

THE ENTHEOGEN REFORMATION

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ABSTRACT: In addition to promising leads for treating PTSD, addictions, depression, and death anxiety, 21st Century research at medical schools finds that with careful screening, insightful attention to the variables of set, setting, and dosage, psychedelic drug administration often facilitates significant spiritual experiences, meaningfulness, altruism, well-being, and similar pro-spiritual effects. This article calls for theologians, professors of religious studies, philosophy, sociology, and psychology to update their courses. It challenges leaders of religious organizations, “How can your institution incorporate these practices and benefit from them?”

KEYWORDS: theology, psychedelics, entheogens, history, future, new religious movements, religious studies, mysticism, transcendence

What is an entheogen? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it.

Entheogen

The term *entheogen* is used for psychedelics that are intentionally used spiritually, that is, they generate (*engen*) the experience of god (*theo*) within. *Entheogen* was listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary's* September 2007 release of new words: “entheogen. *noun.* a chemical substance, typically of plant origin, that is ingested to produce a nonordinary state of consciousness for religious or spiritual purposes.” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2011)

The Entheogen Reformation —A Historical Perspective

Can current religions benefit from psychedelic entheogens? Yes, but it is a culture-wide, decades-long task. If we recognize that entheogens are part of a process of making sacred experiences, often considered revelatory, available to many people—of democratizing them—we see that we are participating in another case of democratizing religion.

Democratizing Text—Around the Year 1500

Around 1500, moveable type and the printing press democratized access to religious texts. The Reformation and the Counter-Reformation followed. General literacy and public education became important so that people could read religious texts. The growing importance of words nourished reason and science. While older religious observances of the prior period continued, new word-centered activities such as reading texts and interpreting them overlaid and overcame the older religion-as-rite era. New interpretations resulted; new churches flourished. Most

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important, text became an increasingly powerful foundation of religious ideas and a standard for judging them. Over time the locus of Western religious activity shifted from rites to reading, from observances to Bible, from participation to verbalization. In *The Case for God*, religious writer and former nun Karen Armstrong (2009) marks the change this way:

The success of the reformers was due in large part to the invention of the printing press, which not only helped to propagate this new idea but also changed people's relationship to text. . . . [A]nd this would make theology more verbose. . . . Ritual was also downgraded. (p. 171) Instead of trying to get beyond language, Protestants would be encouraged to focus on the precise, original, and supposedly unchanging word of God in print. (p. 173)

We need only look at our current religions to see how accurate she is. In contrast to pre-1500, many people today tend to approach religion verbally—through words. Holy books, speaking, beliefs, sermons, catechisms, creeds, dogmas, doctrines, theology, and so on—all these are words. This overemphasis on words shows up today in the way we describe religions—as wordy sets of wordy beliefs. If we ask someone about his or her religion, we expect to hear about beliefs, not what rituals that person performs. The older rites certainly remain and remain important to many people but too often lie obscured beneath a five-hundred-year-year blizzard of words. As the 15th Century printing-based Reformation did then, today's 21st Century entheogen-based Reformation offers to enrich religions too.

Entheogenic enrichment extends to the sense of religious community and social service too, but these topics are beyond the scope of this article. "Raising Values," Chapter 3 in *The Psychedelic Future of the Mind* (Roberts, 2013, pp. 37-54) discusses entheogen enhanced altruism, shifts in personal values, and related ideas of social service, while contributions to reformulating rituals, ethics, and organizational activities past, present, and future are considered at length in *Seeking the Sacred with Psychoactive Substances* (Ellens, 2014).

Democratizing Primary Spiritual Experience—Around the Year 2000

What do entheogens offer religions? First, it is important to realize that in the 21st Century a strict process of using them has been carefully developed. It is not casually simply "dropping acid" on a Saturday afternoon. Developed within the medical-psychotherapeutic research complex, current procedures call for extensive screening (not for everyone), hours of preparation with two session monitors, the sessions themselves (one person at a time with carefully selected, largely spiritual music), and follow-up sessions to integrate the experiences into their daily lives (Johnson, Richards, & Griffiths, 2008).

What do entheogenic sessions provide? This varies from person to person, depending largely on each person's mindset, but generally they can provide experiential depth to what had previously been abstract words. To most people who are even moderately experienced with entheogens, ideas such as awe, sacredness, eternity, grace, agapé, transcendence, dark night of the soul, born again, heaven and

hell, devotion, divinity, blessedness, adoration, holy, faith, forgiveness, and others take on new depths of meaning; they become alive.

Four questions and their respective answers illustrate the new stage of religious understanding that is unfolding—a transition from word-based religion to a new era of experience-based religion, one whose foundation is an intense, personal experience of sacredness.

Belief. *How would a direct primary spiritual experience affect someone?* A volunteer in a psilocybin study at the Johns Hopkins Medical School's Behavioral Pharmacology Research Unit answers: "The complete and utter loss of self . . . The sense of unity was awesome . . . I now truly do believe in God as an ultimate reality" (Griffiths, Richards, Johnson, McCann, & Jesse, 2008).

