

## Religious Implications

### Psyche, Soul, and Spirit

There is a continuum of cosmic consciousness against which our individuality builds but accidental forces and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother sea.

—William James<sup>1</sup>

Psychedelics certainly startled and shook the Western world. But one of the greatest surprises was that psychedelics produced religious experiences. A significant number of people, including staunch atheists and Marxists, claimed to have found *kensho* in a capsule, *moksha* in a mushroom, or *satori* in a psychedelic. In fact, these claims proved so consistent over so many years that some researchers have renamed psychedelics "entheogens," substances that facilitate awareness of God within.

Religious scholars immediately split. For many of them, psychedelic epiphanies were considered pseudo-spiritual at best and delusional at worst. How could mere micrograms of a curious chemical possibly replicate the heights of human experience traditionally hard won over decades?

On the other side of the isle stood researchers like Ram Dass, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, and Huston Smith, who argued for the possibility of experiential equivalence between contemplative and chemical mysticism. They drew on research such as the famous Harvard "Good Friday Study" and on theories such as the "principle of causal indifference."<sup>2</sup> This principle suggests that if states are experientially identical, then the fact that they have different causes may be irrelevant.

The debate has raged for decades. At the present time, both research and theory suggest an answer to this question. That answer is a highly qualified "yes." Yes, it seems that psychedelics can induce genuine spiritual and mystical experiences, but only on *some* occasions in *some* people under *some* circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the conclusion, the debate and the psychedelic explosion which set it off, turned attention to the intriguing relationship between drugs and religion. It soon became apparent that the religious use of drugs to induce sacred states of consciousness has been widespread across numerous cultures. Historical examples include the *kykeon* of the Greek Eleusinian mysteries, the Australian aborigines' *pitturi*, Hinduism's *soma*, the wine of Dionysis Eleutherios (Dionysis the liberator), and the Zoroastrians' *hoama*.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary examples also abound, such as the use of marijuana by Rastafarians and some Indian yogis, Native American peyote, and the South American shamans' *ayahuasca*.<sup>5</sup> No matter what the current debate in the West, it seems clear that for centuries other cultures have agreed that psychedelics are capable of producing valuable religious experiences.

Unsuspecting Westerners who experimented with these drugs were not immune to their religious and spiritual impact, and this impact took three forms. The first was a spiritual initiation. Many people had their first significant religious-spiritual experience on psychedelics. Among the contributors to this book, James Fadiman and Ram Dass are striking examples of people whose lives were dramatically reoriented in this way.

Those who were already committed to spiritual concerns, such as Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Huston Smith, found a deepened interest in, and understanding of, various aspects of religion. Spirituality, mysticism, and Eastern philosophies proved particularly intriguing for many people, and the influx of Hinduism and Buddhism into the West was one result.

A third effect was to encourage people to begin a spiritual practice in order to deepen and stabilize the experiences and openings they had glimpsed. For it rapidly became apparent that, while psychedelics might sometimes grace the user with a glimpse of the transcendent, it often lasted no longer than the drug's effect did. As Huston Smith concluded, "Drugs appear to induce religious experiences; it is less evident that they can produce religious lives."<sup>6</sup> The challenge is to transform peak experiences into plateau experiences, epiphanies into personality, altered states into altered traits, transient states into enduring stages, or as Huston Smith so eloquently put it, to transform "flashes of illumination into abiding light." This challenge played a large role in the popularization of practices such as contemplation, meditation and yoga.

In short, psychedelics had a major impact on the understanding and practice of religion in the Western world, and Ram Dass, Rabbi Zalman

Schachter-Shalomi, and Huston Smith were at the forefront of investigating the religious significance of these substances.

### NOTES

1. W. James, *William James on Psychical Research*. (New York: Viking, 1960), 324.
2. W. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*. (Los Angeles, CA: J. Tarcher, 1964/1987), 29.
3. R. Walsh, "Entheogens: True or False?" *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* 22 (2003): 1-6.
4. H. Smith, "Do drugs have religious import?" *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964): 517-30.
5. H. Smith, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception: The Religious Significance of Entheogenic Plants and Chemicals*. (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2000).
6. M. Harner, ed., *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). R. Walsh (2005), *The Spirit of Shamanism*, 2nd ed. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications (in press).