

THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS AND SPIRITUALITY

by **Barbara Dowds**



The constant need of human beings in civilization to create ideologies, religious beliefs, political hierarchies, and the like, investing these with meaning so as to feel mirrored, real, validated, part of some larger transcendent reality is largely the product of dependency and sedentism and does not appear in societies that value autonomy and mobility.
(Berman, 2000:168).

Between this sky and the faces looking up to it there is nothing on which to hang a mythology, a literature, an ethic or a religion; only stones, flesh, stars and those truths which the hand can touch.
(Camus, 1970: 89)

Abstract:

This article outlines a theory of the historical evolution of human consciousness and spirituality from the time when we became self-conscious and aware of a painful and alienating gap between self and the world. It is postulated that mankind has taken various attitudes to this gap: from accepting it to attempting to bridge it by ecstatic fusion with a transcendent god to numbing out from it. We carry the genetic inheritance which makes any of these strategies possible. In a groundbreaking work, Morris Berman argues that transcendent religion emerged in response to the stress of settled life but that we have retained – mostly in dormant form - the capacity for the earlier immanent ‘paradoxical’ spirituality of our pre-agricultural nomadic ancestors. What we should do with this knowledge is discussed.

Introduction

What is wrong with modern man – and woman? Particularly in the West, we are constantly dissatisfied, striving, looking for more, whether it is consumer goods, fame, fortune, power, a longer lifespan or spiritual kicks. As Anne Wilson Schaef (1987) has pointed out, we are living in an addictive society. Morris Berman is a cultural historian who has attempted to make sense of our malaise in a remarkable trilogy about the evolution of Western consciousness. These volumes are aimed at demonstrating that our current alienation - with its attendant economic chaos and ecological disaster - is not an inherent part of being human, but is a product of certain social and historical changes. His prescience is revealed by noting that the first part of the trilogy was initially published in 1981 and the losses he mourned then have become only more extreme in the intervening 30 years.

In *The Reenchantment of the World* (1981), he traces our distancing from nature back to the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. In *Coming to our Senses* (1989) he explores the relationship between our physical experience of the world and the larger culture. In Western society, we have lost our senses – not our minds, but our bodies. Finally, in *Wandering God* (2000), he contrasts the consciousness, power relations and spirituality of our hunter-gatherer ancestors with later settled human beings, the originators of our present-day urban societies. He argues that with the shift from nomadic to sedentary life, relative social equality and secular/sacred immediacy gave way to power hierarchies and spiritual transcendence.

In this article, I want to examine what Berman has to say about the *evolution* of spirituality, a topic on which I couldn't have imagined any available evidence until reading his book (Berman, 2000).

The Basic Fault

During the Upper Paleolithic era 35,000 years ago, cave painting originated, there is a sharp increase in artefacts such as personal ornaments and grave goods and there is evidence of goal orientation in the form of advance planning (see below). There is general agreement amongst archaeologists that this suggests a 'theory of mind' (Mithen, 1998: 104, 174): i.e. the emergence of self-conscious awareness (Berman, 2000). This generates a painful and alienating split between self and world. In our physical growth, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny: i.e. the development of the embryo mirrors in its stages our evolution from more primitive life-forms. So it is with our psychological development. This split that arose in mankind in the Paleolithic era is seen to appear during the psychological birth of the infant. The beginning of self-awareness typically occurs around the third year of life and creates what Lacan called "the gap" and Balint called the "basic fault" (Gomez, 1997). This is the pulling away from a primal unity with mother and the world into our awareness of Self as a separate entity in a world of Others. Here I want to document how the human race may have grappled with this alienation historically.

The Upper Paleolithic

Based on evidence from the archaeological record as well as studies of today's remaining hunter-gatherer tribes, Berman argues that our Paleolithic ancestors lived in a state of

'paradoxical' consciousness, so named because it is simultaneously focused and nonfocused, a state of attentive waiting: 'It is hovering, or peripheral (horizontal perception), rather than intense or ecstatic' (p.9). The person accepts the world as it presents itself, including the split between Self and World. Spirit is not separate, but is immanent within the world: it is 'the smell of the forest after rain, the warm blood of the deer' (p.11). In this way of being, the secular is the sacred.

