
Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Morris Berman, *Wandering God: A Study in Nomadic Spirituality*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Reviewer: *Mathias Guenther*
Wilfrid Laurier University

Wandering God is the third of a remarkable trilogy on the evolution and diversity of the patterns thought and consciousness of *Homo sapiens* through the ages. Their manifestation, in spirituality and corporeality, were the themes of the previous two books, respectively, *The Reenchantment of the World* (1981) and *Coming to Our Senses* (1989). What Berman deals with in the present book, with impressive intellectual scope and erudition, is the shift of the thought patterns of Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer nomads to those of sedentary agriculturalists (and beyond, to 20th-century Western industrial civilization). "Paradox" characterizes the former, a way of viewing the world, alertly, wholly and horizontally, with a broad, floodlight perspective that takes in all simultaneously, the opposites and the periphery. What is yielded is a "kind of kaleidoscopic consciousness," a "kind of mature ambiguity," for which the author has a distinct preference, as it fosters openness and tolerance, qualities lacking from the thought pattern that displaced it, with the rise of the Old World early agricultural civilizations. This Berman refers to as the "sacred authority complex" (SAC), with a mode of thought in which ambiguity yields to certainty, simultaneity to duality, and horizontality to verticality (and tolerance to dogmatism). Here certain elements of reality are designated elevated, sacred, eternal, true and transcendent value and, by their association with politics and authority, provide the ideological underpinnings for inequality. A key element of SAC is ASC, Altered/Alternate States of Consciousness, in particular "unitive trance" (which embraces, intensively and exclusively, one of a paired set of phenomena, for instance, Self the Sacred, to the exclusion of Other or the Secular). As a powerful "ascent experience," trance provides the person experiencing it with an intensified awareness of one or another of the ultimate truths and connects him or her to the eternal, yielding a "fusion with the absolute" and thereby utter certainty.

The chapters that take the reader through this transformations of human thought are models of scholarship. Learned, informed and up-to-date explorations are offered of Palae-

olithic cave art and culture; of the development, among complex hunter-gatherers and agriculturalists, of inequality; of the rise of agriculture and the alleged cult around the goddess (and her male counterpart, the hero); of early pastoralism. The last two chapters fast forward in time, offering a far-ranging review and typology of Western intellectual traditions that balance the elements of logic or form and spirit or process, as well as paradox. Ludwig Wittgenstein receives detailed treatment, being heralded as the Western thinker whose thought embraced both logic and paradox (turning to the latter in the second half of his life, in a new philosophical incarnation). That "paradigm worship"—SAC's secular branch—continues to this day in Western thought, to our Western intellectual and moral detriment, is Berman's pessimistic conclusion. As an antidote to this Western epistemological disease he suggests that we should inject paradox into our mode of thought, not in massive doses, which would result in merely another paradigm, but through the irksome pinpricks of a gadfly, that "keeps nagging at us until we are ready to look at our need for certainty with a more critical eye."

While cogently argued—with much of the scholarly evidence provided in comprehensive endnotes that rein in a wide array of source material—a student of hunter-gatherers might have a couple of objections, especially a student of hunter-gatherer religion and of the Bushmen, a much drawn-on ethnographic example in Berman's book. The treatment of the Bushmen is too monolithic; it suffers heavily from the affliction of so many of the earlier, pre-revisionist studies on the Bushmen (and on hunter-gatherers), the "tyranny of the !Kung." In treating the latter group as synonymous with "the Bushmen of the Kalahari desert," Berman goes against the grain of more recent studies, by Alan Barnard, Susan Kent, others, which dwell on the striking structural and cultural diversity of this foraging people. The same is the concern of recent researchers on other hunter-gatherers, which span the spectrum from simple, small-scale, egalitarian foragers to complex, hierarchical, virtually sedentary fisher-villagers. The former type is the one privileged in this study and treated as the ethnographic analogues to Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers (with due awareness, on the author's part, of the fact that the Palaeolithic folk that loom large in his book, the cave painters, were likely a variant of complex hunter-gatherers).

