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The Role of Perennialist Thought in the Development of Psychedelic Research in the United  
States

by

Nathan Keele Springer

Under the Direction of Molly Bassett, PhD

A Thesis submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2022

## ABSTRACT

From the 1960s to the present day, American research into the therapeutic effects of psychedelic drugs has focused on their ability to facilitate “mystical” experiences in test subjects. “Mysticomimetic” research has close ties to perennialist notions of religion that gained popularity over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Figures such as William James and Aldous Huxley promoted perennialist ideals within intellectual circles, particularly influencing psychological researchers. As research into psychedelics has gathered momentum from the 2000s onward, claims that mystical experience is key to the compounds’ palliative effects remain tied to perennialist thought, with current research picking up where studies in the 1960s left off. Perennialism can itself be considered a new religious movement that has developed in scientific and academic circles, the existence of which brings into relief the breakdown of notions of a dichotomist relationship between science and religion in the process.

INDEX WORDS: Perennialism, Psychedelics, Mysticism, Science, Psychology, Huxley

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2022

The Role of Perennialist Thought in the Development of Psychedelic Research in the United  
States

by

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May 2022

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated first and foremost to Fred Springer and Sandy Overton-Springer, my mother and father, for their endless support and encouragement during my time in school. I'd also like to thank my brothers, Locke and Liam, for their support, as well as all of the friends who have helped me tremendously over the course of my time in the MA program.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....		<b>V</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....		<b>VII</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION</b> .....		<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 Setting the Stage of Psychedelic Research</b> .....		<b>1</b>
<b>1.2 A Survey of the Literature</b> .....		<b>1</b>
<b>1.3 Are Psychedelics Religious?</b> .....		<b>11</b>
<b>2 MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE AND THE ARTICULATION OF THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY</b> .....		<b>13</b>
<b>2.1 The Influence of William James</b> .....		<b>13</b>
<b>2.2 Aldous Huxley and the Further Articulation of the Perennial Philosophy</b> ...		<b>17</b>
<b>2.3 The Road to Mysticomimetic Research</b> .....		<b>23</b>
<b>2.4 Science and Religion as Mutual Authenticators</b> .....		<b>29</b>
<b>3 PSILOCYBIN RESEARCH AS RELIGION</b> .....		<b>32</b>
<b>3.1 Walter Pahnke and the Marsh Chapel Experiment</b> .....		<b>32</b>
<b>3.2 Picking Up Where Pahnke Left Off at Johns Hopkins</b> .....		<b>39</b>
<b>3.3 The Mystical Controversy and Psychiatric Shamanism</b> .....		<b>47</b>
<b>4 CONCLUSION</b> .....		<b>54</b>
<b>WORKS CITED</b> .....		<b>57</b>



**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1 ..... 45

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Setting the Stage of Psychedelic Research

According to many psychologists, New Agers, and drug enthusiasts, the “Psychedelic Renaissance” is currently in full swing. Therapeutic interventions using MDMA (3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine, or “ecstasy”) and psilocybin as adjuncts to therapy are in the third stage of clinical trials and are being fast-tracked for FDA approval. Shows like *Goop* and *Hamilton’s Pharmacopeia* are touting the ability of psychedelics to make miraculous changes in users’ lives. Wealthy Americans are engaging in “traditional” Ayahuasca rituals in South America. The New York Times publishes articles with hyperbolic titles, such as “The Psychedelic Revolution Is Coming. Psychiatry May Never Be the Same.” While the jury is still out on the lasting impact that this “revolution” will have, these substances are now more a part of the American popular imagination than they have been in over five decades.

While many factors have contributed to this newfound fascination with hallucinogens, the resumption of trials testing the drugs’ therapeutic potential has been of primary importance. Perhaps surprisingly, words such as “miraculous,” “mystical,” and “spiritual” have become commonplace in scientific discourses regarding psychedelics. In particular, the study of psilocybin, the active chemical in “magic mushrooms,” has become a phenomenon that “straddle[s] two worlds we’ve grown accustomed to think[ing] are irreconcilable: science and spirituality.”<sup>1</sup> There is a lengthy history to the psychological

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<sup>1</sup> Pollan, Michael, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us about Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 6.

study of religious experience, and one does not have to look far into this history to discover that drug-induced mystical experiences have long been a part of the conversation.

While it would be problematic to claim that psychedelic drugs, or psychotropic substances at large, are inherently religious, under the right conditions (and sometimes even under non-amenable conditions) psychedelics can produce experiences that their users deem religious, mystical, or spiritually significant.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, psychedelics can be viewed as a material aspect of religion – a sacrament. Whether consumed in a pseudo-traditional setting, such as the modern-day ayahuasca ceremonies which are now in vogue, or in a clinical setting, psychedelics are often treated with an air of reverence, respect, or even fear. Regardless of the cultural setting, they connect people to their communities when used in groups, often facilitate an interaction with some sort of divine presence, and encourage embodied action such as dance, lovemaking, or simply sensory stimulation.

It is important to note that romanticized conceptions of Indigenous plant ceremonies have exerted a large influence over Western psychedelic use in both clinical and non-clinical settings. The existence of “drug tourism,” in which wealthy, mostly white spiritual seekers travel to South America to experience ayahuasca ceremonies and the like, is testament to this influence. The romanticization of Indigenous cultures is reflected in the fact that “the untested belief that ayahuasca shamanism is a static practice may create a distorted view of indigenous cultural histories. Many modern Westerners want these

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. William A. Richards makes the claim that psychedelics are inherently religious in his book *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences*, writing that he “view[s] them as intrinsically sacred.” Richards, William A., *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 8; One of the subjective reports in [a study from the mid-1950s] tells of a visionary experience cut short by the testing procedure... one subject, free at last to engage with [the LSD experience] without the pressures of testing, began to see the world around him with different eyes, saying, “Everything was substantial.” Hartogsohn, Ido, *American Trip: Set, Setting, and the Psychedelic Experience in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020), 82.

cultures to be unsullied, unchanging, pure, and natural – that way, they provide a clear antithesis or antidote to our own society.”<sup>3</sup> The view of Indigenous cultures as pure is reflected in the belief of some psychedelic researchers that psychedelic therapy sessions should be modeled after Indigenous ceremonies – that clinicians should emulate shamans to most effectively provide therapy.<sup>4</sup>

Psychedelics are rarely separated from ritual. In both clinical and non-clinical settings this can most often be equated with a dedication to “set and setting,” with set referring to attitude, mood, and mental state and setting referring to physical and temporal location. A common perspective is that a spiritual healer or clinician is tasked with facilitating the creation of a set and setting that is conducive to producing a mystical experience for someone ingesting a hallucinogenic plant or synthesized chemical compound. We can observe this at play in psilocybin studies at the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research, during which volunteers are placed in a comfortably lit room with various religious iconographies present. Researchers offer affirmations and advice to volunteers, provide them eyeshades and music, and instruct them to lie on a sofa. The “clinical” procedure begins with a sequence of actions taken to “purify” the setting and ensure that the volunteer has a safe mental voyage.

The aim of this project is to observe and analyze the potential presuppositions, strengths, and pitfalls inherent in “mysticomimetic” psychedelic research. Mysticomimetic research presupposes that, under the right conditions, psychedelics have the ability to

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Pinchbeck and Sophia Rohklin, *When Plants Dream: Ayahuasca, Amazonian Shamanism, and the Global Psychedelic Renaissance*. (London: Watkins, 2019), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Like “New Age,” the term shamanism has come under fire from academics for its ambiguity and tendency to eliminate particularities among varying religious traditions. The word is used throughout this paper in reference to the popular understanding of the term, and its use does not indicate its categorical validity.

mimic (or, perhaps, facilitate “genuine”) mystical experiences, and in doing so confer lasting psychological, emotional, and spiritual benefits upon their users. This project also addresses the increasingly controversial framing of psychedelic research in terms of mystical experience. In doing so, the project will also trace the history of how conceptions of mystical experience and the closely related concept of a “perennial philosophy” came to be embedded in the world of psychedelic research and psychedelic culture at large. The history of psychedelic research reveals a fascinating interplay between the spheres of science and religion and demonstrates that these categories are not mutually exclusive and are particularly blended in the world of psychedelic research.

Regardless of the validity of the category of “mysticism,” and beyond explicit references to religion and spirituality in scientific studies of drug-induced mystical experiences, psychedelic researchers and study participants transform research environments into sacred spaces through a variety of meaningful processes. Ritualized behaviors, under the guise of clinical procedures, are used to prepare test subjects for interior spiritual voyages, regardless of whether supernatural belief is involved. The experiences that study participants undergo clearly have religious import, oftentimes radically shifting worldviews and attitudes towards a metaphysical reality. Perhaps more obscurely, researchers themselves find meaning and spiritual fulfilment through working with patients on psychedelics. In the words of one researcher, “Profoundly sacred experiences are now occurring in the laboratories of medical professionals and social scientists.”<sup>5</sup> These sacred experiences become filtered into academic and non-academic

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<sup>5</sup> Richards, *Sacred Knowledge*, 13.

writing, with both researchers and enthusiasts creating a new genre of psychedelic sacred text.

While the “Psychedelic Renaissance” creates opportunities for new expressions of religiosity, so too it carries the weight of the past study of religion and mysticism. This is most visible in the form of “perennialism,” or the concept that all religious traditions can be traced back to some shared absolute, with differences in religious expression arising from interpretational variance. Perennialism has often involved the belief that all the world’s major religious traditions share some “common core” in the form of mystical experience. Perennialism, which is partially a byproduct of the early comparative study of religion, has been largely rejected by the field of Religious Studies, yet it remains part of the mystical framework that psychologists use to understand psychedelic therapy. Additionally, romanticized conceptions of Indigenous psychotropic use have become embedded in the field of psilocybin research, resulting in the attempted emulation of Indigenous practices by scientists and the comparison of psychiatrists to shamans or gurus. All of this has culminated in a rich mythology within the field of psychedelic research.

Before proceeding, it is important to devote some time to unpacking some terminology that is fraught with linguistic and cultural baggage. These definitions are not meant to be authoritative but are rather meant to provide consistent context for their use in this project. First, the term “perennialism” refers to a series of ideas that posit that all major religious traditions can be traced back to some common absolute. Perennialism was primarily disseminated by Aldous Huxley and gained increasing popularity over the course of the twentieth century. The common absolute at the center of perennialism is often assumed by researchers and scholars to be “mystical experience.” The perennialist

paradigm has a multitude of implications that lie beyond the scope of this project, but it is important to note that one implication is methods for cultivating mystical experience are believed to be communicated through esoteric knowledge passed down through the ages by mystical undercurrents within or outside of traditional religious structures and institutions. The ostensibly secret nature of these teachings has caused some researchers to romanticize their “discoveries,” perhaps contributing to the spread of perennialist ideals. Additionally, perennialists either interpret the absolute as a metaphysical reality or divine “Source,” as Huxley did, or as evidence of a shared, cross-cultural neurological basis for religiosity, as some modern researchers do. These two extreme interpretations of perennialism lie at opposite ends of a spectrum: one side operates on metaphysical assumptions, while the other operates on rational materialist assumptions.

The term “mysticism” has long been the subject of debate, with some claiming that mystical traditions and mysticism itself do not actually exist as meaningful categories. This project does not attempt to define the term itself, as there is a wealth of scholarship dedicated to the issue. However, observing and analyzing how mysticism is defined and utilized by intellectuals and researchers in the context of the development of psychedelic research in the United States and Europe is crucial to understanding the interplay of religion and science in research settings.

