Introduction

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I should like to revive and revitalize historical jurisprudence, and I think the way to do it is with linguistic jurisprudence. History is group memory. Language is the record of history. Speech is the recording of the remembered past, and the envisioned future. I shall no doubt be scorned or ignored for the identification of history, speech, and law … But not in all quarters. More and more people are now ready for this message.

Harold J. Berman (1966)

Harold Berman is a giant, whose work defies the banalities of the age and allows us to take their measure. In a scholarly world drifting toward the particularistic exploration of “unique” contexts, Berman points in a different direction – toward holistic descriptions of entire systems of legal thought … Berman’s work, and especially his Law and Revolution, will endure when almost everything is forgotten. He is the only American who might be paired with Max Weber in the depth of his historical and comparative understanding of the remarkable character of legal modernity.

Guido Calabresi, Dean, Yale Law School (1996)

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Harold J. Berman was one of the great polymaths of American legal education, and taught for sixty years before his death in 2007. After completing his LLB and MA in History at Yale – interrupted by military service in World War II from 1942 to 1945 – he began his teaching career at Stanford Law School in 1947. From 1948 to 1985, he taught at Harvard Law School – for twelve years as the Joseph Story Professor of Law and Legal History, for sixteen more as the James Barr Ames Professor of


Law. He also served as Founder and Director of Harvard Law School’s Liberal Arts Fellowship Program in Law, Fellow of the Russian Research Center of Harvard University, and Member of the Legal Committee of the US–USSR Trade and Economic Council.

From 1985 to 2007, Berman taught at Emory Law School, serving as the first Robert W. Woodruff Professor of Law, a university professorship. He was also a Fellow in The Carter Center at Emory University, Founding Director of the American Law Center in Moscow, Founding Director of the World Law Institute at Emory Law School, and Senior Fellow of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University. He was also co-founder of the Journal of Law and Religion and a member of its sponsoring organization, the Council on Religion and Law.

In the first three decades of his career, Berman’s scholarly energies were focused on the Soviet legal system and the law of international trade. He developed several new courses, testified frequently before courts, commissions, and Congressional committees, and traveled regularly to Europe and the Soviet Union – fifty-five times to Russia alone. He spent the 1961–62 academic year at the Moscow Institute of State and Law, where he encountered, among others, a rising young star named Mikhail Gorbachev. In the spring of 1982, he served as Fulbright Professor at Moscow State University. He produced a massive body of new writing in this early period. Of these writings, his Justice in the USSR (1950; rev. edn. 1963) will long endure as a classic, as will several of his lengthy law review articles on the lex mercatoria. Also important publications in this period, 1

1 True story: it was the winter of 1982, with Brezhnev still in power in the USSR. Hal and Ruth had me over for dinner. After a few rounds of drinks, he stood up and announced grandly: “I have a prophecy to make. I predict that, in a decade, the Soviet Union will be revolutionized, and the leader of the revolution will be a young man I have been watching for a long time – Mikhail Gorbachev.” Within a decade, glasnost, perestroika, and demokratizatsiia had become the watchwords of a new Russian revolution. See later Harold J. Berman, "Book Review of Mikhail Gorbachev, PERESTROIKA: New Thinking for Our Country and the World (1987),” The Atlanta Constitution (December 13, 1987); 12; “Gorbachev’s Law Reforms in Historical Perspective,” Emory Journal of International Affairs 5 (Spring, 1988): 1–10; “The Challenge of Christianity and Democracy in the Soviet Union,” in Christianity and Democracy in Global Context, ed. John Witte, Jr. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 287–96.