Spiritual Awakening. *If this happened regularly, how might wider society change?* Stanislav Grof, (1976, pp. 95-96), summarizing one of the effects of LSD psychotherapy, says: "Even hard-core materialists, positively oriented scientists, skeptics and cynics, and uncompromising atheists and antireligious crusaders such as Marxist philosophers suddenly became interested in a spiritual search after they confronted these levels in themselves."

Religious studies. *What if religious studies programs, divinity schools, seminaries, religious orders, and similar religious educational institutions could teach their students to know this?* Psychotherapist Frances Vaughan, describing her own LSD-based experience, conducted when LSD was legal (1982, p. 109): "I understood why spiritual seekers were instructed to look within . . . My understanding of mystical teaching, both Eastern and Western, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and Sufi alike, took a quantum leap."

Spiritual significance. *What if this happened fairly regularly?* Data from the fourteen-month follow-up (Griffiths et al., 2008, p. 626) of the first Johns Hopkins psilocybin study (Griffiths, Richards, McCann, & Jesse, 2006) indicate that "58% of 36 volunteers rated the experience on the psilocybin session as among the five most personally meaningful experiences of their lives, and 67% rated it among the five most spiritually significant experiences of their lives, with 11% and 17%, respectively, indicating that it was the single most meaningful experience, and the single most spiritually significant experience."

These things have happened, and, in spite of a begrudging society, others like them are happening to thousands of people. They appear to happen rarely in churches or during religious services or retreats. At religious educational institutions they occur only extracurricularly, even stealthily, but in some scientific research laboratories they are occurring regularly, assisted by psychedelics.

Moses: All my People Prophets

"What would be the impact if the reported positive behavior changes also turned out to be real?" asks Mark Kleiman rhetorically (2011). He is Professor of Public

Policy at the NYU's Marron Institute, a highly regarded specialist in drug policy, and author of *Drug Policies: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Kleiman & Caulkins, 2011). He answers his rhetorical question (Kleiman, 2011):

We might witness, within a few years, the fulfillment of Moses' prayer: "Would that all my people were prophets!" People unafraid to die might act differently than the currently accepted norm. Just how much enlightenment can our current social order absorb? We may be on the road to find out.

The Entheogen Reformation — Today's Perspective

We are transitioning from an era of word-based religion to an era of experience-based religion. This change may turn out to be as broad and as deep as the religious reformation five hundred years ago when text-based religion replaced the then dominant rite-based religion. Books on the entheogenic uses of psychedelics such as J. Harold Ellens' 2014 two-volume *Seeking the Sacred with Psychoactive Substances* and the anthology *Spiritual Growth with Entheogens* (Roberts, 2012) document this transition. Where do we see it happening? And Why?

Nones

Surprising at first, divinity schools and seminaries are one place. On October 17, 2015, Samuel Freedman wrote in the *New York Times*, about the "nones," as he called them: "students who are secular or unaffiliated with any religious denomination, commonly known as 'nones,' attending divinity school" (p. A12). They select these schools not for their theology or for their church-related affiliations, but because they offer perspectives in morals and in public service. Freedman fails to spot that for some nones (perhaps many) their entheogenic experiences are one root of their spirituality and their social concerns.

Experimental Evidence

In both of their 2006 and 2008 papers on the effect of psilocybin mystical experiences with carefully selected, mature, and healthy adults (Griffiths et al., 2006; Griffiths et al., 2008) the psilocybin research team at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine reported that about 1/3rd of the volunteers said these experiences were among the five most spiritually meaningful in their lives, another 1/3rd the single most. Some volunteers felt confirmed in their beliefs about God; others interpreted their experiences secularly. As a whole, they also boosted their altruism, sense of well-being, positive attitudes about life, and openness (Griffiths et al., 2008). These are results seminaries and divinity schools might envy.

Spiritual, Not Religious

A third source of the Entheogen Reformation is people who describe themselves, "I'm spiritual, not religious." Like the nones, from their position, they prefer to

drop what they consider theological baggage and escape weighty ecclesiastical hobbles. Rather than seeing a church as a bridge to God or restricting their spiritual growth to textual sources, they prefer direct, personal spiritual experience in transcendental states of consciousness. Some alert current theologians are spotting this trend and are another flow into the Entheogen Reformation.

Harvey Cox's Moksha

Now-retired, Harvard theologian Harvey Cox notes in *The Future of Faith* (2009) that many people “who want to distance themselves from the institutional or doctrinal demarcations of conventional religion, now refer to themselves as ‘spiritual.’” He sees an emerging Age of the Spirit “in movements that accent spiritual experience,” “pay scant attention to creeds,” and show “resistance to ecclesiastical fetters” (p. 10).