The Neolithic

With the beginning of our dependence on agriculture about 10,000 years ago (the Neolithic period), our consciousness began to change. Berman believes that by going sedentary, we shifted from a direct experience of life to the pursuit of substitutes and that a certain kind of mental flexibility got lost as well. In this delayed-return economy with its accompanying insecurity, trust in the world declines and fear of death takes on a prominent place. Where hunter-gatherers dealt with conflict by fission and fusion of groupings, settled communities had to create rules and authority structures: i.e. vertical power relations. The sacred which was formerly located in the world is now projected upwards, in what Berman calls the vertical or ascent model of spirituality. This 'sacred authority complex' is typified by the theocracies of Egypt and the Near East. The pharaoh was God's representative on earth and through him security was relatively assured. Paradox has been replaced by certainty and vertical spirituality is accompanied by vertical power relations.

2000 B.C. until recently

Sometime, around 2000 B.C. or later, verticality became more pronounced as the 'ascent' phenomenon emerged. These unitive trance or ecstasy experiences generated temporary psychological security by healing the split. 'All of this served to offset the pain of ego-consciousness by means of a mystical experience that merged the psyche with the rest of creation' (p.4-5). Freud called this the "oceanic experience" and regarded it as regressive, whereas Jung saw it as progressive in contacting primitive wisdom. Apart from this mystical ascent out of our bodies, erotic energy is channelled into specific experiences that we now regard as the norm, e.g. romantic love, heroism or great ambition. The social background to this form of spirituality is quite different from our Paleolithic ancestors. There is narrow birth spacing, dyadic mothering, increasing population density, gender and class inequality, fear of death and adherence to ideology in the pursuit of certainty (see p.150).

Industrial Societies

The current way of dealing with ego-consciousness is what Berman calls 'dullardism', in other words, spacing out. The goal here is to become unconscious - with perhaps a short-term high - by means of our favourite addiction: alcohol, tranquillisers, TV, spectator sports, busyness, workaholism, etc.

Those who try to bring inspiration into our current culture and challenge the dominant analytical, scientific, rational, materialist paradigm in Western thought, tend to shift to Gnostic insight, some form of mysticism or transpersonal spirituality: i.e. a return to the ascent model. Berman believes that mankind has gone through a 'progressive loss in spiritual intelligence' (p.188) and tries to offer an embodied alternative to the ascent model by reintroducing the concept of paradox. Years of bodywork and meditation have convinced him that the vertical model, indeed the addiction to paradigm-shifts, is rooted in denial of our somatic experience. He is highly critical of Jung and transpersonal theorists who, 'despite some valuable insights, were (are) cut off from bodily experience; they created a larger mind than the dominant intellectual paradigm, but when all is said and done, it was still a mind' (p.15). In *Coming to our Senses*, Berman argues that we need a renewed corporeality if we are not going to repress the body and make a fetish out of a supposedly new spirituality. He also believes that the need for certainty that arose with sedentary life overlies a deeper need for the world to be unpredictable, surprising and alive.

Some Evidence

The case that Paleolithic Hunter-Gatherers were Non-Religious

It is impossible in a short article to do justice to the wealth of evidence Berman finds in archaeology, anthropological studies of extant hunter-gatherer and nomadic tribes as well as power relations in non-human primates. Berman is aware that his analysis runs counter to most anthropological thinking about religion. He disagrees with James Frazer, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade that primitive man 'was up to his eyeballs in trance, myth and shamanism' (p.19). He argues in detail for a much more parsimonious and practical interpretation of Paleolithic cave art than the traditional religious/shamanic view. He cites hunter-gatherer societies today that do not worship anything; they 'merely' regard their forest, their universe as alive and friendly. Berman shows with many examples that hunter-gatherer peoples cope with inter-

personal conflict by leaving the community and re-grouping and suggests that the induction of altered states of consciousness may be a response to the stress of living in large sedentary communities - addiction in embryo. Berman further believes that our ancestors may not have viewed death as something terrifying or mysterious, as is in fact true for some hunter-gatherer societies today.