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for purposes of this book, were his exquisite translations of sundry Soviet laws – nearly 2,800 printed pages in English translation.6

In the first three decades of his career, Berman also developed a keen interest in bringing legal education into the undergraduate college – a different exercise in translation, now of professional legal language, concepts, and methods into something accessible to young students of the social, humane, and exact sciences. These pedagogical interests he distilled in two other signature titles, On the Teaching of Law in the Liberal Arts Curriculum (1956)7 and The Nature and Functions of Law (1958; 6th edn., 2004),8 the latter a standard text in American college courses on law. He extended this interest further in arranging a multilingual series of Talks on American Law, which started as Voice of America broadcasts. Here was yet another early example of legal translation and transmission – making the intricacies of American public, private, penal, and procedural law accessible to radio audiences throughout the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, the Middle East, and even the Soviet Union.9

In the last three decades of his career – with Law and Language coming right at the transition point – Berman expanded his legal scholarship to include legal philosophy, legal history, and law and religion. He produced a series of path-breaking volumes, most notably The Interaction of Law and Religion (1974),10 Faith and Order: The Reconciliation of Law and Religion (1993),11 and his massive Law and Revolution: The Formation

Berman left a scholarly legacy of 25 books and 458 articles, book chapters, and book reviews. These writings were collectively published in twenty-one languages; a few of his books are still being translated, and this new book will deserve translation, too. A comprehensive collection of his writings and some of his correspondence from 1948 to 1985 are included in the “Red Set” of faculty publications in the Harvard Law Library. Digital and hard copies of all his (published and unpublished) non-book writings from 1938 to 2007 are available through the Emory University Libraries. His work continues to be mined and cited with alacrity in the main fields that he worked. This new book on Law and Language will provide a further window, if not gateway, into his writings and the development of his legal thought.

Berman taught some 8,000 law students at Harvard and Emory, more than 300 of whom have become professors, in at least 33 countries. His students and colleagues honored him with three Festschriften, and three law journal symposia are dedicated to his work. He was a member of both the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Russian Academy of Sciences. He received more than a hundred prizes and awards for his scholarly achievements, including the prestigious Scribes Award from the American Bar Association, and honorary doctorates from the Catholic

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University of America, the Virginia Theological Seminary, the University of Ghent, and the Russian Academy of Sciences. The newly dedicated Harold J. Berman Library in the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University houses some of his personal books and effects. The Harold J. Berman Lecture Series at Emory Law School offers regular lectures on the many legal topics that Berman long championed.

Throughout his long career, Berman had the remarkable ability to think above, beyond, and against his times. In the 1950s and 1960s, the dominant Cold War logic taught that the Soviet Union was a lawless autocracy. Berman argued to the contrary that the Russians would always honor contracts and treaties that were fairly negotiated. In his views prevailed and came to inform various nuclear treaties, trade agreements, and East–West accords. In the 1970s and 1980s, the conventional belief persisted that the Middle Ages were the dark ages as the West waited impatiently for Enlightenment and modernization. Berman argued the contrary, that the medieval era was the first modern age of the West and the founding era of our Western legal tradition. This view is now standard lore. In the 1980s and 1990s, jurists fought fiercely over whether legal positivism or natural law or some other perspective was the better legal philosophy. Berman called for an integrative jurisprudence that reconciled these views with each other and with other perspectives on law.


19 This is the central thesis of his Law and Revolution series.

a world dedicated to interdisciplinary legal study. And, in the 2000s, with the world hell-bent on waging “a clash of civilizations,” Berman called for a world law, grounded in global structures and processes, and universal customs and principles of peace, cooperation, and reconciliation. This view holds so much more promise than the jingoism and jihadism of the past decade and more.

“First it was Russian law, then it was Western law, now it is world law. What’s next, cosmic law?” This is how Professor Berman’s beloved wife, Ruth, once summarized (with a blend of exasperation and astonishment) the stages of Berman’s storied and storied legal career. There is keen insight in this statement. For Berman, every legal system – even the budding legal system of the world – must ultimately be founded upon cosmic commandments and contemplation, divine examples and exemplars. Berman has long prophesied that those legal systems that build on immanent and material foundations alone will fail. The spectacular failure of the Soviet legal system in the later twentieth century was ample vindication of his insight into the essential religious foundations of law.

Berman repeated this message in China, too, when in 2006, as a still energetic 88-year old, he gave a series of lectures on law to packed houses in a dozen universities. One of his Chinese respondents asked whether one needed to believe in God in order to have a just legal order. “It would certainly help!” Berman quipped immediately. “But no,” he went on diplomatically:

You don’t necessarily have to believe in God, but you have to believe in something. You have to believe in law at least. If you can’t accept God, then just focus on the law that God has written on all of our hearts.

formed his basic, three-part analytical framework for jurisprudence, combining natural law, legal positivism, and historical jurisprudence.


