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From Stone to Nuclear: The Religion of Our Remote Ancestors?

Last month I visited in France and my daughter took me to the caves of Lascaux, Rouffingac and Padirac. These are awesome experiences. We took in the ways in which the pictures had been captured so vividly on flat walls, the three dimensions and the sense of movement of the animals probably more than 50,000 years ago.

Ailie and I questioned each other about the strange crosses, signs and dots on the walls alongside the paintings and compared them to the strange spirals cut by our Celtic ancestors in the rocks around Kilmartin in Argyle which had so intrigued us before. In the shop at Lascaux I came across a book titled *The Mind in the Cave*. The title captured my imagination. Ailie, who has a degree in Social Anthropology and Religious Studies, talked me into it, as she often does, and I bought it and it led me into a fascinating world, the world of paleo-psychology, the minds of early man and woman – and, of course into their religion. And that took me on a journey to the present day and to a deepening understanding of my own religion and perhaps, even, of myself.

These paintings are dated to around fifty thousand years ago! About four or five thousand years BC (which means about seven thousand years ago) we have traces of the first river valley civilisations on the Nile, the Indus and the Yangtze Kiang. The Columbian civilizations of South and Central America are roughly contemporaneous. But 50,000 years ago is that huge period of time again and again - and over again up to nearly ten times that. It reminds me of a piece from the Scandinavian Sagas on eternity:

High up in the North in the land called Svithjod, there stands a rock. It is a hundred miles high and a hundred miles wide.

Once every thousand years a little bird comes to this rock to sharpen its beak.

When the rock has thus been worn away, then a single day of eternity will have gone by.

As far as we can conceive of it, 10,000 years ago it might as well be an eternity. Like astronomical miles in space, 10,000.00 years just leaves us stunned. Incidentally, you might be inclined to exclaim “All these souls with no absolution for their sins before they died, no Pope to hold the keys of heaven and no true Christian fundamentalist evangelists to save them – what was this Judaeo-Christian God DOING all that time?” That is the chronological equivalent of the old geographical and cultural Sunday School chestnut “What about all these black and yellow people, mummy? (not to put too fine a point on it) Are they all going to hell?”

It was the cryptic signs from fifty thousand years ago that intrigued us. Several framed squares (rather like a knots and crosses but set with a frame round it); some parallel lines; some part curves, like boomerangs, nested inside each other; lots of clusters of dots seemingly arranged randomly; the occasional part of a curve with what might look like a tiara of jewels round it; and so on. It was as I came to read the book that I realised that someone had made sense of it. And fascinating sense it turned out to be! The explanation advanced came from recent laboratory reports of human experience in altered states of consciousness.

Now, let us pause and try to be very careful about what we mean by 'altered states of consciousness'. Altered in what way, we have to ask? By hypnosis, by extreme (often near death) experiences, by various drugs, by crowd hysteria, often unsought for by schizophrenic or epileptic invasion of consciousness or, much more often, just by more gentle effects such as that of music, scenery or even a sense of awe which might be part of what we are accustomed to call worship. Most people in the west prefer to restrict the term 'altered states of consciousness' to extreme hallucinations and trance states and we see these as inferior to the 'full light of reason'. I would not be alone in subscribing to the proposition that we need to think of a spectrum of altered states of consciousness.

In the selection and training of astronauts it has been known since the nineteen sixties that prolonged total sensory deprivation (e.g. floating in a tank of glycerine in the dark and in total silence) produces all sorts of hallucinations in altered states of consciousness with some people being more susceptible than others. It was even used by the British army in Cyprus as a means of brain-washing. It is also well known that altered states can be produced by a repeated mantra or chant, by prolonged drumming, continually flashing lights and sustained rhythmic dancing, to mention a few.

To take one example, a group of cognitive psychologists including people called Martindale and Siegel have systematically investigated visual experiences in altered states of consciousness. Martindale and others maintain that there two different trajectories or paths along which alteration can proceed, a normal everyday one and what he calls an intensified trajectory. In the normal one we daily, or several times a day,

pass from the concentrated reasoning clarity of the consciousness that we westerners so value and upon which all our scientific and technical achievements have been built, into a daydreaming state and then into hypnagogic pre-sleep state where we may see many images just as we pass over into sleep, and finally into deep dreaming sleep. But if we take off on the intensified trajectory, then, as we pass beyond daydreaming, we encounter what he calls entoptic phenomena before we progress to full hallucinations. These entoptic phenomena are usually seen as square frames, bunches of dots, parallel lines, etc. and these are what we see depicted on the wall of the caves alongside the paintings. Some of these figures and signs are seen by sufferers from migraine and recent research has shown that they are cerebral phenomena generated by the brain the eye together. They can be reproduced repeatedly in the laboratory under the right conditions and they are found world-wide with slight cultural variations, even alongside cave paintings in South Africa and in North America.