This paper also regularly refers to the “New Age” or New Age culture, movements, etc. While the term is contested within the field of Religious Studies, it functions as a convenient, intelligible category for the purposes of this paper. New Age is used here to refer to a variety of spiritual beliefs, initially tied to modern millenarianism, that arose in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and have continued to gain traction up to the present.

While there is no essential definition of the term or characteristics that would fit all instances of its use, the significance here is that it is tied to extreme expressions of modern “spirituality” as opposed to “traditional religion.” Psychedelic drugs and the associated counterculture of the 1960s are closely tied to the New Age, at least as it is used in this paper.

Finally, clarifying the way in which the word “psychedelic(s)” is used in this project is important. “Psychedelics” primarily refer to the “classical psychedelics,” which include mescaline, psilocybin, DMT (dimethyltryptamine), and LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide). These chemicals are generally considered to have been the most culturally significant hallucinogens over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and have had the most impact on the world of scientific research. In comparison to other classes of drugs, psychedelics produce relatively similar effects, which, under the right conditions, can include time distortion, ego loss, visual/auditory distortions, and positive mood. The term “psychedelic” was coined by British psychiatrist Humphrey Osmond in a letter to Aldous Huxley in 1956, and with the wide usage of that term came specific cultural and societal connotations.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, I also use psychedelic to refer to a particular cultural element that began in the mid-twentieth century and has continued into the present - a cultural element with ties to mystical experience, Western conceptions of Eastern spirituality, and humanistic psychology.

## **1.2 A Survey of the Literature**

As the current “Psychedelic Renaissance” seemingly continues to bubble, the volume of literature on psychedelics is ostensibly increasing exponentially. These texts are roughly divided into three categories: literature on mystical experience and psychedelics that is

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<sup>6</sup> Hartogsohn, *American Trip*, 77.



intended to trace the history of the inclusion of perennialist and orientalist notions in modern psychology; contemporary commentary on the relationship between psychedelics and religion; and psychological studies and articles that directly demonstrate the phenomena that I am observing and analyzing. Surveying the literature used in this project will allow insight into the conversation around psychedelic research and mysticism that will foreground the arguments of this project. It will also give the reader a brief historiography of this conversation.

The first category of texts gives historical context to how psychedelics and religion became associated with psychology in American culture. Most of these sources were written between the early twentieth century and the 1960s, with many of them being primary sources. Christopher Partridge's *High Culture: Drugs, Mysticism, and the Pursuit of Transcendence in the Modern World* discusses early experiments in consciousness by Europeans and Americans and traces the development of Western "experimental mysticism" from its origins in opium use by Europeans to the current state of psychedelic research. Ido Hartogsohn's expands on this history in *American Trip: Set, Setting, and the Psychedelic Experience in the Twentieth Century*, which provides an account of early psychedelic experimenters and researchers who profoundly influenced the attitudes of those that followed in their footsteps. Hartogsohn's all-encompassing use of the concept of "set and setting" (set as attitudes, mood, and mind state and setting as physical and temporal location) can be an extremely useful tool in application to both individual and communal contexts when exploring the role of ritual in psychedelic use, both in

“traditional” and research contexts.<sup>7</sup> William James’ lecture on mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which discusses concepts that were profoundly influential on mystical experience and perennialism, situates the work of modern researchers and Aldous Huxley, whose books *The Perennial Philosophy* and *The Doors of Perception* crystallized the relationship between psychedelics and religious experience in the American popular imagination.

The second set of texts is comprised of commentary on the history of psychedelics and psychedelic research in America. Anthropologist of science Nicolas Langlitz’s book *Neuropsychodelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research since the Decade of the Brain* provides an authoritative account of the history of psychedelic research and its current resurgence, with special attention paid to the role of spirituality (as opposed to materialism or naturalism) in scientific studies. This work also discusses what Langlitz dubs “perennial neurophilosophy” and “a shift from *philosophia perennis* to *neurobiologia perennis*,” or the move from interpreting some absolute “Truth” as the source of the apparent similarities between mystical experiences across cultures to claiming that brain chemistry and function lie at the core of said similarities.<sup>8</sup> Building off Langlitz’s work, this project argues that contemporary psychedelic research represents an example of the inability to describe aspects of culture in purely religious or secular terms. *American Trip* also demonstrates the ability of psychedelics to spontaneously produce spiritual experiences, sometimes even in

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<sup>7</sup> The word “traditional” is often used without examination both inside and outside of academia. The description is used in this project not to assert some sort of cohesive, premodern tradition, but rather to mirror the rhetoric of public discourse and to refer to the common perception that such a tradition exists.

<sup>8</sup> Langlitz, Nicolas, *Neuropsychodelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research Since the Decade of the Brain*. (Berkeley: University of California Press), 228.

conditions that are not conducive to said experiences. Hartogsohn's work is also used to argue that the "set and setting" of current and past studies on the therapeutic value of psychedelics reinforce the interpretation of participants' experiences as "mystical," thus shaping individual attitudes toward belief in a higher power, the existence of a metaphysical reality, and the presence of an afterlife.

Finally, the third category of texts is produced by both mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary forays into psychedelic research, specifically research aimed at empirically measuring mystical experience based on Ralph Hood's mysticism scale. The first example of this type of research is Walter Pahnke's (in)famous Marsh Chapel Experiment, in which ten Harvard Divinity students were dosed with psilocybin, the primary active compound in "magic mushrooms." This experiment was conducted with the aim of determining if psychedelic drugs could reliably occasion mystical experiences in volunteers in a "religious" setting. The second area of research to be analyzed is contemporary research at Johns Hopkins University, which investigates the ability of mystical experiences occasioned by psilocybin to produce "substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance."<sup>9</sup> These experiments effectively picked up where Pahnke's study left off, with researchers basing their theories off the same basic premise as Pahnke and simultaneously bringing ahistorical notions of mysticism along with those premises. Placing these two experiments in proximity to each other will bring into relief issues such as secularization, the spiritualization of mental healthcare, and the attempt to authenticate "mystical experience" by tying it to perennial notions of religion.

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<sup>9</sup> Griffiths, R. R., et al, "Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance," *Psychopharmacology*, 187, no. 3 (2006) 268–283.

### 1.3 Are Psychedelics Religious?

With the visible influence of psychedelic drugs on New Age movements and the increasing presence of articles from major news outlets dubbing hallucinogens “miracle drugs” and connecting them to mystical experiences, it seems evident today that there is a connection between these substances and religion. In fact, there is a long history behind the current Western recognition of psychedelics as having spiritual significance. The use of hallucinogenic plants and fungi in the Americas, including ones containing mescaline, psilocybin, and DMT, was first noted by Spanish colonists in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and dried peyote buttons have been found near the Rio Grande that are radiocarbon dated to roughly 4000 B.C.E.<sup>10</sup> While it is not apparent exactly how long religious practices have incorporated intoxicants, there is evidence that the use of psychotropic plants extends far into ancient times, which is reflected in the belief, popular in some New Age circles, that the use of psychedelic plants represents something like the “birth of religion,” or at least the origin of human consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

Beginning around the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, European views on Indigenous plants portrayed the use of them in a religious or spiritual context as heathenry or mental illness. This culminated in the 1620 ban of peyote by the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>12</sup> This condemnation of hallucinogens illustrates the widespread dismissal and suppression of Indigenous cultures and the European Enlightenment, rationalist interpretation of hallucination as transgressive and undesirable. However, before the advent of modern

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<sup>10</sup> Jay, Mike, *Mescaline: A Global History of the First Psychedelic*. (London: Yale University Press, 2021), 34.

<sup>11</sup> McKenna, Terence, *Food of the Gods the Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge*. (New York.: Bantam, 2010), 52.

<sup>12</sup> Leonard, Irving A, “Peyote and the Mexican Inquisition, 1620,” *American Anthropologist*, 44, no. 2 (1942) 324–26.

drug legislation and suppression, Europeans and Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century began freely experimenting with mind-altering substances in transcendental contexts. *High Culture* offers a comprehensive history and analysis of the use psychotropic substances as gateways to different realms of experience, tracing the tradition from the opium-fueled reveries of experimenters in the early 1800s to modern psychedelic research and subcultures.

Beyond psychedelics themselves, psychedelic culture has profoundly influenced modern notions of spirituality in the US. In the 1960s this influence was highlighted by popular figures such as Richard Alpert (better known as Ram Dass), a Harvard researcher who was “awakened” by his psychedelic experiences and afterward pursued an Eastern spiritual path. After the countercultural explosion in the 60s, “drugs became heavily implicated in the rise of the human potential movement and the other alternative forms of spirituality that flourished on the West Coast in the 1970s.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, psychedelics became entangled with New Age spiritualities and vice versa, with each mutually transforming the other.

The modern notion of psychedelic drugs developed in tandem with the spiritual revolution that took place in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a revolution that saw a decreased interest in traditional religious institutions in the US and an increased interest in de-traditionalized forms of religion. While there are potential problems with the portrayal of religion in studies on psychedelic drugs, these chemical compounds can produce experiences that users regularly deem to be spiritually significant. In many ways, the studies themselves provide insights into how American religious culture has continued to

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<sup>13</sup> Hartogssohn, *American Trip*, 218.

change from the 1960s to the present, especially when current studies are compared to those conducted in the 1960s.

## **2 MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE AND THE ARTICULATION OF THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY**

### **2.1 The Influence of William James**

American psychologist and philosopher William James had a powerful and wide-ranging influence on the fields of Religious Studies and psychology, and the convergence of these two disciplines is apparent in the history of psychedelic research. James helped to catalyze the 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholarly interest in mysticism and foreshadowed the development of Aldous Huxley's perennialist thought with his emphasis on religious pluralism. He also discussed drug-induced mystical experiences, helping to popularize the idea that psychotropic substances could occasion mystical experiences for those to whom they did not come naturally. Another important idea that James promoted and can still be observed in psychedelic research today is his concept of "the fruits before the roots," or the idea that the origin or ontological grounding of religious experience is far less important than the potential benefits of the experience. Over the course of the 1900s, scholars of religion came to scrutinize his thought, especially his emphasis on phenomenology in the realm of religion, but his ideas would take on a life of their own in the realm of psychedelic research.

James engaged with philosophy, religion, and psychology and was an early proponent of the potential for the field of psychology to reveal insights into the nature of religious experience. His work in many ways anticipated the pursuits of those in the field of

psychedelic research. While his influential lectures at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, only briefly mention the use of intoxicants, his experiences with anesthetics profoundly altered his worldview and, through his influence, modern conceptions of mystical experience in the United States. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he notes that his experiences under the influence of nitrous oxide caused him to realize that “Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different.”<sup>14</sup> This concept directly influenced the thought of Aldous Huxley, who theorized that the brain is a “reducing valve” for consciousness and shuts out forms of consciousness that are not conducive to biological survival. James was so influenced by his experiences with nitrous oxide that in 1874 he pseudonymously published a review of “*The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy*,” a pamphlet arguing that “the secrets of religion and philosophy were to be found in the rush of nitrous oxide intoxication.”<sup>15</sup>

In addition to making early scholarly connections between intoxication and religious experience, James also foreshadowed the approaches of twentieth-century psychedelic researchers in that his work was “suspended between the poles of faith and reason.”<sup>16</sup> James’ thoughts on drug use and mystical experience demonstrate an early tension between scientific rationalism and religious experience, with James noting of

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<sup>14</sup> Nitrous oxide was initially used as a tool for medicine, giving rise to the practice of anesthesia before being widely recognized as a means of achieving mystical experience; this process is inverted in the history of psychedelics, which were initially used as instruments of spiritual ecstasy before being acknowledged by medical and therapeutic communities as potentially useful; James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 335.

