THE ANAESTHETIC REVELATION:
PSYCHEDELIA AND MYSTICISM

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“Drugs appear to induce religious experiences; it is less evident that they can produce religious lives.”

Huston Smith

Borges wrote: “There is no classification of the Universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural. The reason for this is very simple: we do not know what the universe is.”

The debate concerning mysticism and psychedelic consciousness is equally arbitrary and conjectural: we do not know what mysticism and consciousness are. Notwithstanding these divergent, often conflicting terms, scholars of religion and of the psychedelic experience have engaged in a timeworn debate concerning whether authentic religious or mystical states can be achieved by ingesting psychoactive substances. Here, I provide a brief overview of the key moments and figures in this discussion, and synthesise the various emergent patterns. I then assess whether psychedelia and mysticism are indeed two names for a similar epistemological enterprise.

The relationship between religious practice and psychoactive plants is ancient and cross-cultural. There is extensive research into shamanism across the world and its association with hundreds of different psychoactive plants. For example, it has been proposed that the ancient Vedic intoxicant *Soma* may have been the fly agaric mushroom
(Amanita muscaria), the ceremonial drink kykeon of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Old Testament manna contained psychoactive alkaloids from ergot (Claviceps purpurea).

A new chapter in this relationship began with the industrial age and the isolation and synthesis of psychoactive compounds. The widespread consumption of these drugs in the nineteenth century began with Humphry Davy and the Pneumatic Society’s experimentation with nitrous oxide. Opium (and its derivatives laudanum, morphine and heroin), cannabis, ether, cocaine, and mescaline also impact on nineteenth century society. Though the question of mystical revelation or religious experience inspired by these drugs is not explicit, the reported experiences of many of the figures naturally approach this issue, making this a pivotal moment owing to the secular and yet mysterically revelatory quality of the experiences. The question was of great concern to William James, the grandfather of psychedelic research, whose experiences with nitrous oxide and ether led him to consider the relationship between spontaneous mystical states and induced ones:

Nitrous oxide and ether [...] stimulate the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree. [...] I know more than one person who is persuaded that in the nitrous oxide trance we have a genuine metaphysical revelation.

James concluded his musings on ‘anaesthetic revelation’ with the well-known comparison between intoxicated and mystical states:

our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, while all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. [...] No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. [...] to me the living sense of its reality only comes in the artificial mystic state of mind.

Despite these considerations, his chapter on mysticism asserts that the true mystical state is ‘passive’. The legacy of James’s investigations into these artificial states of mind is vast, and has influenced countless researchers in their evaluation of such experiences.

Mescaline was first isolated in 1897 by Heffter and synthesised by Späth in 1919. While many cultural figures reported their experiences with mescaline, it was Huxley who proposed a phenomenological connection between mystical states and experiences of mescaline, although he was careful not to make the association so close as to make the two states wholly equivalent:

I am not so foolish as to equate what happens under the influence of mescalin or of any other drug, prepared or in the future preparable, with the realization of the end and ultimate purpose of human life [...] but] to be shaken out of the ruts of ordinary perception, to be shown for a few timeless hours the outer and the inner world, not as they appear to an animal obsessed with survival or to a human being obsessed with words and notions, but as they are apprehended, directly and unconditionally, by Mind at Large – this is an experience of inestimable value to everyone and especially to the intellectual.

Huxley’s works were hugely influential, and were critiqued by scholars of religion and mysticism. Importantly, The Doors of Perception was read by Carl Jung, whose participation in this debate is curiously sparse. He comments only briefly about Hofmann's isolation of LSD-25 at the Sandoz labs in Basel in 1938, Hofmann’s first experiences of the drug in 1942, and his isolation of psilocybin and psilocin in 1958. I am grateful to my colleague Leon Schlamm for referring me to Jung’s correspondence wherein he expresses his misgivings about the use of psychoactives not solely in psychoanalysis, but also in recreation:

[Mescal] has indeed very curious effects – vide Aldous Huxley! – of which I know far too little. I don’t know either what its psychotherapeutic value with neurotic or psychotic patients is. I only know there is no point in wishing to know more of the collective unconscious than one gets through dreams and intuition [...] I am profoundly mistrustful of the “pure gifts of the Gods.” You pay very
That is the mistake Aldous Huxley makes: he does not know that he is in the role of the “Zauberlehrling,” [sorcerer’s apprentice] who learned from his master how to call the ghosts but did not know how to get rid of them again.\textsuperscript{12} p172-3