The experience of moving from normal consciousness to the hallucinatory state is seen as coming in three stages. First, there are the entoptic phenomena common to all mankind. Then, as the person goes deeper into the altered state, there come the attempts to make sense of them. These attempts to make sense vary from culture to culture and finally, after the experience of many trips and discussions among others in the culture, there are the full hallucinations which are the fully agreed partially culturally determined interpretations or 'end-products' of the entoptic phenomena. "For example an ambiguous round shape may be 'illusioned' into an orange if the subject is hungry; a breast if he is in a state of heightened sexual drive, a cup of water if the subject is thirsty, or an anarchist's bomb if the subject is fearful."

The move into the third, deep, stage is often experienced as a swirling vortex or a rotating tunnel that seems to surround them and draw them into its depths. Often, too, a bright light in the centre of the visual field creates and intensifies the illusion of a tunnel. This phenomenon corresponds closely to what are now commonly reported by patients who have recovered from a near death experience. Beyond the vortex the experience is described in a variety of other cultures, sometimes as flying, sometimes as going below ground down a hole or down the roots of a tree. And, almost always it leads to a description of existence as in three tiers, below ground (or sea); on this earth and above the earth. More than 90% of all known cultures on earth have 'culturally patterned forms of altered states of consciousness.' (Lewis-Williams, (2002) *The Mind in the Cave*. London, Thames and Hudson, p. 128)

There seems little doubt that the cave painters of 50,000 years ago were well familiar with what we know today as shamanism in indigenous religions around the world and in parts of some very ancient and prestigious religious cultures indeed. Why do I say there seems little doubt? Because (1) anyone can see the cryptic projections of the wall of the caves for themselves; (2) anthropologists have found similar signs in ancient places around the world; (3) psychologists are able to reproduce these forms in the laboratory and (4) contemporary reports of near death experiences from patients who are deemed to have died for a few seconds are remarkably similar. There is a convergence of evidence from different sources.

In the Upper Paleolithic all people were hunter-gatherers and most probably used a range of institutionalized altered states of consciousness. The visual,

aural and somatic experiences of those states give rise, in the hunter gatherer shamanistic cultures of today, to perceptions of an alternative reality that is frequently tiered (hunter-gatherers believe in spiritual realms above and below the world of daily life). As people with special powers and skills, the shamans, are believed to have access to this alternative reality. The behaviour of the human nervous system in certain altered states creates the illusion of dissociation from one's body (less commonly understood in hunting and gathering shamanistic societies as possession by spirits). As Lewis-Williams writes, Shamans use dissociation and other experiences of altered states of consciousness to achieve at least four ends. Shamans are believed to contact spirits and supernatural entities, heal the sick, control the movements and lives of animals, and change the weather.

These four functions of shamans, as well as their entrance into an altered state of consciousness, are believed to be facilitated by supernatural entities that include variously imagined supernatural powers, animal-helpers and other categories of spirits.

Many paleo-anthropologists have emphasized the importance of making sense of altered states of consciousness in the genesis of religion. Lewis-Williams quotes Peter Furst, an expert in the use of hallucinogenic drugs in ritual, as writing, 'It is at least possible, though certainly not provable, that the practice of shamanism...may have involved from the first — that is, the very beginnings of religion itself — the psychedelic potential of the natural environment:' Without stressing the use of psychotropic plants to alter consciousness, James McClenon in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, writes in 1997: "[S]hamanism, the result of cultural adaptation to

biologically based altered states of consciousness], is the origin of all later religious forms.' And Weston La Barre came to the same conclusion: 'All the dissociative "altered states of consciousness" — hallucination, trance, possession, vision, sensory deprivation, and especially the REM-state dream — apart from their cultural contexts and symbolic content, are essentially the same psychic states found everywhere among mankind; ...shamanism or direct contact with the supernatural in these states... is the *de facto* source of all revelation, and ultimately of all religions.'

So our more direct religious ancestors in the Middle East, only some three thousand years ago had probably already inherited the cosmology of a three tiered universe with a place below and a place above and they built their temples on high points where their priests went on spirit journeys and performed rituals (consciousness altering rituals perhaps?) uniting heaven, the underworld and the here and now – as I set out in a service several years ago.