Even children intuitively sense this law within us. Every child in the world will say, “That’s my toy.” That’s property law. Every child will say, “But you promised me.” That’s contract law. Every child will say, “It’s not my fault. He hit me first.” That’s tort law. Every child will say, too, “Daddy said I could.” That’s constitutional law. Law ultimately comes from our human nature, and our human nature is ultimately an image of God.23

Such views reflect, in part, Berman’s life-long effort to integrate his religious faith with his legal learning. In his chapel talks delivered in the Harvard Memorial Church over the years, Berman contrasted “the wisdom of the world” with “the wisdom of God.” The wisdom of the world, he declared, “assumes that God’s existence is irrelevant to knowledge, and that truth is discoverable by the human mind unaided by the Spirit.” Jewish and Christian wisdom, by contrast, “seeks God’s guidance … in order to discover the relationship between what we know and what God intends for us.” Knowledge and intellect are “intimately connected with faith, with hope, and with love.” “God does not call us to be merely observers of life; rather he calls all of us – even the scholars in all that we do – to participate with him in the process of spiritual death and rebirth which is fundamental religious experience.”24

Early on, Berman made clear that dialogue was essential to our relationships with God, neighbor, and self, and that language was an essential sinew of all our relationships. God is a God of words, Berman believed, drawing on the Bible. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” reads John 1. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” Genesis 1 reads. And He did so by speech: “And God said, ‘Let there be …’” is how each day of creation starts. When it came to the creation of men and women, it was by dialogue, by conversation, first among the members of the Trinity, then between God and humanity: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,” the Trinitarian God says to its members. And thereafter, God walked and talked with the man and the woman whom he created, though he talked with no other creature. For Berman, humans, created in the image of God,

23 This is based in part on my memory of a conversation with Professor Berman after his return from China. These same sentiments are conveyed in a newspaper article about this trip. See Meredith Hobbs, “Translating Western Law into Chinese: Emory Professor Harold J. Berman toured China, speaking to halls packed with Chinese students,” The Daily Report 117 (Fulton County, GA) (June 1, 2006): 1.

are given the capacity for language and dialogue with each other and with God. In a 1969 sermon in Harvard’s Memorial Church he proclaimed:

If we see Christianity as a dialogue which God has initiated with man, I think we can see that Christians are called to transform this dialogue into a dialogue also among men, in which we are brought into relationships with each other, so that we share common convictions, undertake common tasks, and recognize a common authority … All life is a great conversation, a discourse, a speaking together, which goes back to the very beginning, to God Himself.

Dialogue was key, in Berman’s view, to teaching and reaching reconciliation, and for building community both locally and globally. Both Jewish and Christian theology, he reminded his church listeners, teach that persons must reconcile themselves to God, neighbor, and self. For Berman, building on St. Paul, this meant that there can be “no real division between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female” – or, for that matter, black and white, straight and gay, old and young, rich and poor, citizen and sojourner. For every sin that destroys our relationships, there must be grace that reconciles them. For every Tower of Babel that divides our voices, there must be a Pentecost that unites them and makes them understandable to all.

Such spiritual sentiments could shackle the narrow-minded. They liberated Berman from conventional habits of mind and traditional divisions of knowledge. He challenged Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Jeremy Bentham for their separation of fact and value, is and ought. He criticized Alexander Solzhenitsyn for his contradistinction of law and morals, law and love. He fought against the divisions of the very world itself into East and West, old and new, developed and undeveloped. His favorite

25 Berman and I sometimes did devotions together, and I remember spending weeks discussing the meaning of these quoted statements, which in his view said a lot about the dialogical nature of God.
26 See Conclusion herein, p. 161.
28 See sources in note 22, and Tibor Várady’s Afterword herein.
29 See Berman, Justice in the USSR, 15–24; Faith and Order, 239, 280; Law and Revolution, 538, 546. For criticisms of Bentham, see his unpublished (but available in Emory Law School Library archives), “World Law and the Crisis of the Western Legal Tradition,” The William Timbers Lecture, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, April 21, 2005.
30 See Berman, Faith and Order, 314, 381. For similar criticisms of Emil Brunner, see Berman, Interaction, 81–91.
jurists were Gratian, Matthew Hale, and Joseph Story, who wrote concordances of discordant canons. His favorite philosophers were Peter Abelard, Philip Melanchthon, and Michael Polanyi, who developed integrative holistic philosophies.