<sup>15</sup> Tymoczko, Dmitri, “The Nitrous Oxide Philosopher,” *The Atlantic*, May 1, 1996, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1996/05/the-nitrous-oxide-philosopher/376581/>.

<sup>16</sup> Tymoczko, “The Nitrous Oxide Philosopher.”

mystical experiences: “Physiology will have nothing to do with them. Orthodox psychology turns its back on them. Medicine sweeps them out.”<sup>17</sup> This tension continued to play out over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with mysticomimetic researchers taking on the role of James as devil’s advocates. Both James and mysticomimetic researchers have been relatively agnostic in their approaches, and certainly more concerned with the “fruits” of mystical experience than with the “roots” - the benefits more than the origins.

Particularly impactful was James’ lecture on mysticism in 1902. In many ways, it set the stage for early twentieth-century scholarly discussions of the topic. His theorization of four qualities of mystical experience - ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity - heavily influenced subsequent American conceptions of mystical experience; in fact, Walter Pahnke listed these qualities of mystical experience in his Harvard dissertation, “Drugs and Mysticism,” demonstrating that James’ thought had a profound influence on the scales used to quantify mystical experience.<sup>18</sup> James’ lecture also explicitly posited that mystical experience is a cross-cultural phenomenon: “Hindus, Buddhists, Mohammedans, and Christians all have cultivated [mystical experience] methodically.”<sup>19</sup> In his lectures James used “case studies” from various religious texts to demonstrate the presence of mystical experience in all major religious traditions, a move that Aldous Huxley and many scholars of religion later adopted. However, these case studies lacked historical context and led to a trend of placing varying descriptions of mystical experience in proximity to each other in an attempt to argue for the sameness of these experiences.

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<sup>17</sup> Tymoczko, “The Nitrous Oxide Philosopher.”

<sup>18</sup> Pahnke, Walter Norman, *Drugs and Mysticism: An Analysis of the Relationship between Psychedelic Drugs and the Mystical Consciousness*, PhD dissertation, (Harvard University, 1963), 28.

<sup>19</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 346.



The influence of James beyond the realm of Religious Studies is still deeply felt. In fact, one researcher working at the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness research uses an explicitly Jamesian framework to investigate drug-induced mystical experiences. David B. Yaden writes that his “research and writing provide an empirical, 21st-century update to William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* using 1) psychometric survey instruments, 2) computational linguistic analysis, 3) neuroimaging, 4) neurostimulation technology, and 5) psychopharmacology.”<sup>20</sup> In “updating” the thought of James, Yaden argues for the inherent “fruits” of psychedelically-induced mystical experiences. He argues, through James, that “the meaning and significance of a subjective experience cannot be deflated by an account of its physiological origin.”<sup>21</sup>

However, it appears that Yaden may be trying to get to the “root” of the situation in equating drug-induced MEs [mystical experiences] with “natural” ones. He writes, “the data from this study cast doubt on the assumption that RSMEs [religious, spiritual, or mystical experiences] induced through psychedelic substances are any less genuine, positive, or spiritually significant.”<sup>22</sup> This statement raises several questions. What does it mean for an experience to be “genuine?” How is “spiritual significance” measured? Even if survey responses indicate similar experiences, can researchers conclude that two types of experience are both “authentic?” Likewise, do similar measurements of brain activity indicate similar experiences? These questions point to the rise of what researcher Felix Hasler has dubbed “neuroperennialism”:

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<sup>20</sup> Yaden, David B., David B. Yaden, PhD, accessed March 4, 2022, [www.davidbryceyaden.com](http://www.davidbryceyaden.com).

<sup>21</sup> Yaden, David B., et al, “Of Roots and Fruits: A Comparison of Psychedelic and Nonpsychedelic Mystical Experiences.” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 57, no. 4 (July 2017), 5.

<sup>22</sup> Yaden, “Of Roots and Fruits,” 10.

What students of religion since Leibniz have discussed as *philosophia perennis*, namely, that all religions share the same core of absolute truth, is currently undergoing a modern neurobiological reinterpretation. Maybe the spiritual experiences of human beings do not resemble each other across cultures because they point to the same God or universal truth but simply because human brains all work alike.<sup>23</sup>

There are many assumptions built into the premise of neuroperennialism, the most significant being that “the spiritual experiences of human beings... resemble each other.”<sup>24</sup> While it would be easy to look at a text such as Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy* or Mircea Eliade’s *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* and assume that mystical experience looks very similar across cultures, dedicated study will show that this is not always the case. So, while James’ ideas have found new life outside of the field of religion, there are many problems carried over with them, including the ahistorical nature of his approach.

## **2.2 Aldous Huxley and the Further Articulation of the Perennial Philosophy**

In many ways, Aldous Huxley followed in the footsteps of William James and exerted a significantly more powerful influence than James did on the field of psychedelic research. Huxley’s influence is only partially due to the widespread dissemination of his writing in the 1950s and 1960s counterculture; at least equally important to the salience of his thought is the extent to which he engaged with the psychedelic cognoscenti of his time, many of whom worked in psychology and helped to shape the landscape of mid-twentieth century drug-assisted therapy. Huxley had a deep interest in comparative religion and Eastern mysticism, and these interests shaped the content of his first mescaline experience and contributed to the orientalizing of psychedelic culture and research. Taking Huxley’s

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<sup>23</sup> Langlitz, Nicolas, *Neuropsychedelica: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research Since the Decade of the Brain*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 228.

<sup>24</sup> Langlitz, *Neuropsychedelica*, 228.

thought and the breadth and depth of its influence into account is crucial to understanding the development and current state of the role of spirituality in psilocybin research.

Before further discussing the significance of Huxley's influence, it is important to take stock of the figures and ideas who influenced Huxley himself. These influences reflect an early scholarly understanding of mystical traditions that proved to shape the field of comparative mysticism for decades to come. From William James to Rudolph Otto to Evelyn Underhill, Huxley drew inspiration from intellectuals who had implied the existence of a perennial philosophy without explicitly naming it as such.

The influence of James is clear in the structure and methodology of *The Perennial Philosophy*, a work published in 1945 that cherry-picks from a variety of Western and Eastern religious texts to make the case that a cohesive set of theological and philosophical concepts has been articulated across time by mystical figures from various religious traditions. In the same manner as James, Huxley constantly cites examples, or as James calls them, "case studies," culled from various English translations of religious texts to support the claims he is making and draw attention to the ostensible similarities between mystical movements. This rhetorical strategy is what J.Z. Smith calls the encyclopedic style of comparison, which he criticizes it for its shortcomings:

The data are seldom either explicitly compared or explained. They simply cohabit within some category, inviting comparison by their coexistence, but providing no clues as to how this comparison might be undertaken. The encyclopaedic mode consists of contextless lists held together by mere surface associations in which the overwhelming sense is that of the exotic.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Smith, Jonathan Z, "Prologue: In Comparison a Magic Still Dwells," in *A Magic Still Dwells Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberly C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 27.

Huxley's use of this method certainly contributed to the exoticization of Eastern religious cultures, concomitantly contributing to the orientalizing of psychedelics.

While Huxley's recurring citation of James' theories and methods demonstrates the influence that the latter figure had on the former, this influence is also implicit in Huxley's theories themselves. As mentioned earlier, James claims that "our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different."<sup>26</sup> About a half-century later, "Huxley... expand[ed] on James' ideas, claiming that people under the effect of drugs... have access to aspects of the world which are foreclosed to most of us in normal situations," an idea articulated through Huxley's "reducing valve" theory of consciousness.<sup>27</sup>

Some other scholars of religion that Huxley drew inspiration from appear in the pages of *The Perennial Philosophy*. In the case of Rudolph Otto, Huxley includes *Mysticism East and West* in his list of recommended books at the end of *The Perennial Philosophy* and cites a passage from Otto comparing the "Indian doctrine" of *jnana* to the thought of Meister Eckhart.<sup>28</sup> Otto's comparisons of Eastern mystics to Western ones clearly influenced Huxley's approach, as Huxley quotes Eckhart throughout his book and often places these quotations alongside excerpts from "Eastern" mystical sources. So, ideas that contributed to the mystification of Eastern religious practice and the concomitant orientalizing of mysticism were absorbed and widely disseminated among both

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<sup>26</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 335.

<sup>27</sup> Amati, G., "Superior Points of View: William James and Aldous Huxley's Reflections on Mystical and Religious Experiences," *Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society*, 1, no. 1 (2020), 36.

<sup>28</sup> Huxley, Aldous, *The Perennial Philosophy: An Interpretation of the Great Mystics, East and West*, (New York: Perennial, 1945), 305.; the Sanskrit term *Jnana* refers to "pure awareness" or knowledge in various Indian religious traditions.

psychologists and laypeople by Huxley. Like Otto's work, Evelyn Underhill's book *Mysticism*, which builds upon the perennialist foundations of Otto's work, was recommended by Huxley in *The Perennial Philosophy*.<sup>29</sup> Also notable for inclusion in Huxley's recommendations is W. Y. Evan-Wentz's "translation" of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a work that would be reinterpreted by Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert in a psychedelic and psychological context.<sup>30</sup> The work of James, Otto, and Underhill reflects an early understanding of the concept of mysticism that had implicit connections to perennialist ideals.

Nicolas Langlitz's widely cited book *Neuropsychedelia* is evidence of the staying power of Huxley's ideas. The book's introduction, "Neuropsychopharmacology as Spiritual Technology," quickly moves to a subsection entitled "Listening to Moksha in the Age of Soma," a reference to two of the fictional drugs featured in Huxley's works. Soma, named after the Vedic deity and corresponding psychotropic plant brew, is a central plot element in the highly successful novel *Brave New World*. It represents Huxley's view of many widely used intoxicants, such as alcohol, as methods of blunting the harshness of reality for imbibers. In contrast, Huxley's late-career work *Island* features the drug moksha (named after the soteriological goal of Hinduism), which enables its consumers to attain spiritual clarity and was developed by Huxley based on his mescaline experiences. In Langlitz's words, "Unlike soma, moksha neither serves escapism nor does it rob its users' lives of authenticity, quite the contrary."<sup>31</sup> While the reference to the Vedic Soma in *Brave New*

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<sup>29</sup> Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, 306.

<sup>30</sup> Donald S. Lopez Jr. argues that *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is less a translation than a Western construction influenced by the burgeoning American spirituality movement.

<sup>31</sup> Langlitz, *Neuropsychedelia*, 5.

*World* isn't terribly significant beyond revealing Huxley's interest in Hinduism, it is clear that Huxley's naming the almost panacean drug of *Island* "moksha" was meant to equate psychedelic drugs with the potential for liberation from what he viewed as the spiritual impoverishment of modern humankind.