As for hunter-gatherer religion, one might take issue with Berman's suggestion that trance is a religious phenomenon primarily of agricultural folk, occurring only "occasionally" among hunter-gatherers and showing merely "traces" among Palaeolithic ones. The work by Richard Katz and, more recently, by David Lewis-Williams, Thomas Dowson and Jean Clottes—to which Berman addresses himself critically in one of his lengthy endnotes—suggest otherwise, namely that ASC is an integral and pivotal element of the religion of the Bushmen, as of other hunter-gatherers, including prehistoric ones. Also contestable is Berman's suggestion that the trance experience is vertical, one of ascent, and that it is "unitive." The outer-body travel of a Bushman trance dancer is in fact as much lateral or horizontal—across a nocturnal natural landscape, on the lookout for game animals and humans in other camps—as it is vertical, up- and downwards. Regarding verticality, a dimension Berman ascribes to the cosmologies of agriculturalists, one might note that one finds the same also among hunter-gatherers, exemplified in a three-tiered universe (vertically traversed by some sort of *axis mundi*). As for its unitive aspect, the Bushmen's version of trance is one more of disassociation and disjuncture than of unity, as, at the experiential and phenomenological levels, aspects of the real world, of the living, people and animals, merge with those of the spirit world.

These objections notwithstanding, I am persuaded by Berman's depiction of the mental and cosmological patterns of hunter-gatherers, especially its key element of paradox (or ambiguity, which, as it happens, is the *leitmotif* also of my own recently published study of the religion of one such group, the Bushmen). These patterns are also radically different from those of non-hunter-gatherers, yet, at the same time, they continue to be linked to them, as ideological counter-currents to their distinctive mode of thought, one marked by clarity, certainty, dogmatism and authority. That hunter-gatherers are a distinctive, autonomous cultural type, today as in the past, whose ideas, beliefs, myths and world view are profound and relevant to our own, is the basic message I take from this fascinating study of human thought and consciousness. This sort of message has become highly controversial in the field of hunter-gatherer and Bushman studies. Because of the cogency of its argument and quality of its research, this book might well rekindle the controversy and elicit a new round in the "Great Kalahari Debate."

Yuen-fong Woon, *The Excluded Wife*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal and Kingston, 1998, ISBN 0-7735-1730-8, xvii + 295 pages.

Reviewer: *Wendy Larson*
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When a professor decides to present her research in novel form, I always feel some trepidation. Nonetheless, I felt

drawn to the portrayal of the "excluded wife"—the woman left behind in China when her husband left to find his fortune in Canada—by Yuen-fong Woon. Woon is a professor in Pacific and Asian Studies at the University of Victoria, and began the research behind this book in the mid-1980s as part of an oral history project. Part 1 of the book covers the period from 1929 to 1952, when the Chinese Exclusion Act (in force from 1923 to 1947) prohibited wives from accompanying their husbands to Canada. This is the longest and most vivid section of the novel. Part 2 covers 1952 to 1955, when the main character leaves southern mainland China for Hongkong, along with thousands of refugees. The third and final part goes from 1955 to 1987 and takes place in Vancouver's Chinatown.

The centre of this novel is Wong Sau-ping, created to represent the "grass widow," or the wife left behind in Guangdong Province. To invent this character, Woon interviewed women who had joined their husbands in Canada, others in peasant households in Guangdong Province, and cadres in China. Woon's stated goal in writing about grass widows is to produce an ethnography that is "an accurate depiction of their lives and a truthful testimony to their bravery and endurance" (xi). I believe she has met this goal.

Wong Sau-ping is the wife of Leung Yik-Man, a grandson of the large Leung lineage. In focussing both on lineage, with its pervasive cultural meanings, and on a woman, Woon allows her quite evident feminist sensibilities to play upon this fictional historical record, for as she notes in the family tree she has constructed for Wong Sau-Ping, "A formal genealogy would leave out Sau-Ping's natal family, and the women would be there marginally if at all" (xiii). This move allows us to see one rationale behind Woon's decision to use fiction rather than present her research within conventional modes. Although it would be possible to represent the lives of women almost totally determined by patriarchal concepts of lineage, the women's subjectivity—their daily experience of these cultural structures—is expressed much more vividly in this fictional form.

The story is engrossing. Woon's ability to create living characters grows as she progresses through the narrative, which begins in 1929 when Sau-ping is an unmarried teenager moving into the "maiden house" with others like herself. As Woon notes, Sau-ping "had been trained as a modest daughter" and throughout the tale we find that Sau-ping in many ways is a conventional uneducated woman who lives by the dictates of patriarchy and ancestor worship that have been taught to her. She is afraid of becoming a grass widow but cannot question the idea, because "women were required to be strong in obedience" to avoid being turned into pigs or crazies and killed by the villagers (8).

Sau-ping is married in 1933 to Leung Yik-man. We hear Woon's scholarly voice infiltrating the narrative here and there; for example, when Sau-ping first sees Yik-man, she describes him as "tall and muscular by local standards" (32). Surely that added "by local standards" is Woon telling us that