Homo sapiens, essentially anatomically ourselves, swept into the backwater cul de sac of Western Europe from Russia and Eastern Europe around some 50,000 years ago and found Neanderthal man had already been there, probably for at least 250,000 years before that. *Homo sapiens* was then the result of millions of years of previous development elsewhere, mainly in Africa. The archaeological evidence suggests that we began using points, sharp edges as tools and using grindstones to make pigments as far back as 300,000 years ago and that at least 150,000 years later we can be found fishing, shell fishing and in long distance trade. Bone tools, barbed points and body decoration such as beads came in over another 120,000 years before any representational images such as we find in caves. As Steven Mithen writes in his (1996) book, "The Prehistory of the Mind: A

Search for the Origins of Art, Religion and Science”, there was almost certainly a parallel development in our mental abilities. Psychologists now recognise that what we, a few decades ago used to call general intelligence is a composite of several distinct abilities, e.g. shape recognition, short term memory. Recent theorists in paleo-psychology have suggested that it was relatively recently, perhaps even 10,000 years ago that the various abilities of social intelligence, technical intelligence, natural history intelligence and linguistic intelligence could join up together and communicate within the individual brain – probably through the increasing development of language which was originally based on musical sounds.

I cannot avoid having two closely intertwined themes today. One is about the role of altered states of consciousness in religion but the other is about the possibility of some evolution occurring in man’s thinking. Some years ago I came across the book “The Origin of Consciousness in The Breakdown of the Bi-cameral Mind” by Julian Jaynes. In it he argues, with many excellent examples provided, that as recently as the estimated times of the composing of the Iliad and the Odyssey, i.e. the early ancient Greeks, there was a significant change in our ability to think. It is not widely known that more than seventy percent of us hear voices at some time or other in our lives but we fairly quickly identify their origin as either a misinterpretation of a real sound or as coming from directly within ourselves. Jaynes maintains that the earlier ancient Greeks in the Iliad interpreted them as the voices of the Gods ordering them to do this or that, while the later Greeks of the Odyssey made the same distinctions and identifications as we mostly can do.

Whatever the religious experience of Neanderthal man, and even of the

apes and the animals was, they did not appear to have the ability to convey it to each other. What the prehistoric caves convey to us through the studies of anthropology and cognitive psychology together is that such altered states of consciousness were widespread 50,000 years ago. When they first happened, and when they were exploited in something like communal worship, we can only speculate on at present.

Let us take a look at the Judaeo-Christian tradition from which we Unitarians have emerged and within which we live. If you have any familiarity with the Old Testament at all you will have no trouble in finding visions and revelations, dreams and strange fantasies – all in the tradition of the interpretation of internal mental phenomena such as the Stone Age shamans practiced 45,000 years earlier at the beginning of almost entirely unrecorded human time. Just think of Isaiah and, of course the favourites of the American religious right, Ezekiel, Daniel and the New Testament Revelation.

Julian Jaynes thinks he can discern a development in thinking in the paleo-psychology of mankind when the ancient Greeks positioned their internal voice emanating from a relatively unconnected part of their brains, bringing a breakthrough in the unity of human consciousness. Not dissimilarly, we today can look back at the development of scientific thought as a sea change in our mental development. Before that, mythical explanations based on the capricious intervention of the Gods were advanced ad hoc independently of each other for each natural phenomenon. As William-Davis says, completely different mythical explanations may be put forward to explain why a certain mountain A exists and why mountain B, just a few kilometres away, is where it is.

Probably Thales, living on the Ionian coast in the sixth century BC, is the first example of this new way of thinking that we know of. He was able to predict the eclipse of 585 BC because he had deduced the existence of universal laws from his studies. Before that all events were believed to be controlled by the Gods and therefore unpredictable. From Thales and the ancient Greek scientists of Ionia and Alexandria general laws, universally applicable, would come increasingly to be induced from a study of a widespread field of incidences. These general laws would then be used to deduce or predict what could be expected to happen. And if it did not, the laws needed to be induced afresh or modified to take account of a wider range of causal factors. The ancient Egyptians and the Sumerians knew a lot about geometry and mathematics and they were superb observers of the sky but both of them kept their knowledge within a secretive priestly elite in league with the political powers of the day. Although the Sumerians probably made the first attempts at scientific prediction by trying to link the movement of the heavenly bodies to events on earth in the study of astrology, we, with our superior knowledge deduced more widely from modern physics and astronomy, now know why their attempts were doomed to failure. As is universally recognised, the ancient Greeks undoubtedly gave us our open enquiring science of today.

But this new way of thinking took a very long time to penetrate. It was not even self-consciously and systematically described until the enlightenment. And even after that it was often overwhelmed by forces of revelation and dogma reinforced by secular power as in Nazi Germany. We can still go back there tomorrow and there are many forces within our society which fervently wish that we would.

Moving into New Testament times, we see in the Damascus experience of St Paul, the REAL founder of Christianity an example of revealed truth, possibly arising from an epileptic storm. We see the Emperor Constantine allegedly guided by a vision deciding to make Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. And we see many others throughout the dark and middle ages claiming revealed knowledge as authority.

So why am I telling you all this? What does it matter? Where is the message you might say? Is it in the difference between what today we called revealed truths, originating in the Shamanistic journeys of our remote ancestors, and what we called empirical truths, derived from research guided by scientific method?