Huxley's contributions to psychedelic culture are especially relevant here because he arguably popularized modern perennialism more than any other figure. Following the publication of *The Perennial Philosophy* in 1945, Huxley tried mescaline, his first psychedelic, in the early 1950s, publishing an account of his experiences as *The Doors of Perception* in 1954. This work would become massively popular not only among the growing counterculture of the 1960s, but also among key figures in the development of the psychedelic therapy movement. Some of the many significant figures influenced by Huxley's ideas include Timothy Leary, Huston Smith, and Walter Pahnke.<sup>32</sup> Smith stated that Huxley was "enormously important [to him] ... 'not only as a writer, but as a friend and mentor,'"<sup>33</sup> reflecting the ability of Huxley to make both professional and personal connections with many of those he met. The fact that Huxley fostered both intellectual and personal relationships with so many members of the psychedelic cognoscenti had a profound influence on the trajectory that psychedelic therapy would take over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Not only did *The Perennial Philosophy* serve to distill and propagate Huxley's influences, but the research that led to it also directly shaped his drug experiences and interpretations of them. As Ido Hartogsohn writes:

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<sup>32</sup> Pahnke, *Drugs and Mysticism*, 46.

<sup>33</sup> Partridge, Christopher H., *High Culture: Drugs, Mysticism, and the Pursuit of Transcendence in the Modern World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 26.

Huxley's unique perspective certainly contributed to the development of his perennial interpretation of the effects of psychedelics, which not only enlisted the teachings of mystics from various traditions but also interpreted the drugs as revealing a perennial type of knowledge... In addition, Huxley's profound interest in Eastern religions led him to his invocation of Eastern concepts and ideas as avenues through which one might explore and understand the effects of psychedelics, a thesis that had a profound impact on the subsequent exegesis of psychedelia.<sup>34</sup>

Huxley's thesis contributed to what Jeffrey Kripal calls "Psychedelic Orientalism." Like attempts by psychedelic researchers and New Agers to mutually authenticate science and religion through reference to each other, which will be discussed shortly, the orientalization of psychedelics simultaneously turned to Eastern mystical traditions to argue for the validity of psychedelic experiences and placed these mystical traditions within a Western psychological framework. A letter that Huxley wrote to Timothy Leary in 1962 exemplifies the psychologization of Eastern mystical traditions. In it, Huxley writes that "The whole of gestalt therapy is anticipated in [the 112 exercises in awareness, extracted from a Tantrik text]."<sup>35</sup> Huxley attempts to validate both Tantric thought and gestalt psychology by claiming that they both reached the same basic conclusions. In this way Huxley not only introduced perennialist ideals to influential intellectual circles, but also helped to propagate the idea that psychedelics and Eastern mysticism offer similar outcomes. As will later be elaborated, this specific letter and other interactions with Leary contributed to the spread of mysticomimetic therapy and perennialist thought.

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<sup>34</sup> Hartogssohn, *American Trip*, 71.

<sup>35</sup> Kripal, Jeffrey J., *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 128.

### 2.3 The Road to Mysticomimetic Research

The history of psychedelic research is haunted by two prevailing paradigms – psychedelics as psychotomimetics (mimicking psychosis) and psychedelics as mysticomimetics (mimicking mystical experience). The emergence of these paradigms as popular concepts in the 1950s and 1960s can be traced back to a history of Western self-experimentation with psychotropics. One early influence on the psychotomimetic paradigm was French psychiatrist Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours' Club de Haschichins, a group organized in the 1840s to experiment with high doses of orally consumed cannabis. Moreau hypothesized that “the drug was able to mimic many of the effects of mental illness,” stating that “whoever submits to its influence the power to study in himself the mental disorders that characterize insanity.”<sup>36</sup>

However, the tradition of Western “experimental mysticism” predates the Club de Haschichins. Europeans in the early 1800s experimented with the ability of opium to induce dream-like states. Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both Europeans and Americans used nitrous oxide, opium, cannabis, and, increasingly, peyote to transcend everyday reality and achieve “mystical states” that, judging from personal accounts, appear to be similar to the ones observed in experiments today.<sup>37</sup> This tradition of drug experimentation was passed along through both exoteric and esoteric currents, with figures like James and Moreau bringing attention to drug-induced psychosis and mysticism on a mainstream level while countercultural figures such as Aleister Crowley experimented relatively quietly.

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<sup>36</sup> Hartogsohn, *American Trip*, 25; while cannabis is sometimes considered only a “minor psychedelic,” these experiments still set a precedent that drug experiences could give insights into the causes and phenomenology of mental illness.

<sup>37</sup> It must be considered that perhaps this similarity is due to the history of Western psychedelic experimentation influencing researchers/consumers rather than any real ontological similarity.



The first widely recognized model for psychedelic research and therapy was the so-called psychomimetic model, which began to take form in European research and was adopted by US researchers in the early 1950s.<sup>38</sup> “A 1949 paper by A.M. Becker... described [LSD] as a ‘psychoticum,’” which probably helped to spread the notion that drugs, particularly psychedelic ones, could cause users to experience psychosis or a schizophrenic mind state.<sup>39</sup> This paradigm had considerable staying power and remained the field’s prevailing theoretical lens through the 1950s. The psychomimetic movement also gave researchers what they perceived as evidence for the theory that chemicals endogenous to the human brain were at the root of mental illness.

Because of the lack of attention to mental preparation for and the physical environment of experiments with psychedelics, early test subjects regularly experienced what could easily be interpreted as psychosis. Harsh lighting, isolation, and other “extrapharmacological” factors were eventually recognized as elements conducive to a “bad trip” – this recognition reflected an early interest in what would eventually be dubbed “set and setting.”<sup>40</sup> Additionally, a paper by LSD researcher Max Rinkel “went so far as to note a possible influence of the ‘rather artificial setting’ that existed in medical experiments, in contrast to indigenous ceremonies.”<sup>41</sup> Rinkel’s statement anticipated the romanticization of mysticism and shamanism that has taken place in both psychological communities and New Age circles. The realization of the potential for non-drug factors to affect test subjects’

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<sup>38</sup> Hartogssohn, *American Trip*, 30-31.

<sup>39</sup> Hartogssohn, *American Trip*, 31.

<sup>40</sup> Hartogssohn, *American Trip*, 47.

<sup>41</sup> Hartogssohn, *American Trip*, 47.

psychedelic experiences contributed to an eventual shift in research techniques, which came to emphasize the importance of set and setting in shaping test subjects' experiences.

Even though many test subjects displayed psychotic or paranoid behavior during this stage of research, there were frequent instances in which individuals under the influence of LSD in clinical settings had spontaneous religious or mystical experiences. Not only did these experiences hold great religious import for test subjects, but they also seemed to produce a pronounced therapeutic effect. Betty Eisner and Sidney Cohen, both American LSD researchers in the late 1950s, noticed the therapeutic potential of psychedelics and made major strides in developing a mysticomimetic approach to psychedelic therapy. While Huxley may have promoted the ability of psychedelics to facilitate a spiritually enriched life, it was Eisner and her experiences with LSD that contributed to the exploration of the mysticomimetic model. She recalled herself, under the influence of LSD, "being drawn into a mystical experience... but as [she] felt the relaxing of the self boundaries, there was this flood of grateful tears which [she] stopped because of the three men present."<sup>42</sup> Stemming from the interruption of potentially visionary experiences by psychological testing methods and an uncomfortable environment, Cohen and Eisner worked to create conditions more conducive to producing and sustaining mystical experiences. Also, as were many other LSD researchers at the time, Cohen was directly influenced by Huxley – the seeds of perennialism had been planted.<sup>43</sup>

It is important to note here that the psychotomimetic and mysticomimetic paradigms are not entirely unrelated. William James extensively discussed "the bugaboo of

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<sup>42</sup> Hartogsohn, *American Trip*, 81.

<sup>43</sup> Hartogsohn, *American Trip*, 81.

morbid origin” in one of his lectures, concluding that religious genius and mental illness are not mutually exclusive. The connection between mental illness and susceptibility to religious experiences eventually found its way from the psychological world to the New Age. *The Invisible Landscape*, a book co-written by Terence McKenna and his brother Dennis, includes a chapter titled “Shamans and Schizophrenia” that draws parallels between the schizophrenic and the shaman and exemplifies the trend of equating mental illness with a proclivity for religious experience.

At least partially due to Aldous Huxley’s publicly connecting his mescaline experience to religion in *The Doors of Perception* in 1954, a new paradigm began to form within psychedelic research. Many researchers began to propose that, rather than solely possessing the ability to temporarily induce madness in patients, psychedelics could also occasion mystical experiences with tremendous therapeutic potential. In 1955 Betty Eisner wrote of her first LSD experience: “I could feel myself being drawn into a mystical experience—the sense of unity with all things in the universe.”<sup>44</sup> She also wrote to psychiatrist Humphry Osmond that “if I have a mission in life, I feel it is to put the mystic back into healing... I’m afraid I’m beginning to sound like a sermonizer.”<sup>45</sup> Eisner’s tendency toward the mystical and her publication of works displaying that tendency caused a rift in her working relationship with Cohen. The failure of Eisner’s career helps to explain what Kripal deems self-censorship by scientists whose personal conclusions clash with a materialist interpretation of study results.<sup>46</sup> Despite Eisner’s career trajectory, the late

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<sup>44</sup> Hartogsohn, *American Trip*, 81.

<sup>45</sup> Hartogsohn, *American Trip*, 88.

<sup>46</sup> Kripal, Jeffrey J., *The Flip: Epiphanies of Mind and the Future of Knowledge*, (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2019), 56.

1950s saw a rise in the implementation of mysticism in psychedelic studies as “more researchers became aware of the ubiquity of religious experiences in subject reports.”<sup>47</sup>

One of the most widely recognized figures in the history of psychedelia, Timothy Leary had a career path that mirrored that of Eisner’s, albeit more extreme. Tracing Leary’s involvement in psychedelic research is key to understanding the rapid popularization of mysticomimetic therapy. Like many other researchers discussed in this paper, Leary and Huxley were intimately connected. Leary and Huxley had a continuing correspondence, which included working together for months to outline “the do’s and don’ts of consciousness research.”<sup>48</sup> After Leary wrote to Huxley while the latter was lecturing at MIT, the two worked with other Harvard researchers throughout October 1960 before the Harvard Psilocybin Project began in November of that year; Huxley became “subject no. 11” in the Project’s sessions.<sup>49</sup> Huxley’s involvement as a founding board member of the Harvard Psilocybin Project in 1960 would profoundly impact both Leary’s approach to studying psychedelics and his personal philosophy. The orientalizing of psychedelics was passed along from Huxley to Leary, as “Leary’s subsequent reflection on the psychedelic experience was explicitly informed by Huxley’s work and by the increasingly Easternized occulture of the 1960s.”<sup>50</sup> Even Leary’s recollection of Huxley as a “serene Buddha with an encyclopedic mind” belies the combination of Eastern mysticism and Western rationalism that Huxley and company sought to embody.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Hartogsohn, *American Trip*, 85.

<sup>48</sup> Hartogsohn, *American Trip*, 102.

<sup>49</sup> Partridge, *High Culture*, 233.

<sup>50</sup> Partridge, *High Culture*, 235.

<sup>51</sup> Partridge, *High Culture*, 235.

