this indisputable observation and we agree that it is not reductive, we must recognize that, for a naturalist, it is consistent with all the knowledge of the living and, therefore, it is sufficient and completely reassuring.

But the Philosophers, even if they listen to and respect the conclusions of the Biologists, and consequently, record their data and take it into account in their reflections, do not interpret it in the same way and, consequently, are not satisfied with it. If inert matter can, in fact, be defined as having a history “better and better organized but more and more complicated” and if the living matter which descends from it can be summed up in a story “more and more diversified but better and better controlled – by genetics”, the thinking being itself is surprising because of his or her “ever Freer but ever more Responsible” character! And this indisputable, but well-guarded, Freedom means that Humans suddenly find themselves, for the first time in this long journey, in charge of their own destiny – at least in part, but perhaps more and more so. Natural selection “stroved” to save the species; but, enriched with the spiritual dimension inherent in the spirit, it now focuses on “saving” the Person.

And we have thus reached the end of this elegant tableau, with its complementary stages and successive steps.

Humans, with their deep biological roots, emerge before our eyes “naturally” equipped with this famed religious sense.

The Person and the Soul merge into it, and often so do Reflection, Meditation and Prayer. Perhaps this is the shared answer that Scientists and Philosophers were looking for.

What now remains to define is the Human Being, even though this demarcation will not change our conclusion. Nevertheless, we are in an Academy of Sciences and we owe it to ourselves to examine whether this frontier exists at all.

Like the Chimpanzees, our closest relatives, seem to have invented rituals and to be concerned with death (at least today), and like the Prehumans, our closest ancestors, seem to have manufactured tools as early as 3,300,000 years ago, thus achieving the creation of form and symbol at the same time, some of us would tend to trace the notion of “religious” sense back to 10 million years ago, to the age of the common ancestors of Chimpanzees and Humans; others would, on the contrary, wait for biological evidence (level of cerebral complexity) or archaeological evidence (manufactured objects, burials, rock art) before daring to attach “religious sense” to a Prehuman (Lucy, for example) or to a Human.

But whether this sense is 10 million years old, 3 million years old or 500,000 years old, “one fine day” (which can be of a certain, progressive, duration), a “soul (ἡ ψυχὴ τὰ ὄντα πώς ἔστι πάντα)” (Aristotle, *De anima*, 431 b 20) does emerge from a long history of 14 billion years of Matter and 4 billion years of Life, giving unity to the Hominidae family whom, despite its hitherto unsuspected antiquity, we can thus call Human.

[Yves Coppens](#) and [+ Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo](#)