Jung’s language is striking here as, despite a slight ironic edge, he acknowledged mescaline’s deep power and the numinosity of the experience. He clearly did not question whether the mystical state is achievable through mescaline, but whether it is advisable. More outspoken was Jung’s associate von Franz, discussing the need to maintain ‘the storm-lantern’ of the ego and not to permit its engulfment in the dark seas of the unconscious. She transposed this storm-lantern image onto the psychedelic culture whose heyday had only just passed, following Jung’s critique of Nietzsche as a man whose ego-inflation led him to delusion:

> When the ego, however, identifies to that degree with the greater inner presence, No.2, the result is a “puffed-up ego and a deflated self”. History is full of examples of such figures: Sabbati Sevi, Hitler, Manson, Leary and all the other pathological demagogues and religious pseudo-prophets. They have inflicted infinite damage on the world because they have transformed normal inner experiences of the unconscious into morbid poison through inflated identification with them.\textsuperscript{13} p42

Jung was mistrustful of drugs prescribed by psychiatrists to treat patients, preferring to develop his own rich methods of pursuing each personal narrative, allowing unconscious content to inform and direct the consciousness. The method was never to abandon ego consciousness. This is visible in his mistrust of European adulation of eastern spiritual practices that he assumed advocated ego abandonment,\textsuperscript{14} and his own fear of ego-loss when in Africa. So close was von Franz to Jung, and so versed in his views, one can assume that such a strong opinion about psychedelics would likely represent Jung’s thoughts, though one can only speculate whether Jung would have placed Leary on the same list as Hitler.

Leary, Metzner and Alpert acknowledge Jung’s voluminous research into the psychology of religious experience and esoteric texts such as the \textit{Bardo Thodol},\textsuperscript{15} though they recognise Jung’s perspective \textit{vis-à-vis} ego-loss, an attribute they consider essential to the psychedelic experience. They propose that Jung’s reservation on this matter prevented his fuller understanding both of the \textit{Bardo} and of psychedelics. Likewise, many analysts and therapists — Grof, Shulgin, Stolaroff, Metzner — employ Jung’s models of the self, unconscious, archetypes and complexes within psychedelic therapy. So too, Campbell, who like Jung was wary of psychedelics, nevertheless recognised that the Hero Journey provided a guide for those experiencing psychedelics.

\textit{That was the era of inward discovery in its LSD phase. Suddenly, The Hero with a Thousand Faces became a kind of triptych for the inward journey, and people were finding something in that book that could help them interpret their own experience. […] Anyone going on a journey inward or outward to find values will be on a journey that has been described many times in the myths of mankind, and I simply put them all together in that book.}\textsuperscript{16}

Zaehner, refuting Huxley’s mystical claims, suggested that ego-loss is, indeed, a fundamental attribute of the mystical and religious state and that the intoxicated state provides only a temporary release from ego, not a lasting and constructive one.\textsuperscript{11} Criticising Huxley’s use of Catholic and Hindu terms, he argued that these bold declarations about ‘gratuitous grace’, ‘Beatific state’ or ‘one-ness’ are matters of spiritual practice within established traditions of faith. The mescaline experience, he argued, aside from specific traditions, lies outside established traditions of faith. Zaehner’s outlook was so coloured by his religious faith\textsuperscript{17} that he made naïve comments, such as suggesting that the feeling of communion of god through drugs is “merely a vulgar error shared by many primitive communities and certain ecstatic sects.”\textsuperscript{11} p24 Clearly, Zaehner argued not from a phenomenological position — whether a mystical state is possible — but a theological one — is it permissible. At the core of Zaehner’s critique was his disquiet of psychodelic explorers’ attempts to
bypass years of spiritual devotion and God’s grace.

Theory and practice were married in 1962 in Pahnke’s Good Friday Experiment. The objective of the experiment was to evaluate whether psilocybin, in a double blind experiment, could occasion mystical experience in religiously-predisposed subjects. Pahnke, using Stace’s nine categories of mysticism to evaluate the experiences of the subjects, found that provided with a suitably reverent context, psilocybin can induce states of consciousness equivalent to mystical states. In particular ‘Persisting Positive Changes in Attitude and Behavior’ (Stace’s ninth category) was observed. Zaehner critiqued Pahnke, as he had Huxley, again arguing theologically: can the experience be considered religious if, given the Christian context, there is no experience of Christ?

Following the widespread popularity of psychedelics as championed by Kesey and the Pranksters, and Leary, the question of religiosity became public. Indian guru Meher Baba presented the perceived dangers of attempting to gain enlightenment through psychedelics. “If God can be found through the medium of any drug, God is not worthy of being God.” Like Zaehner, Baba was concerned with ‘short cuts’ to the divine:

No drug, whatever its great promise, can help one to attain the spiritual goal. There is no short-cut to the goal except through the grace of the Perfect Master, and drugs, LSD more than others, give only a semblance of “spiritual experience,” a glimpse of a false Reality.