Additionally, Leary's work often made moves to psychologize Eastern mystical traditions and treated them as having anticipated modern scientific discoveries. A great example of this psychologization is *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which Leary coauthored with Richard Alpert (Ram Dass) and Ralph Metzner, both of whom also had backgrounds in psychology and continued to promote Eastern mystical traditions for the rest of their lives. Near the beginning of the book the authors state that "Eastern philosophic theories dating back four thousand years adapt readily to the most recent discoveries of nuclear physics, biochemistry, genetics and astronomy."<sup>52</sup> Leary's eagerness to validate Eastern mysticism through science and vice versa speaks yet again to attempts by both scientists and New Age practitioners to use both science and religion to mutually authenticate each other. These attempts imply a perceived lack in both religion and science, separately, to offer satisfying explanations for pressing philosophical and metaphysical questions.

Additionally, Leary offers interpretations, presented as authoritative, of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* that downplay supernatural elements of Vajrayana Buddhism. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* itself has been criticized as a Western construction, but Leary and company took the modern interpretation even further and presented the "book" as a psychological text. For example, the authors state:

This is not (as Lama Govinda reminds us) a book of the dead.<sup>53</sup> It is a book of the dying; which is to say a book of the living; it is a book of life and how to live. The concept of actual physical death was an exoteric facade adopted to fit the prejudices of the Bonist tradition in Tibet. Far from being an embalmers'

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<sup>52</sup> Leary, Timothy, Ralph Metzner, Ram Dass, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, (February 2014), <https://psychedelicfrontier.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/The-Psychedelic-Experience-A-Manual-Based-on-the-Tibetan-Book-of-the-Dead.pdf>, 7.

<sup>53</sup> Lama Govinda, or Ersnt Lothar Hoffman, was a German convert to Buddhism who spread Tibetan teachings that reached the American counterculture of the 60s and 70s. "Anagarika Govinda," Wikipedia. Accessed April 16, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anagarika\\_Govinda](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anagarika_Govinda).

guide, the manual is a detailed account of how to lose the ego; how to break out of personality into new realms of consciousness; and how to avoid the involuntary limiting processes of the ego; how to make the consciousness-expansion experience endure in subsequent daily life.<sup>54</sup>

Leary and company's sterilized interpretation speaks to the "Protestantization of Buddhism;" the original texts are stripped of any "irrational" intention and instead presented as supporting modern psychology and science at large. Also, one must wonder if the authors were caught up in revealing the perceived "secrets" of ancient religious texts. Either way, their regarding *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as a psychological manual influenced subsequent psychedelic research in that it utilized religious examples to validate modern psychology and vice versa.

#### **2.4 Science and Religion as Mutual Authenticators**

Research into mystical experiences, including drug-induced ones, often involves a double-maneuver by scholars and researchers. On the one hand, scientists appeal to religion and mystical traditions in order to lend credibility to their work; if religious practitioners have been using techniques of transcendence for thousands of years and those types of experiences can be accessed with a pill, the potential benefits and ease of access would be tremendous. On the other hand, researchers and laypeople with metaphysical belief systems can validate their beliefs by appealing to scientific (or pseudoscientific) evidence. The world of psychedelic research represents a complication of the idea that science and religion are opposing forces. In fact, it represents a syncretic process that has been ongoing since the ideas of religion and science as separate categories of thought and belief arose in the 1800s.

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<sup>54</sup> Leary, Metzner, and Dass, *The Psychedelic Experience*, 8-9.

As early as the late nineteenth century scholars were noting the apparent conflict between religion and science. In 1875 John William Draper wrote, “The history of Science is not a mere record of isolated discoveries; it is a narrative of the conflict of two contending powers, the expansive force of the human intellect on one side, and the compression arising from traditional faith and human interests on the other.”<sup>55</sup> This is an early example of the “conflict thesis,” the theory that religion and science are inherently in opposition to each other. Regardless of the reality of the matter, the fact remains that the *perception* of science and religion as mutually opposing forces has continued to be a subject of academic and popular discourse into the present. The current debate around the “problem of mysticism” in contemporary psychedelic research reveals the discomfort some scientists have with bringing religious thought or metaphysical speculation into the lab.

Revisiting the historical arc outlined earlier in this paper with attention to the idea of science and religion as mutual authenticators requires returning to the thought of James and Huxley. James’ balance of scientific rigor (in his view) and belief in the potential existence of an “unseen order” anticipated the function of psychedelic research as a means of reconciling science and religion. While twentieth-century American culture saw a growing divide between religious and secular cultural attitudes (particularly regarding evangelical Christianity and scientific communities), psychedelic culture and research grew to represent a “way out” of this dichotomy. Huxley would claim to approach psychedelic phenomenology from a rationalist mindset; he understood psychedelics to be “technologies capable of producing controlled experiments in mysticism” and mystics themselves to be

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<sup>55</sup> Draper, John William, *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*, (New York.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), vi.

“empirical theologians.”<sup>56</sup> Therefore, while science and religion continued to become broadly understood as being in opposition to each other, experimenters such as James and Huxley wanted to have their cake and eat it too: to speculate on, and possibly promote, the idea of a metaphysical reality while maintaining a rationalist mindset. The tradition of pairing metaphysical thought and rationality would later be adopted by countercultural figures such as Terence McKenna, who regularly opined that his metaphysical speculation was not incompatible with his empiricism. At Esalen, a center of countercultural spirituality located in California, he once said, “I’m a rationalist who’s just had a very weird set of experiences, but I *am* a rationalist. I have no patience with channeling, the lords of the many rays, the devas—there’s this whole thing going around about disincarnate intelligence, and it’s mostly under the control of fairly, shall we say, non-rigorous thinkers.”<sup>57</sup> Perhaps because of its clinical setting and emphasis on experience rather than directly observable or measurable phenomena, psychedelic research is often presented and/or perceived as more legitimate than other paranormal or supernatural claims.

The authentication of religious experience through scientific inquiry is inverted in contemporary studies, in which claims of a cross-cultural, ancient mystical tradition centered on religious experience are used to legitimize scientific studies, or at least the experiences being studied. The belief in science as a tool for authenticating religious conviction is reflected in New Age religious movements, which have come to view many scientific concepts (regardless of the depth of understanding by practitioners) as apt

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<sup>56</sup> Partridge, *High Culture*, 202; Barrett, Frederick S, et al., “Validation of the Revised Mystical Experience Questionnaire in Experimental Sessions with Psilocybin,” *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, 29, no. 11 (2015), 3.

<sup>57</sup> McKenna, Terence, “A Weekend with Terence McKenna,” The Library. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://www.organism.earth/library/document/a-weekend-with-terence-mckenna>).



metaphors for their spiritual beliefs. Take, for example, *The Tao of Physics* by Fritjof Capra, a work that sought to mutually authenticate both scientific and religious worldviews by declaring them to represent the same ideals. William Richards, a psychiatrist who was a close friend of Walter Pahnke and has studied psychedelic therapy from the 1960s to the present, writes that “The understanding of the ultimate nature of energy is, as many readers may realize, similar to the views of quantum physicists,” and, of *The Tao of Physics*, “the writings of mystics and physicists often sound very similar.”<sup>58</sup>

### 3 PSILOCYBIN RESEARCH AS RELIGION

#### 3.1 Walter Pahnke and the Marsh Chapel Experiment

In many ways the Marsh Chapel Experiment, also known as the Good Friday Experiment, represents the culmination of years of scientific research, speculation on comparative mysticism, and philosophical ruminations on perennialism. As the first major study explicitly addressing the topic of drugs and mysticism, this experiment set the standard for research into drugs’ ability to occasion mystical experiences. Its influence is still felt today. Pahnke’s research brought together many influential members of the psychedelic movement: Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (Ram Dass) served as members of Pahnke’s thesis committee, and perennialist scholar of religions Huston Smith was present as a test subject during the experiment. Smith’s presence is particularly relevant to those in the field of Religious Studies, as it offers an example of the cross-fertilization of perennialist ideas between psychological researchers and academics studying religion. Overall, the impact of this study cannot be understated.

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<sup>58</sup> Richards, *Sacred Knowledge*, 47.

Walter Pahnke “conducted the research project known as the ‘Good Friday Experiment’ for his PhD dissertation in the History and Philosophy of Religion on the subject of Religion and Society.”<sup>59</sup> This PhD was in addition to a doctoral degree in medicine and a master’s in divinity that he had already acquired, both also at Harvard. Pahnke’s eclectic interests uniquely positioned him to design the Marsh Chapel Experiment, and it is important to recognize the convergence of these interests and how they represent the rapidly evolving climate of psychedelic research at the time.

Pahnke’s religious background deeply affected the design of the Marsh Chapel Experiment, which was intended to measure whether a religious set and setting was conducive to occasioning mystical experiences through psychedelics. His identity as a Christian minister contributed to many aspects of the project. First, the test subjects were all male, Christian theology students in their 20s, and measurements were taken before the experiment to ensure that religious background would factor into the “set” of the experiment. Additionally, the experiment was conducted inside of the Marsh Chapel at Boston University. This setting was replete with religious imagery, including “altar, pews, stained glass windows and various religious symbols,” and the experiment was conducted as eminent theologian Howard Thurman gave a sermon that was projected through speakers in the basement of the chapel, where the test subjects were required to stay.<sup>60</sup> Pahnke’s intention was to determine whether a religious set and setting could produce mystical experiences.

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<sup>59</sup> Richards, *Sacred Knowledge*, 31.

<sup>60</sup> Doblin, Rick, “Pahnke’s ‘Good Friday experiment’: A long-term follow-up and methodological Critique,” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 23, no. 1 (1991), 3.

Pahnke's methodological approach also betrayed some of his influences. In regard to the environment of the study, "Pahnke believed the most conducive environment for his experiment would be a community of believers participating in a familiar religious ceremony designed to elicit religious feelings, *in effect creating an atmosphere similar to that of the tribes which used psilocybin-containing mushrooms for religious purposes* [emphasis added]."<sup>61</sup> Pahnke's attempt to model research environments after Indigenous ceremonies harkens back to a paper by LSD researcher Max Rinkel, who "went so far as to note a possible influence of the 'rather artificial setting' that existed in medical experiments, in contrast to indigenous ceremonies."<sup>62</sup> Psychological researchers' references to the efficacy of set and setting modeled after plant-based Indigenous ceremonies helped to contribute to the "psychologist as shaman" archetype that over time became popular in New Age and research circles.

Another significant aspect of Pahnke's methodology was his selection of test subjects. The goal of the experiment was to determine if psilocybin could facilitate mystical experiences for *religiously inclined* individuals in a religious setting, a goal that differed from modern therapeutic trials. Pahnke selected "twenty white male Protestant volunteers, all of whom were students at the same theological school in the Boston area, [and] were given a series of psychological and physical tests. Ten sets of closely matched pairs were created using variables such as past religious experience, religious background and training, and general psychological makeup."<sup>63</sup> This method of selection homogenized the potential types of experiences that the test subjects could have. Additionally, though it was

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<sup>61</sup> Doblin, "Pahnke's 'Good Friday Experiment,'" 3.

<sup>62</sup> Hartogsohn, *American Trip*, 47.

<sup>63</sup> Doblin, "Pahnke's 'Good Friday Experiment,'" 3.

out of Pahnke's control, another methodological decision would affect the overall setting of the trial: "At the insistence of one of the group leaders as well as Pahnke's faculty sponsor, Timothy Leary, but over the objections of Pahnke, all of the group leaders were also given a pill prior to the service."<sup>64</sup> This action was ostensibly taken to make the student test subjects more familiar with the project leaders, but it also illustrates Leary's overzealous promotion of psychedelics, something that would eventually lead to his being fired from Harvard.