“The era of dualism is waning,” Berman wrote in 1974. “We are entering into a new age of integration and reconciliation. Everywhere synthesis,” the overcoming of false opposites, is “the key to this new kind of thinking and living.” Either–or must give way to both–and. Not subject versus object, not fact versus value, not soul versus body, not faith versus reason, not church versus state, not one versus many, “but the whole person and whole community thinking and feeling, learning and living together” – that is the common calling of humankind, Berman wrote.

Berman applied this gospel of reconciliation and integration most vigorously to his legal studies. He called for the reintegration of the classic schools of legal positivism, natural-law theory, and historical jurisprudence – which, in his view, had been separated since God was cast out of the legal academy. He called for the integration of public law and private law, of common law and civil law, of Western law and Eastern law into a global legal system. He urged that law be given a place among the humanities and enrich itself with the ideas and methods of sundry humane disciplines. He urged that legal language be cast in terms understandable to all, and be enriched by the power of poetry, liturgy, literature, and art. And he urged most strongly that the subjects and sciences of law and religion be reconciled to each other. Their separation was, for him, a theological “heresy” and a jurisprudential “fallacy” that cannot survive in the new era of synthesis and integration. “[L]aw and religion stand or fall together,” he wrote. “[I]f we wish law to stand, we shall have to give new life to the essentially religious commitments that give it its ritual, its tradition, and its authority – just as we shall have to give new life to the social, and hence the legal, dimensions of religious faith.”

Berman’s talk of the death of dualism and the birth of an age of synthesis points to his further belief in a teleological, if not, providential view of history. Both Jewish and Christian theology, he reminded his readers,
teaches that time is continuous, not cyclical, that time moves forward from a sin-trampled garden to a golden city, from a fallen world to a perfect end-time. Berman was convinced that slowly but surely all the peoples of the world would come into contact with each other, and ultimately, after revolutionary struggle and even apocalyptic explosion, would seek finally to be reconciled with each other forever.  

Berman’s grand account of evolution and revolution in Western history, set out in his *Law and Revolution* series, is rooted in this basic belief about the nature and pattern of time. There is a distinctive Western legal tradition, he argued, a continuity of legal ideas and institutions, which grow by accretion and adaptation. The exact shape of these ideas and institutions is determined, in part, by the underlying religious belief systems of the people ruling and being ruled. Six great revolutions, however, have punctuated this organic gradual development: the Papal Revolution of 1075, the German Lutheran Reformation of 1517, the English Puritan Revolution of 1640, the American Revolution of 1776, the French Revolution of 1789, and the Russian Revolution of 1917. These revolutions were, in part, rebellions against a legal and political order that had become outmoded and ossified, arbitrary and abusive. But, more fundamentally, these revolutions were the products of radical shifts in the religious belief systems of the people—shifts from Catholicism to Protestantism to Deism to the secular religion of Marxist-Leninism. Each of these new belief systems offered a new eschatology, a new apocalyptic vision of the perfect end-time, whether that be the second coming of Christ, the arrival of the heavenly city of the Enlightenment philosophers, or the withering away of the state. Each of these revolutions, in its first radical phase, sought the death of an old legal order to bring forth a new order that would survive the Last Judgment. Eventually, each of these revolutions settled down and introduced fundamental legal changes that were ultimately subsumed in and accommodated to the Western legal tradition.  

In this new millennium, Berman believed, the Western legal tradition is undergoing a profound integrity crisis, graver and greater than any faced in the past millennium. The old legal order of the West is under attack both from within and from without. From within, Western law is suffering from the critical and cynical attacks relentlessly issued by jurists and judges—a “form of lawyerly self-loathing,” he once called it. These legal skeptics have dismissed legal doctrine as malleable, self-contradictory  