Baba’s message was taken up by vocal supporters and led to a profusion of publications and public debates about the spiritual dangers of the psychedelic experience.

Masters and Houston reviewed the debate and its most important spokespeople and set out its precise problem: “One of the most important questions raised by the psychedelic drugs is whether authentic religious and mystical experiences occur among the drug subjects.” Most notable in their list of scholars is Watts, who argued that the substances are a tool and not an end, and that the non-enlightened person will be no closer to the divine for all the mescaline in Mexico. Watts addressed the affinity between the “vague” terms, ‘religious experience,’ ‘mystical experience,’ ‘cosmic consciousness,’ and “such states of consciousness induced by psychedelic drugs, although they are virtually indistinguishable from genuine mystical experience,” arguing for the judicious and sacramental use of psychoactive substances in order to prepare the path towards the states of awareness that religious practices so often failed to achieve. His debt to William James is clear in his delineating four salient characteristics of the psychedelic experience: 1) slowing down time, 2) awareness of polarity, 3) awareness of relativity, and 4) awareness of eternal energy.

Watts reflected Jung’s concern with the dangers of sudden and deep immersion in the unconscious, describing his first experiences with LSD:

I qualified as an expert insofar as I had also a considerable intellectual knowledge of the psychology and philosophy of religion: a knowledge that subsequently protected me from the more dangerous aspects of this adventure, giving me a compass and something of a map for this wild territory.

He was dismayed at the “stupidity of the federal governments by passing unenforceable laws against LSD [which] not only drove it underground but prevented proper research” which led to “the injudicious use of LSD [which] has afflicted uncounted young people with paranoid, megalomaniac, and schizoid symptoms.” Despite suggesting that Jungians themselves are scared of the unconscious, Watts resembled more the studious and cautious Jung than the gregarious and populist Leary or Kesey. This is best reflected in Watts’s misgivings at Leary’s rising messianic status, which he describes in pure Jungian terms:

Nevertheless, I myself began to be concerned, if mildly, at the direction of Timothy’s enthusiasm, for to his own circle of friends and students he had become a charismatic religious leader who, well trained as he
was in psychology, knew very little about religion and mysticism and their pitfalls. The uninstructed adventurer with psychedelics, as with Zen or yoga or any other mystical discipline, is an easy victim of what Jung calls “inflation,” of the messianic megalomania that comes from misunderstanding the experience of union with God […] He was moving to a head-on collision with the established religions of biblical theocracy and scientific mechanism, and simply asking for martyrdom.24 p331

Watts’s most concise conclusion to the relationship between psychedelics and mystical states is his declaration that they are the medicine not the diet, and that once the state has been experienced, it can be cultivated through traditional psycho-spiritual practices:

*psychedelic experience is only a glimpse of genuine mystical insight, but a glimpse which can be matured and deepened by the various ways of meditation in which drugs are no longer necessary or useful. When you get the message, hang up the phone. For psychedelic drugs are simply instruments, like microscopes, telescopes, and telephones. The biologist does not sit with eye permanently glued to the microscope; he goes away and works on what he has seen.*22 p25

In the wake of severe government legislation of psychedelic drugs and the passing of a certain aesthetic era, the debate lost momentum from the early 1970s. While Leary continued his vocal support of psychedelics, his star had fallen since many vilified him as being the chief catalyst of this government clampdown. However, McKenna, a friend and supporter of Leary, became a popular fringe figure in the 1980s and 90s with his animating philosophies of psychedelics, shamanism, ecology, hermeticism and ethnobotany. McKenna articulated his vision of a psychedelic society in which he avers that not only do psychedelics lead to a state of mystical encounter with the Otherworld, they surpass all other practices at achieving these states.25

McKenna shared much with Watts, most notably in his affirmations that the criminalisation of these substances arises not from health concerns but from authoritarian fear of the insights that are gained. Yet, while Watts equated psychedelics with scientific instruments, McKenna’s shamanistic perspective saw the plants themselves as conscious, the mushrooms as intelligent, instructive, conscious entities, living in synergy with humans. In this sense, McKenna’s contribution to the ancient debate of psychedelic plants and mystical states is perhaps the most radical of all the aforementioned theorists, as it rests on a position of plant-consciousness. While the scientific and academic communities may tolerate Watts equating psychedelics and telephones, McKenna’s talking mushrooms constitute a greater epistemological challenge.