Despite the biases that influenced Pahnke's approach to his project, he did take some precautions to minimize the influence of this bias. For one, he did not prepare the test subjects (excluding the academic figures who served as "guides") with "the mystical literature" at all. One test subject, interviewed for a long-term follow-up report, stated that "None of the fine points of the mystical experience were given to us. We were not told to read any books such as Stace's book on mysticism or Jacob Boheme's books, nothing like that. They did not bias us in any way towards that, not at all."<sup>65</sup> Doing so would have influenced the set and setting similarly to how Aldous Huxley underwent his mescaline experience after years of ruminating upon perennialist ideals and Eastern mysticism; the test subjects would have been primed for mystical interpretations of their experiences from the start.

Additionally, Pahnke himself did not consume any psychedelics until after the conclusion of his doctoral dissertation. Pahnke's abstinence from the drugs he was studying is extremely important to note, as many researchers who experimented with

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<sup>64</sup> Dublin, "Pahnke's 'Good Friday Experiment,'" 4.

<sup>65</sup> Dublin, "Pahnke's 'Good Friday Experiment,'" 4.

psychedelics tended to proselytize or valorize the drugs. This is due to the highly suggestible nature of the psychedelic experience. Ido Hartogsohn calls LSD a “suggestible technology,” stating that “the term ‘suggestibility’ recurs in much of mid-twentieth-century psychedelic discourse and remains prevalent up to this day.”<sup>66</sup> This suggestibility, paired with the influence of figures such as Huxley, Alan Watts, Leary, and others, could help to explain the rapid proliferation of perennialism within research circles. Also, the malleability of the psychedelic experience must be taken extremely seriously, as there are currently concerns about the ethics of changing people’s belief systems through psychedelic therapy.<sup>67</sup>

Ultimately, while Pahnke’s study did not explicitly express perennialist leanings in his research to the extent that others did, the inclusion of certain sources reinforced perennialist ideals. In his dissertation, *Drugs and Mysticism*, Pahnke states that many people who have used visionary substances have been “struck by the similarity of their experiences with those described by mystics and visionaries from a variety of cultures. Aldous Huxley opened the eyes of many to such a possibility when he described his first mescaline experience in *The Doors of Perception*.”<sup>68</sup> Shortly after this claim he cites Alan Watts as an authority on drug-induced mystical experiences. The inclusion of Watts here foreshadows his inclusion in the paper “Classic Hallucinogens and Mystical Experiences: Phenomenology and Neural Correlates,” coauthored by Johns Hopkins researchers Roland Griffiths and Frederick Barrett. The fact that Griffiths invokes Watts as a “mystic” perfectly

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<sup>66</sup> Hartogsohn, *American Trip*, 200.

<sup>67</sup> Love, Shayla, “The Insights Psychedelics Give You Aren’t Always True,” *VICE*. Accessed March 4, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/5dgkkn/the-insights-psychedelics-give-you-arent-always-true>.

<sup>68</sup> Pahnke, *Drugs and Mysticism*, 20.

demonstrates how reliant modern psilocybin trials are upon Pahnke's original model and how Watt's perennialist views, like those of Huxley, have been imported into psychological trials.

Importantly, the scale that Pahnke developed to measure mystical experience was influenced by the work of many scholars of comparative mysticism, particularly Walter Stace:

Pahnke decided to measure the mystical experience in reference to eight distinct experiential categories. The categories include 1) sense of unity, 2) transcendence of time and space, 3) sense of sacredness, 4) sense of objective reality, 5) deeply felt positive mood, 6) ineffability, 7) paradoxicality and 8) transiency. These categories are very similar to those elaborated by such well-respected scholars of mystical experience as William James (1902), Evelyn Underhill (1910), and W.T. Stace (1960) and are accepted as valid even by academic critics of the Good Friday experiment such as R.C. Zaehner (1972). At present, the scientific questionnaire most widely used by researchers to assess mystical experiences is a 32-item questionnaire created by Ralph Hood, also based on categories developed by W.T. Stace.<sup>69</sup>

By developing an ostensibly empirical study and scale using the scholarship of James, Underhill, and especially Stace as a foundation, Pahnke essentialized mysticism and implicitly acknowledged it as a valid category of religion and experience. The Hood Mysticism Scale, which was created by psychologist of religion Ralph Hood, expanded upon the scales used in Pahnke's work, underscoring the significance that Stace's thought has for the psychological study of mystical experiences. Part of the motivation behind the creation of scales used to measure mystical experiences is the mutual authentication of science and religion.

While the set and setting of the Marsh Chapel Experiment was "religious" in that it was featured Christian imagery, values, liturgy, location, and personal backgrounds, the

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<sup>69</sup> Doblin, "Pahnke's 'Good Friday Experiment,'" 7.

experiences of some of the participants reflected perennialist notions of religion. Huston Smith cited his experience during the study as crystallizing his perennialist philosophical outlook: “The experiment was powerful for me, and it left a permanent mark on my experienced worldview... For as long as I can remember I have believed in God, and I experienced his presence both within the world and when the world was transcendently eclipsed. But until the Good Friday Experiment, I had had no direct personal encounter with God of the sort that *bhakti yogis*, Pentecostals, and born-again Christians describe.”<sup>70</sup> While Smith’s interpretation certainly had to do with his years exploring other religious traditions, particularly Eastern mystical traditions, he did attribute his transcendental experience to the invocation of Christ as an object of fervor.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, images and stories of hallucinogen use by Indigenous peoples permeated the counterculture of the 1960s, as one participant in the experiment noted in his experience report: “While the service went on I was caught up in this experience of eternal life and appreciating what the peyote Indians or the sacred mushroom Indians experienced with their imbibing of the drug.”<sup>72</sup> So, beyond the perennialist notions brought into the experiment through Smith and Leary, romanticized images of the “primitive” use of psychedelics also made their way into participants’ subjective experiences through the American popular imagination. The influence of popular culture cannot be escaped in these sorts of studies.

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<sup>70</sup> Richards, *Sacred Knowledge*, 46.

<sup>71</sup> Richards, *Sacred Knowledge*, 46.

<sup>72</sup> Doblin, “Pahnke’s ‘Good Friday Experiment,’” 16.

### 3.2 Picking Up Where Pahnke Left Off at Johns Hopkins

Due to the controversy regarding psychedelic research, the mass dissemination of LSD among the counterculture, and the ensuing anti-drug media frenzy, American research into the therapeutic potential of psychedelics ceased entirely during the 1970s. In 1977 William Richards, who would play a large role in jumpstarting the American “Psychedelic Renaissance,” acted “as the last researcher and clinician to administer psilocybin to a patient at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center – the only institution at that time in the United States that was allowed to conduct research on psychedelic substances.”<sup>73</sup> After 1977, the moratorium on psychedelic research lasted for almost thirteen years. While drug use would remain a significant religious practice in underground psychedelic churches, new religious movements, and Indigenous ceremonies, research into the mystical potential of psychedelics would remain closed for some time. Chemist Alexander Shulgin was one of the few, if not the only, government authorized scientists to continue what could be considered self research into the potential of psychedelics for personal spiritual growth, but this research wasn’t necessarily concerned with the therapeutic value of the chemicals.

In 1990 the moratorium broke when Dr. Rick Strassman was granted permission to conduct studies on DMT, a powerful psychedelic tryptamine with short-acting effects, at the University of New Mexico. Beyond his being the first researcher permitted to work with a “classical hallucinogen” in over two decades, Strassman embodies many of the qualities of other researchers discussed in this paper. For one, he became a Buddhist practitioner during his experience as a psychedelic researcher. He specifically became interested in Zen

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<sup>73</sup> Richards, *Sacred Knowledge*, xii.



Buddhism and received training from a Zen Roshi.<sup>74</sup> This makes him part of the lineage of psychedelic researchers with a profound interest in Eastern religion. Additionally, he sought to reconcile science and religion through mutual authentication. For example, Strassman makes connections between human biology and Buddhist thought in his book *DMT: The Spirit Molecule: A Doctor's Revolutionary Research into the Biology of Near-Death and Mystical Experiences*: "I already knew that the Tibetan Buddhist Book of the Dead teaches that it takes forty-nine days for the soul of the recently dead to 'reincarnate.' ... It takes forty-nine days from conception for the first signs of the human pineal to appear. Forty-nine days is also when the fetus differentiates into male or female gender. Thus the soul's rebirth, the pineal, and the sexual organs all require forty-nine days before they manifest."<sup>75</sup> Similarly to Leary, Strassman connects *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* to modern science, in this case biological rather than psychological, in an attempt to validate both.

Strassman wasn't necessarily concerned with the therapeutic potential of DMT - the experience is so dramatic and brief that therapeutic applications have been difficult to conceptualize - but he did focus on the inner journeys of trial participants. He also seemed to address some of the metaphysical implications of their experiences in *The Spirit Molecule*. In the chapter titled "Mystical States," Strassman outlines the ability of DMT to occasion mystical experiences, albeit lacking the therapeutic value of psilocybin. In his description of mystical states he makes remarks such as, "There is a searing sense of the sacred and holy. We contact an unchanging, unborn, undying, and uncreated reality. It is a

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<sup>74</sup> Strassman began practicing Soto-Zen style meditation in his twenties under the tutelage of a Zen Roshi. Osto, Douglas, *Altered States: Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 96.

<sup>75</sup> Strassman, Rick, *A Doctor's Revolutionary Research into the Biology of Near-Death and Mystical Experiences*. (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2001), 81-82.

personal encounter with the ‘Big Bang,’ God, Cosmic Consciousness, the source of all being.”<sup>76</sup> Mention of an “unchanging, undying, and uncreated reality” conjures up vague notions of Western interpretations Hindu philosophy. The inclusion of the Big Bang, God, and Cosmic Consciousness speaks to science, traditional religion, and New Age language respectively. Strassman may be at the extreme end of the spectrum in terms of his combination of spiritual and scientific beliefs, but his research most certainly had an impact on the studies at Johns Hopkins.

While Strassman explicitly addressed metaphysical speculation in his studies and writing, research at Johns Hopkins University took a somewhat more staid approach. Exercising extreme caution due to the furor around psychedelics in the 1960s - psilocybin is most often used in these studies simply because the chemical name sounds more innocuous than LSD to most even though they belong to the same class of chemicals - Roland Griffiths and his fellow researchers published their landmark paper “Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance” in 2006. Initially, rather than focusing on the therapeutic applications of psilocybin, Griffiths and his team looked solely at the ability of psilocybin to occasion mystical experiences. Journalist Michael Pollan writes:

The story of how this paper came to be sheds an interesting light on the fraught relationship between science and that other realm of human inquiry that science has historically disdained and generally wants nothing to do with: spirituality. For in designing this, the first modern study of psilocybin, Griffiths had decided to focus not on a potential therapeutic application of the drug—the path taken by other researchers hoping to rehabilitate other banned substances, like MDMA—but rather on the spiritual effects of the experience on so-called healthy normals.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Strassman, *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, 235.

<sup>77</sup> Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*, 31.

So, for Griffiths it would appear that “spiritual significance” is valuable as an object of study in and of itself, rather than being important only for its therapeutic value. The first step of modern psilocybin research was to scientifically re-establish the ability of psilocybin to “occasion mystical-type experiences.” The term “mystical-type” also pushes the issue of authenticity in drug-induced mystical experience to the side, a move that perhaps obscured the mysticism-heavy direction that future research at Johns Hopkins would take.