In *Turning East*, a 1977 book, Cox described his peyote experience many years before:

What I felt was an Other moving toward me with a power of affirmation beyond anything I had ever imagined could exist. I was glad and grateful. No theory that what happened to me was “artificially induced” or psychotic or hallucinatory can erase its mark. “The bright morning stars are rising,” as the old hymn puts it, “in my soul.” (pp. 47–48)

Perhaps calling on this experience, in *The Future of Faith*, he questions (2009, p. 24), “Might the capacity for awe be enhanced by a drug similar to the ones that enhance memory or alertness?” Later Cox mentions a prayer: “Give us this day our daily faith, but deliver us from beliefs” from Aldous Huxley’s novel *Island* (1962) in which daily faith arose from a fictional entheogen, “moksha.” Psilocybin, ayahuasca, LSD, mescaline, and similar entheogens are today’s real-life mokshas.

Saint Thomas's Induced Contemplation

Probably the best-known—and the least followed—example of progressing from words to experience comes from the ultimate Catholic wordsmith, St. Thomas Aquinas. After building an army of concepts, an “infused contemplation” convinced him that everything he had written, thought, and argued “was no better than straw or chaff,” and he stopped writing on his unfinished book (Pius XI, 1923). St. Thomas’s preference for primary spiritual experience is widely echoed today.

Huston Smith's Empirical Metaphysics

Probably the most widely esteemed current reference to entheogens comes from Huston Smith’s *Cleansing the Doors of Perception: The Religious Significance of Entheogenic Plants and Chemicals*, (2000). Referring to entheogens, he titled his first chapter “Experimental Metaphysics.” In his Preface, Smith refers to Aldous

Huxley, “. . . nothing was more curious, and to his way of thinking, more important, than the role that mind-altering plants and chemicals have played in human history” (p. xv). He cites “[William] James’s point that no account of the universe in its totality can be taken as final if it ignores extraordinary experiences of the sort he himself encountered through the use of nitrous oxide.” “This entire book,” Smith adds, “can be seen as an extended meditation on those two ideas” (p. xv).

Good Fruit

It is mistaken to see entheogens as threatening current religion; they, like the printing press before them, present new visions of religion and, as with the printing press, it depends on how we use them. William A. Richards has summarized his decades of thought on this topic in his 2015 book *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences*. In addition to advanced degrees from Yale Divinity School and Andover-Newton Theological School and a Ph.D. from Catholic University, he served on the staff of the LSD psychotherapy program at Spring Grove Hospital and Maryland Psychiatric Research Center. Now he combines these backgrounds as a principal session monitor in the current Johns Hopkins Department of Psychiatry’s Behavioral Pharmacology Research Unit, which is doing legal psilocybin research.

Looking at scripture, theology including creeds and traditions, social dimensions, and religious experiences — in *Sacred Knowledge*, he writes, “Primary religious experiences may well provide wisdom and vitality that may illumine and strengthen these other religious pillars; however, in my judgment, they do not render them less important” (p. 27).

Later in the section “Underdeveloped Areas of Religious Thought,” he lists some examples of deeper understandings that entheogenic experiences contribute:

- theological scholarship — acknowledgement of both unitive consciousness and devotion to the divine in personal manifestations, Christ, Shiva, and others
- death of the ego — dying to the self and becoming a new being in Christ
- sin — redemption or salvation as establishing a conscious connection with the sacred dimensions of consciousness
- religious symbols — a metamorphosis from symbols as intellectual concepts to spiritual realities bursting with significance such as the Eucharist and sacredness of the altar
- prophets and prophecy — appreciation for the visionary realms that prophets encountered
- scriptures — written by humans who personally experienced alternative states of awareness.

Where do we go from here? Because the entheogenic path of spiritual growth is currently illegal for most citizens with a few exceptions, practice will have to wait, but becoming informed via reading is widely available. Eventually, “Perhaps the next step,” as Richards hopes, “would be to extend legal authorization to retreat

and research centers, staffed by professionals with both medical and religious training, who understand the art of wisely administering these substances to those who wish to receive them” (2015, p. 177).

Envoi

Children of a future age,
Reading this indignant page,
Know that in a former time
A path to God was thought a crime.
— after William Blake

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The Author

Started in 1981, Tom Roberts taught the world's first psychedelics course listed in a university catalog. In medicine, he is co-editor of the 2-volume *Psychedelic Medicine: New Evidence for Hallucinogenic Substances as Treatments*. In religion, he edited *Spiritual Growth with Entheogens: Psychoactive Sacramentals and Personal Transformation* and is a major contributor to J. H. Ellens's *Seeking the Sacred with Psychoactive Substances: Chemical Paths to Spirituality and God* (2 volumes). In the humanities, he formulated Multistate Theory in *The Psychedelic Future of the Mind: How Entheogens Are Enhancing Cognition, Boosting Intelligence, and Raising Values*. Most recently, *The Psychedelic Policy Quagmire: Health, Law, Freedom, and Society* (co-edited) addresses the complex of issues across these fields, notably academic freedom. He is Professor Emeritus in the Honors Program and in Educational Psychology at Northern Illinois University.