The debate continues to this day in numerous contexts and discourses, and critical approaches to this wide and nebulous field have reclaimed respectability. This is principally due to the resurgence of the role of psychotropic substances in therapy and medicine. Current studies are focusing on psychedelic treatments for a wide range of disorders and addictions. Figures such as Grof, Strassman, Doblin, Goldsmith, Griffiths, Stolaroff, the Shulgins, and Krupitsky have deepened the field of research into psychedelics and medical and psychotherapeutic practice that was silenced at the end of the 60s. Griffiths, in particular, has refocused on the question addressed by Pahnke, and reported that “58% [of subjects receiving high doses of psilocybin] met criteria for having had a ‘complete’ mystical experience.”26 p621

It is significant that the resurgence of scholarly research into psychedelics should be principally in the field of medicine and therapy, not in the wider popular cultural arena as in the 1960s. This is firstly because, in contrast to the religious fervour accompanying psychedelics in the past, the medical avenue is respectable. Secondly, it concerns treating the sick and the dying, and is thus contained within a defined social demographic. Therefore the attention that such substances generate proposes no immediate threat to established moral, ethical or social order, aside from within strictly defined medical and psychoanalytical communities.

Medicine and therapy also provide a structure to accommodate the transformative and potentially unnerving aspects of psychedelics. For this reason Grof and others have successfully guided patients through trauma towards wholeness within a safe and nurturing environment. Grof, for example, incorporates them gradually and methodically
within the treatment, considering them powerful tools in a toolbox that includes holotropic breathing and meditation. Schlamm argues that had Jung visited Ramana Maharshi on his trip to India in 1938, he may have understood that the individuation process was far closer to the yogic traditions than he had supposed. Likewise, had Jung met Grof or Metzner, he may have understood that controlled use of psychedelics can be incorporated within analysis more cohesively than he had imagined.

One might suggest that the question that concerned Huxley, Watts, Smith and Pahnke about the religious dimension of these substances has been deprioritised. The medics and therapists are not surrogate priests, and no figure has emerged demonstrating the same religious fervour as Leary. Nevertheless, scholarly endeavours have not lost sight of this old debate concerning mystical or religious states of consciousness and psychedelics. Grof’s numerous publications focus on this issue, and are encapsulated as this ancient relationship between the ‘holotropic states of consciousness’ and religion:

Mystics have encountered very difficult challenges in organized religions, even though direct experiences of numinous dimensions of reality in holotropic states of consciousness have provided inspiration for all great religious movements. Such experiences, moreover, are essential to preserving the vitality and relevance of religious creeds.

Smith, however, is still particularly interested in the question of the religious dimension of the psychedelics, observing that “The goal (it cannot be stressed too often) is not religious experiences, but the religious life.” The substance can facilitate the experience, he argues, but certainly not guarantee the religious life, as once the trip is over, the subject must incorporate the experiences into established religious or spiritual systems. Here, though, we must be careful not to align too closely ‘religious’ with ‘mystical’. While no ‘church of psychedelics’ has emerged to provide spiritual structure for individual experience, this does not in all cases infer a desacralisation either of the plants or the experience. Set and setting are, as always, important, and where such reverence is not observed, such as slapstick salvia trips posted on YouTube, the perceived dangers of the plant are amplified in the eyes of prohibitionists. Ayahuasca, whether drunk in Iquitos, Europe or the US, is commonly treated with respect and solemnity, and as such those advocating its use have been better able to present coherent and reasoned arguments to the legislature.

It is important to stress that when approaching the term ‘psychedelic’ we are in the same non-consensual area that we are with the term ‘mystical’ and as such no clear empirical definition can be adequately reached:

The narratives of psychedelic drug trips are as luxuriant and varied as myths, dreams, and psychoanalytical revelations. In a sense there is no ‘psychedelic effect’ or ‘psychedelic state’; to say that someone has taken LSD tells little more about the content and import of his experience than to say that he has had a dream.

The whole debate is not about the phenomena of ‘psychedelics’ and ‘mysticism’ but of the language describing phenomena. Mystical states are like ‘peak experiences’ that we are all (to a greater or lesser extent) familiar with. While one may demur from describing a psychedelic experience as mystical, one may find it hard to define, for example, one of McKenna’s ‘heroic doses’ of psilocybin, LSD or DMT as anything other than a peak experience. Watts intuitively suggested as much when acknowledging that for all his desire “to delineate the basic principles of psychedelic awareness”, he must recognise “that I can speak only for myself. The quality of these experiences depends considerably upon one’s prior orientation and attitude to life.” Both James and Stace include ‘ineffability’ as one of the definitions of the mystical state; accordingly the description of the experience will necessarily be arbitrary. Therefore the debate is between linguistic systems rather than a perceived consensual experience. Much ink has been spilled on this nebulous debate, and we are no nearer consensus. Can one encounter the divine with psychedelics? It depends on your moral, ethical and theological assumptions, and on your understanding of the divine and of psychedelics. And thus the debate continues.