Before analyzing the set and setting of the Johns Hopkins experimental psilocybin sessions, it is important to briefly get acquainted with Griffiths, the psychiatrist who has become one of the major voices of the scientific “Psychedelic Renaissance.” Unlike Walter Pahnke, Griffiths did not have a theological education or foundational Christian belief system. However, he did have an equally significant religious background that contributed to the methodological approach of his studies. In the 1990s Griffiths became interested in Siddha Yoga<sup>78</sup> and began consistently practicing meditation in 1994. He has also somewhat reluctantly admitted to having a mystical experience himself, one which, in his own words, drew him “deeper and deeper into this mystery.”<sup>79</sup>

While one would perhaps be able to glean some of Griffiths’ metaphysical and perennialist leanings from reading his studies alone, he has explicitly addressed them. In regards to his mystical experience, which took place during a meditation session, he said that he was introduced to “something way, way beyond a material worldview that I can’t really talk to my colleagues about, because it involves metaphors or assumptions that I’m

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<sup>78</sup> Siddha Yoga is a form of meditation founded by Muktananda, a 20<sup>th</sup>-century Indian guru. “Siddha Yoga,” Wikipedia. Accessed April 18, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siddha\\_Yoga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siddha_Yoga).

<sup>79</sup> Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*, 33.

really uncomfortable with as a scientist.”<sup>80</sup> Griffiths’ reluctance to share his experience of a metaphysical reality with his colleagues demonstrates the tendency of mainstream science to reinforce a strictly materialist worldview, or to assume that materialism is the only framework through which science can be practiced efficaciously. As Jeffrey Kripal writes, “A scientist might hesitate to report anomalous experiences because of his or her social and professional context... There are subtle and explicit forms of censorship that effectively suppress these types of reports to protect the present reigning interpretation of the world – classical or conventional materialism.”<sup>81</sup>

Griffiths eventually became frustrated with the inability of his scientific work to fulfill him emotionally and intellectually, which culminated in his “going through the motions at work [and becoming] much more interested in going home in the evening to meditate.”<sup>82</sup> Eventually, Griffiths’ work with psilocybin became a practice that rewarded him in ways which his traditional drug research could not. The capability for scientific research to be spiritually fulfilling for researchers is reflected in the experience of Griffiths’ colleague William Richards, who, in his book *Sacred Knowledge*, recalled a study participant’s psilocybin experience: “This guy is lying on the couch right there where you are, with tears streaming down his face, and I’m thinking, how absolutely beautiful and meaningful this experience is. How *sacred*.”<sup>83</sup> Psilocybin research is something that not only produces spiritually significant experiences for study participants, but also becomes a part of some researchers’ spiritual lives in a scientific setting. Griffiths’ experience

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<sup>80</sup> Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*, 33.

<sup>81</sup> Kripal, Jeffrey J., *The Flip*, 56.

<sup>82</sup> Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*, 33.

<sup>83</sup> Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*, 56.

demonstrates that scientific work in the domain of psychedelics need not (or, possibly, cannot) take place in a religious vacuum; science can be a religious practice for both researchers and researchees. As Griffiths does in his research, Richards embraces scholarship on religion with a perennialist bent, frequently citing Huston Smith as “an eminent scholar of religions.” Importantly, Richards downplays mainstream Religious Studies and Theology at large, opting instead for an experiential, Jamesian approach to engaging with religion. He states that while studying at Yale he “found [his] primary intellectual yearnings and spiritual inspiration nourished in lectures not in the theological division of the university, but by members of the psychiatric faculty in the School of Medicine,” going on to say that “it was clear to [him] that [he] had discovered the experiential dimension of religion being most intensely manifested in the medical division of the university.”<sup>84</sup>

Moving from the researchers to the studies themselves, the set and setting of the experiments at Johns Hopkins, which began in 2000 and are still ongoing, is markedly different than that of Pahnke’s Marsh Chapel Experiment. First of all, the traditional religious imagery of the Marsh Chapel has been replaced with more ambiguous spiritual markers. The rooms in which sessions are conducted feel “more like a den or living room than a room in a laboratory, with a plush sofa, vaguely spiritual paintings on the walls, a sculpture of the Buddha on a side table, and shelves holding a giant stone mushroom and various other nondenominational spiritual artifacts, as well as the small chalice in which the volunteers receive their pills.”<sup>85</sup> The varied, ambiguous iconography of the session

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<sup>84</sup> Richards, *Sacred Knowledge*, 167.

<sup>85</sup> Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*, 56.

rooms is clearly indicative of the influence of Huxley, Leary, and the like. The emphasis is on Eastern, Indigenous, and “spiritual” religious imagery rather than that of Protestant Christianity. The experimental design at Johns Hopkins also involves the use of eye shades to block external visual cues, a methodological decision in line with popular notions of the individualistic, interior, and experiential qualities of “spirituality” as opposed to “religion.”



*Figure 1: One of the session rooms used for the Johns Hopkins psilocybin trials*  
(<http://thirdmonk.net/postcont/2015/01/JHU-Session-Room.jpg>)

The influence of psychedelic spirituality and perennialist thought on the Johns Hopkins studies extends beyond the “sacred” space in which sessions take place. Griffiths and the Johns Hopkins team most explicitly addressed the influence of perennialism on their projects in the paper “Classic Hallucinogens and Mystical Experiences: Phenomenology and Neural Correlates.” Particularly significant is the section “What is mysticism?” in which the team attempts to define mystical experience and introduces the Hood Mysticism Scale that is used in the Johns Hopkins studies. This section begins with a quotation by Alan Watts: “[Mystical experiences are] those peculiar states of consciousness in which the individual discovers himself to be one continuous process with God, with the

Universe, with the Ground of Being, or whatever name he may use by cultural conditioning or personal preference for the ultimate and eternal reality.”<sup>86</sup> The terms used for “Ultimate Reality” indicate compatibility with a range of belief systems: religious, materialist, and philosophical, respectively. The phrase “whatever name he may use by cultural conditioning or personal preference” alludes to Stace and other perennialists’ emphasis on the role of interpretation in personal accounts of mystical experiences, an idea used to support the “common core” theory of mysticism.<sup>87</sup> The article also supports the idea of the “common core” theory with a quotation from Huxley. The inclusion of these quotations, which come not from scholarly sources but from intellectuals within the psychedelic movement, demonstrates that “A very small number of writers, artists, and intellectuals [transformed] an entire generation,” including its scientific thinkers.<sup>88</sup> The sources cited also demonstrate that both academic and non-academic sources are ostensibly given equal weight when considering conceptions of mysticism in the Johns Hopkins studies.

It is notable that the paper focuses on Stace’s conception of mysticism, including his typology of introvertive and extrovertive mysticism, with the paper’s authors claiming that “the most definitive philosophical treatise on mystical experiences was compiled by Walter Stace.”<sup>89</sup> It is taken as a presupposition that Stace’s theory of mystical experience is the most accurate model available. This is also evident in the use of the Hood Mysticism Scale,

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<sup>86</sup> Barrett, Frederick S. and Roland R. Griffiths, “Classic Hallucinogens and Mystical Experiences: Phenomenology and Neural Correlates,” *Behavioral Neurobiology of Psychedelic Drugs Current Topics in Behavioral Neurosciences* 36 (2017), doi:10.1007/7854\_2017\_474, 2-3.

<sup>87</sup> The argument regarding interpretation posits that mystical experiences are identical across cultures and the reason for differing reports of these experiences is due to interpretation within a mystic’s religious framework.

<sup>88</sup> Kripal, *Esalen*, 128.

<sup>89</sup> Barret and Griffiths, “Classic Hallucinogens and Mystical Experiences: Phenomenology and Neural Correlates,” 3.

with which “Ralph Hood and colleagues have vigorously defended the thesis of the ‘common core’” of mysticism.<sup>90</sup> The paper mostly ignores any controversy or pushback against perennialism within the field of mystical studies. A short paragraph does recognize the “constructivist” perspective of mysticism, writing that “It is important to acknowledge that the most extreme interpretation of the common core hypothesis, which holds that mystical experience is a direct encounter with the divine, and from which claims of a perennial philosophy are made, has been criticized by some scholars of religion,” but the authors ultimately conclude that, “although debating the conceptual extreme interpretations of mystical experience has provided a platform for academic scholarship, it may not be a productive strategy for advancing a scientific basis for exploring the immediate causes and consequences of such experiences.”<sup>91</sup> So, the authors recognize the wide spectrum of perennialist views that exist, but set aside the issue of the “roots” of mystical experience in favor of using a model of mysticism that is operable within the framework of their studies.

### **3.3 The Mystical Controversy and Psychiatric Shamanism**

In an editorial accompanying Griffiths’ paper, psychiatrist Harriet de Wit suggested that it was time for science to “recognize these extraordinary subjective experiences... even if they sometimes involve claims about ultimate realities that lie outside of the purview of science.”<sup>92</sup> De Wit recognizes the value of scientifically exploring subjective spiritual experiences even if the metaphysical speculation involved clashes with the goals of

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<sup>90</sup> Barret and Griffiths, “Classic Hallucinogens and Mystical Experiences: Phenomenology and Neural Correlates,” 5.

<sup>91</sup> Barret and Griffiths, “Classic Hallucinogens and Mystical Experiences: Phenomenology and Neural Correlates,” 5.

<sup>92</sup> Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*, 32.



traditional science. Through the scientific study of drug-induced mystical experiences the lines between empirical observation and theological speculation become blurred, a blurring which has been the cause of much debate within the scientific community. Even within the Center for Consciousness Studies at Johns Hopkins, opinions differ about how to best handle psychedelic therapy. In 2021, Matthew Johnson, one of the Center Directors, wrote an article titled “Consciousness, Religion, and Gurus: Pitfalls of Psychedelic Medicine,” in which he opined that many psychedelic researchers inappropriately introduce their own religious or spiritual beliefs into therapeutic sessions. In fact, he directly addressed the perennial elephant in the room, writing that belief systems are “not limited to standard religious beliefs. It would also be inappropriate to introduce meta-religious beliefs such as perennialism (the notion that the major religious traditions point toward a core truth).”<sup>93</sup> The fact that Johnson addressed perennialism by name is testament to how deeply it is embedded within the current psychedelic research paradigm.

Other members of the scientific community have pushed back against the enterprise of mysticomimetic therapy as a whole. Many have expressed concern that “if science states that psychedelics induce mystical experiences that are key to their therapeutic action, this is too easily misinterpreted as research advocating a role for the supernatural or divine,” and furthermore that the scientific community’s “choice of frameworks and measures serves to reify concepts such as mystical consciousness without sufficient justification.”<sup>94</sup> It is also true that using the scales such as Hood’s Mysticism Scale only allow study

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<sup>93</sup> Johnson, Matthew W., “Consciousness, Religion, and Gurus: Pitfalls of Psychedelic Medicine,” *ACS Pharmacology & Translational Science* 4, no. 2 (2020), 580.