The counter case is put by the archaeologist, Steven Mithen, who convincingly argues that 'we can be confident that religious ideologies as complex as those of modern hunter-gatherers came into existence at the time of the Middle/Upper Paleolithic transition and have remained with us ever since' (1998: 202).

The Origins of the Split between Self and World

After 35,000 years ago, evidence of developing advance planning appears in the archaeological record in the form of carving, polishing and repair of tools, storage of tools at the home base and the advent of big game hunting. The events of the Upper Paleolithic - technology, burials, adornment, hunting and artistic/symbolic representation - all indicate a shift from the exterior world to the mind. It is thought that before this period, man's cognitive ability was limited to thinking about physical reality, but that later, it encompassed abstract ideas such as death or personal identity. This is paralleled in the cognitive development of children today as demonstrated by Piaget. By the time we arrive at the Neolithic with the planting of grain and the domestication of animals which involve enormous depth of planning, our capacity to feel at home in the world by paradoxical thinking is virtually lost. The split between Self and world needs mending. We now require religion - and attachment.

Mothering in Hunter-Gatherer Tribes

Hunter-gatherer societies in the present and probably in the past have/had to space their children; and with a typical 4-year period of nursing at the breast, HG children do not develop attachments to transitional objects, but cathect the whole environment instead. Erikson (1968) makes explicit the link between unitive trance and the bond between mother and infant. He suggests that we repeatedly try to recapture the dyadic, numinous experience of infancy through later experiences of fusion such as romantic love, immersion in a leader's charisma or religious observance. In this way we transcend our separateness. However, as Berman shows, other cultural versions of child-rearing are possible and 'in them romantic love, religion, war, vertical

spiritual experience and charisma seem to be absent, aberrant, or muted because infants in those societies are not the object of such exclusive (narcissistic) intensity' (p.46).

Nomadic 'Religion'

Berman suggests (following Bruce Chatwin) that for nomads and hunter-gatherers, it is movement that makes religious ritual superfluous. 'Movement across the landscape is such a vivid, immediate experience that the need for anything more complicated than paradox is largely obviated' (p.166). Among many others, he cites the Basseri nomads of Iran for whom the spring migration is the highlight of the year. 'The search for pasture was of secondary importance to the symbolism of the event, which revolved around spatial mobility, the freedom to migrate' (p.167). Chatwin (1988) believes that religion is a response to anxiety and that movement, by catharting this anxiety (something that body therapists will recognize), removes the need for religion. I wonder if the real point of the Christian pilgrimage was movement rather than holy sites, journey rather than destination, though of course part of the thrill and holding of any journey is the prospect of arrival.

Berman acknowledges that there are many hunter-gatherer and nomadic groups today who do espouse vertical, ecstatic religions. It is not known whether their distant ancestors worshipped in the same way or whether their ascent-model of religion was acquired from settled neighbours. However, what is important for Berman's argument is that it is possible – and there are many current or recent tribal examples – to live deeply engaged, non-alienated lives without transcendent religion. These tribes are more embodied and have an ongoing trusting acceptance of their world and of themselves and others. They are not trying to escape from their lives.

The Nomadic Personality

One of the most comprehensive studies of nomadic personality (cited p.172-174) involved interviews with four East African peoples, each of whom had agricultural and nomadic wings, making for a total of eight groups. There was a clear difference in personality structure, not along ethnic lines, but along ones of subsistence. The pastoralists expressed emotions, including anger, directly, whereas the farmers suppressed them. The farmers hated others, whereas the pastoralists did not harbour hostilities (though they relied on the option of fission and fusion in the event of

conflict). Fear of poverty, jealousy of wealth and desire for friends were dominant in the agrarian psyche, whereas pastoralists prized independence and self-reliance above everything else and their networks of interdependence were not person-specific. Even their cognitive abilities differed in terms of the nomads' tendency to see parts of a perceptual field as separate from the whole, a necessity for survival in that way of life.