I have to turn aside for a moment from my main theme today, which is really about altered states of consciousness in our religion, to address a subsidiary theme which has unavoidably crept in to my line of thinking. I said earlier that most people in the west prefer to restrict the term 'altered states of consciousness' to extreme hallucinations and trance states and we see these as inferior to what me might be tempted to call the 'full light of reason'. Today we have various levels of confidence in what we believe. My geometry teacher's propositions would only come untrue in his worst nightmares. Physicists and chemists would be astonished if certain of their cherished laws failed to work. Social scientists, like experimental psychologists trade in probabilities estimated by sophisticated statistical methods. Other students of mankind, such as sociologists and historians, weigh up the balance of probabilities. Many religions rely on what they call revealed truth, not dissimilar, I am suggesting, to the truth of the shamanist's reported

experiences. Is there some evolution of human abilities to think here? I must leave it here to return to my main theme.

We Unitarians are an advanced battle ground where scientific knowledge meets revealed knowledge, where magical thinking about the Christ and even about the historical Jesus meets literary, historical and scientific criticism. Our ancestors on the radical far left of the Protestant revolution, long ago escaped the magical thinking that surrounded the alleged transformation of substances in the ritual of the Eucharist. In the nineteenth century we threw out miracles and the alleged magical status of the scriptures as the infallible voice of our Judeo-Christian God, before any other branches of the Christian religion. And many, but not all of us, have not stopped.

Yet there are lost yearnings among us too. There is always a nostalgia for the certainties of the past and I often share it. There are those who want more magic. Alastair Bate, at one time our Minister, used to complain that we were totally lacking in any sense of ritual. On at least one occasion, he used to mount shamanic ceremonies in the church on a Saturday afternoon. I do not think I was meant to stumble in on one of them where he dressed up in his Druidic robes, danced round us in a circle and beat his shamanic drum and led us on a guided fantasy down into the earth where we were supposed to meet our sacred power animal. All it produced in me was a poem which I had been struggling to write anyway. The neo pagans still hold such rituals.

Among some new Unitarian ministers there is a move to bring back the ritual of communion.

Recently Sue Wooley of UALM wrote an article in our UK house journal asking if we might not consider becoming more 'happy clappy' like the pentecostalists. Judging by the published post in return the answer was a fairly resounding NO.

We Unitarians, in this church at least, are pretty far out on the cool rationalist end of the spectrum of churches. We are the children, not so much of revelation as of the enlightenment. Yet are we Unitarians condemned to be desiccated calculating machines? I absolutely think not.

When I was about twelve I used to cycle out of Edinburgh on my own to a Norman church at Dalmeny near the Forth Bridge. There I had an appointment in the dusk with the dimly lit altar in the apse and gazing at it from the back of the tiny church, I felt the awe of the presence of all the worshippers over all the centuries. Later I learned of Otto's idea of what he called the numinous, an aura of reverence-inspiring mystery which can be felt in connection with certain places at certain times. I experienced it often in the dusk among the mountains and lochs, on the tops of some hills, around a waterfall, in the forest and even in the midst of the most hectic traffic in the centre of Glasgow. More conventionally certain cathedrals can bring it out and still many pieces of music. Perhaps the students of religion would class it as a form of animism and see it as primitive. Very rarely I have experienced a more universal sense of oneness with the universe and all forms of life within it. Most of you will have had some equivalent experiences.

When I come to contemplate the wonders of this life I can usually revive it at will. When I come to lead worship I often experience it, sometimes

several times in a Sunday. Indeed if I did not have that sense of mystery and awe which could be called worship myself, I would consider myself as unfit to lead others in what we conventionally call worship.

Yet, now, I have to ask you, is what I experience and I guess many of you, a mild altered state of consciousness in the long traditions stretching back to our forefathers in the caves? Of course we do not take hallucinogenic drugs like the ancient Hindus took the soma juice from the magic mushroom, the Fly Agaric; or like the students and professors of divinity at Harvard and Princeton took LSD in the sixties, as Tim Leary wrote up in his banned book, *The Politics of Ecstasy*; or like the chaplains in Jaroslav Hasek's bitter satire on militarism, *The Good Soldier Schweik*, who felt closer to their God after they had swilled copious amounts of the blessed communion wine. We do not find these aids necessary.

But do we experience together mildly altered states of consciousness?

Here are no magical transformations, no elaborate rituals, no impenetrable, elitist and secretive priesthood, no dancing in the isles, no ecstatic speaking with tongues. Here we are united in our sincere to find our own personal place of truths and to share the journeys in reaching there, perhaps never finally to arrive.

We are committed to extending the boundaries of human knowledge. But we are aware of how little we will ever know and we fear and love both that which we think we know and that which we guess we do not.