<sup>94</sup> Sanders, James W., and Josjan Zijlmans, “Moving Past Mysticism in Psychedelic Science,” *ACS Pharmacology & Translational Science* 4, no. 3 (2021), 2.

participants to interpret their experiences through the lens of mystical experience while discouraging alternative explanations. Many scientists approaching the issue from this position seek to dismantle the mystical therapeutic framework entirely. There are many other proposed mechanisms of action of psychedelic therapy, such as the reduction of death anxiety. In the most extreme materialist formulation of the action of psychedelics the issue of experience is removed entirely, which has resulted in the search for “non-psychedelic psychedelics” – drugs that would not cause any acute perceptual changes but would still provide users with therapeutic benefits.<sup>95</sup>

A potential side effect of the incorporation of perennialist ideology into psychedelic therapy is the alienation of people whose belief systems may clash with a perennialist framework. For example, the ambiguity of the mixture of iconography present in the Johns Hopkins sessions is perhaps intended to create a neutral, inclusive environment for patients, while in reality it could cause discomfort for those who have operate within more mainstream religious belief systems. Matthew Johnson pushed back against the practice of including religious iconography in session rooms, writing, “the introduction of such religious icons into clinical practice unnecessarily alienates some people from psychedelic medicine, e.g., atheists, Christians, and Muslims. It will ultimately interfere with the mainstream adoption of these treatments to help the greatest number of appropriate individuals.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Grover, Natalie, “Non-Hallucinogenic Psychedelics: Scientists Close in on Compound,” *The Guardian*. April 28, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/apr/28/non-hallucinogenic-psychedelics-scientists-close-in-on-compound>.

<sup>96</sup> Johnson, “Consciousness, Religion, and Gurus: Pitfalls of Psychedelic Medicine,” 3.

Another controversial topic in the realm of mysticomimetic research is the issue of the “authenticity” of drug-induced mystical experiences. This discussion came to a head with R.C. Zaehner’s response to Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception*. Zaehner was adamant that drug-induced experiences could not be equated with instances of “true” mystical experience. In order to acknowledge the power of drug-induced experience, he typologized mysticism as either religious mysticism or nature mysticism: nature mysticism was considered less authentic and included drug-induced experience, and religious mysticism constituted “true” encounters with the divine. While Zaehner’s Catholic background certainly came to play in this division of mysticism, the fact remains that the idea of drug-induced experiences as “artificial” mysticism had been raised.

This is relevant to the discussion at hand because it seems that mysticomimetic research has often been concerned with arguing for the authenticity of drug-induced mystical experience. Recall Yaden’s positing of the “genuine” nature of drug-induced RMSEs, as it is in this way that the perennialist philosophy becomes a means of legitimizing the research; if it can be empirically measured that both psychedelic and non-psychedelic mystical experiences produce the same therapeutic or neurological results, then it has been “proven” that drug-induced mystical experiences are just as authentic as non-drug-induced ones. To many researchers, drawing parallels between these experiences lends additional credence to the results of the studies – after all, if one could achieve the same results from taking a psilocybin capsule as from years of dedicated religious training, why would one not take the pill? This idea is tied to wider notions of what Paul Devereux calls “the long trip,” or the idea that “a close relationship [exists] between human culture and

psychoactive substances, the suppression of which in Western society is aberrant.”<sup>97</sup> The researchers potentially view themselves as connected to this lost relationship, and additionally wish to connect brain chemistry and psychology to both explain religion and use it to verify their research.

Another issue within psychedelic research communities in America is that mysticomimetic therapy is by and large the prevailing theoretical framework in the field. While the position of mysticomimetic research as “the only game in town” is problematic, it is also true that occasioning “mystical experiences” through drugs produces lasting benefits for study participants, even if “mysticism” remains poorly defined. The article “Working with Weirdness” pushes back against the aforementioned criticisms, urging researchers to continue “embracing the weirdness of psychedelics,” criticizing those who maintain a “positivistic attitude that struggles to make sense of [drug-induced mystical experiences] using materialist and reductionist approaches.”<sup>98</sup>

Nicolas Langlitz, an anthropologist of science, addresses the relationship between science and materialism with a series of interviews in the chapter “Mystic Materialism” in *Neuropsychedelia*. In the chapter Langlitz interviews graduate student Erich Studerus, who studied psilocybin at a prestigious German lab. Studerus stresses the importance of studying the material conditions of consciousness while also “reject[ing] the reduction of mind to brain.”<sup>99</sup> While he may not totally espouse the same metaphysical views as Griffiths, he did engage in a series of Ayahuasca ceremonies that reshaped his personal

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<sup>97</sup> Hartogsohn, *American Trip*, 292.

<sup>98</sup> Brecksema, Joost J., and Michiel van Elk, “Working with Weirdness: A Response to ‘Moving Past Mysticism in Psychedelic Science,’” *ACS Pharmacology & Translational Science* 4, no. 4 (2021), 2.

<sup>99</sup> Langlitz, *Neuropsychedelia*, 224.

worldview and philosophy, demonstrating the tendency of individuals studying drug mysticism to seek out their own spiritually enriching experiences.

Like a number of other researchers in the field, Studerus also draws parallels between shamanism and psychedelic therapy, writing, “Without the power of suggestion, a shamanic session would not work. Those running such a drug ritual need to exude absolute security, authority, and expertise. In the case of experimental subjects easily impressed by scientific authorities, a researcher might be able to fulfill this function as well.” Terence McKenna reflects this attitude’s incorporation into the New Age, writing, “One area of modern life that does not appear to be shamanic, but that might profitably model itself after shamanism, is psychoanalysis.”<sup>100</sup> Once again we have an example of psychedelic enthusiasts looking to shamanism as a model for modern psychology. As Hartogsohn articulates, one potential perspective on this issue is that the power of psychedelics to increase suggestibility enables the leader of a ritual, whether a traditional ceremony or clinical therapeutic session, to guide someone through their interior voyage. The ceremonial leader or clinician shapes the set and setting of the experience with their authority, and a comfortable and spiritually open set and setting is conducive to occasioning a mystical experience. Many researchers have stated that it is not the chemical itself that creates a mystical experience. Rather, the chemical facilitates the ability of a “guide” to tease out such an experience.

The archetype of the psychologist or psychedelic figure as shaman or guru may not be explicitly acknowledged by researchers like Roland Griffiths. However, this archetype

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<sup>100</sup> McKenna, Terence K., and Dennis McKenna, *The Invisible Landscape: Mind, Hallucinogens, and the I Ching*. (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 18.

has a long history within the field of psychedelic research. While not a psychologist himself, Huxley was called the “*guru extraordinaire*, whose words first beckoned [one] through the doors of perception,”<sup>101</sup> and Timothy Leary was a self-proclaimed guru who inspired a huge number of 60’s youths to “tune in, turn on, and drop out.” Johns Hopkins researcher Matthew Johnson warned of the dangers of this archetype, writing, “The scientist or clinician might, perhaps without explicit awareness, fall into the trap of playing guru or priest, imparting personal philosophies without a solid empirical basis.”<sup>102</sup> Regardless of the potential pitfalls of scientists filling the roles of “gurus,” the archetype of the scientist as shaman represents another way in which science and rationalism have adopted religious trappings in order to legitimize their work. Like many other ideas generated within psychedelic research communities, the archetype of the psychologist or scientist as shaman has been transferred to the New Age. Terence McKenna exemplifies this trend, writing, “The scientist who charts the unexplored levels of organization found in nature... has much in common with the shaman who journeys through the magical topography of the spirit-world.”<sup>103</sup>

This archetype has been taken to the extreme in the form of the mythologization of prominent figures in psychedelic research. Patrick Kossuth, a German researcher who rejects drug mysticism, says, “Take Albert Hofman, for example. There are people getting down on their knees in front of him, kissing his feet, and the conference hall is filled by a cheering crowd and some of them are dancing on the stage, I’ve heard. There is a

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<sup>101</sup> Partridge, *High Culture*, 191.

<sup>102</sup> Johnson, “Consciousness, Religion, and Gurus: Pitfalls of Psychedelic Medicine,” 580.

<sup>103</sup> McKenna and McKenna, *The Invisible Landscape*, 18.

discipleship.”<sup>104</sup> This level of dedication is not limited to Hofman – scientists such as Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, John Lilly, Alexander Shulgin, and Rick Strassman have been invited to speak at New Age locales, such as the Esalen Institute; written scientific, spiritual-leaning books, a modern form of sacred text; and remained cornerstones of psychedelic culture into the new millennium. These figures reveals that, regardless of the presence of metaphysics or not, psychedelic research has been mythologized and its history has been transformed into a cohesive narrative by psychedelic culture.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Psychedelics and psychedelic research provide an outlet for religious expression to continue in the postmodern world. Globalization, religious pluralism, and the progress of scientific discovery have created a mass-cultural environment in which some have found it difficult to imagine religion continuing to thrive. The ease of access to mystical experiences occasioned by psychedelics have created a way for some individuals who would have perhaps otherwise maintained a rational materialist *weltanschauung* to embrace the possibility of a metaphysical reality. While further research is needed to support the ability of psychedelics to convert people from a materialist mindset, there has been at least one study (with which Griffiths was involved) that supports psychedelic conversion with results from survey respondents: “More than two-thirds of [respondents] who identified as atheist before [their first psychedelic experience] no longer identified as atheist

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<sup>104</sup> Langlitz, *Neuropsychodelia*, 211.

afterwards.”<sup>105</sup> All of this is to say that psychedelics in themselves have the capability to be used as powerful spiritual technologies.

The power of psychedelics to radically shift the perspective of an individual certainly represents a sort of religious phenomenon. However, studies into the therapeutic potential of drug-induced mystical experience constitute religious activity in less obvious ways. Clinical settings have been transformed into sacred spaces not only through the presence of “mystical” experiences, but also through the spiritual fulfilment experienced by researchers themselves; the rituals, in the form of clinical procedures, that are used to prepare study participants; and the production of sacred texts in the form of articles and pop science books. While much of this religious significance is implicit in the texts themselves, many scientists have openly expressed their perennialist attitudes and metaphysical beliefs.

The world of psychedelic research reveals a frequent interplay between the realms of science and religion, with scientists looking to religious concepts to lend credence to their claims and vice versa. This relationship is expressed in ways such as the scientific appeal to mysticism as validating therapeutic action; the New Age use of scientific thought to “prove” metaphysical beliefs; and calls to model psychiatric intervention after shamanism and therapeutic sessions after Indigenous plant ceremonies. Pushing back against the secularization thesis, these phenomena are a clear indicator of the resilience of

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<sup>105</sup> Griffiths, Roland R., et al. “Survey of Subjective ‘God Encounter Experiences’: Comparisons among Naturally Occurring Experiences and Those Occasioned by the Classic Psychedelics Psilocybin, LSD, Ayahuasca, or DMT,” ed. by Rosemary Frey. *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 4 (April 23, 2019), 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0214377>, 1.



religious life in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. These ideas also show the way in which scientific research into psychedelics and mysticism has influenced New Age culture.

Ultimately, there is still much to unpack in regard to the “Psychedelic Renaissance.” Currently the movement only seems to be gaining popularity, and as psychedelic therapy continues to grow and potentially become legalized, there will be many philosophical, neurological, and ethical questions to consider. Continued scholarship on the relationship between psychedelic experience and mysticism is needed to better understand the role of religion in these types of therapies. The field of Religious Studies has been regularly invoked in psychedelic psychology, but contemporary voices are needed to ensure that the conversation around religion and psychedelic therapy is well-balanced and responsibly conducted. The “Psychedelic Renaissance” is certainly an exciting time for scholars of religion, scientists, psychedelic enthusiasts, and more.

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