In general, nomadic society is less specialised and more egalitarian, and when hierarchies do develop, it is due to interaction with sedentary states rather than from their own internal dynamics.

Berman's Conclusion

We all carry within us the genetic legacy of immanent spirituality. If Berman is right and this was mankind's way of life from the dawn of self-consciousness 35,000 years ago until we settled in agricultural communities 10,000 years ago, then a much greater part of our evolutionary history was spent in paradoxical consciousness than in the relatively recent ascent model of being. All we need is to remove our blinkers and realise that the vertical model is not the only one. So, where does all this lead us? Clearly with the current world population, there is no possibility that we can return to a nomadic existence. Nor does Berman want to add to paradigm-shift addiction by creating a new false god for us to pursue. He concludes: 'there is an alternative to this paradigm-shift addiction, but because it is not addictive, it is much less exciting. This is to recognise that what we need is not a dramatic transformation of reality and culture, but simply the willingness to live in this culture and reality as we work on the intelligent repair of present problems, without hype or bombast, and let the future take care of itself' (p.229). He believes that there are two elements of HG living that modern individuals could adopt: one is the cultivation of silent spaces and the second is the radical acceptance of death. At a social level, we must tackle the population problem.

He cites Bernadette Roberts (1993) who has made the transition he talks about from the unitive experience of the sacred to the paradoxical: "I quit wandering around looking for life". She gave up on the "false expectation that some ultimate reality lies hidden somewhere behind, beneath or beyond what is."... "How many can appreciate the triumph of being common and ordinary? Who can understand what it means to learn that the ultimate reality is not a passing moment of bliss,


not a fleeting vision or transfiguration, not some ineffable, extraordinary experience or phenomenon, but insteadas simple as a smile?" (p.232). In reading this, I am reminded of the journey of the spiritual teacher, Catherine Ingram (2003). After decades of Buddhist striving, she became depressed and has moved away from Buddhism to a non-affiliated teaching of what she calls "awakened awareness". This is a relaxed present attention that is not something to be attained but rather something to be noticed and honoured. Most of the qualities she helps awaken in her students are those that Berman advocates: silence, embodiment, genuineness, delight and wonder.

What About Me?

Having spent most of my word space attempting to summarise Berman's argument, I begin to wonder where I fit into all of this. I was drawn to the book because of my fascination with the same subjects: psychology, anthropology, archaeology, etc. But, at a deeper level, I know in my body-spirit what he is talking about. In my childhood, I was fortunate enough to cathect nature more than the numinous (m)other. Yet my childhood experiences of nature may not have been entirely of the immanent variety and may have had moments of ecstatic fusion that I have spent my later life seeking to repeat. But, in my adult life, spiritual striving has brought me a sense of failure and emptiness, with a constant seeking after a fusion that may be impossible for me without extreme physical deprivation. I need to learn to recognise and give thanks for the more ordinary pleasures such as I have experienced on walking holidays with a different destination each day. There is a joy and satisfaction beyond words in the moods of the ever-changing landscape and weather, the soothing physical exercise, the genuine hunger at the end of the day and the holding provided by the need to reach the destination with its attendant food and shelter. If the life of a nomad was an option, I would take it.

And yet, I don't share Berman's disquiet about out-of-body experiences or altered states of consciousness. Can we not work against some of

the unacceptable faces of the ascent model of consciousness while retaining transcendent religion? If I was graced with the experience of ecstatic fusion with God, I certainly wouldn't say no. At the same time, I have got the message from Berman that it is time to stop searching above, behind and beyond and value what is *here*.

What still needs to be explored is to what degree we are becoming nomads again in a globalised world and whether our technologised, internet identities are becoming more diffuse and therefore, ironically, open to paradoxical consciousness. 

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- Unless otherwise stated, all references are to Berman (2000).

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