APA copyright

http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0040299

"This article may not exactly replicate the authoritative document published in the APA journal. It is not the copy of record."

Psychedelics and Mystical Experiences

**Review of *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experience***

By William A. Richards

New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016. 269 pp. ISBN 978-0-231-17406-0 $29.95

Reviewed by Michael J. Winkelman

Contact: michaeljwinkelman@gmail.com

Abstract

Reviews the book, *Sacred knowledge: Psychedelics and religious experiences,* by William A. Richards. Richards’s career of clinical research with psychedelics and professional formation in theology, comparative religion and the psychology of religion bring integrative perspectives to understanding psychedelic experiences. Clinical accounts, scientific research and his personal experiences with psychedelics enable Richards to address issues of core importance in religious studies, medicine and society in general. Clinical studies with psychedelics provide findings that contribute to assessment of issues in religious studies, providing evidence that supports a perennialist view of mystical experiences as inherent to human nature. Double blind studies establish the intrinsic ability of psychedelics to produce mystical experiences, as well as behavioral changes in the participants’ lives. Similarities in mystical and psychedelic experiences across people and cultures point to their transcendental nature and basis in human biology. Richards weaves together various strands of evidence to educate professionals of many disciplines and the general public about the range of promising uses of psychedelics. Although psychedelic ingestion does not always produce mystical experiences, when they fail to do so, they generally engage the user with personal experiences related to childhood trauma or unresolved emotions, especially fears, grief, anger and guilt. This reveals another power potential of these substances to provide relief for conditions often found intractable by modern medicine. *Sacred Knowledge* provides a call to recognize the biases that have affected our societal evaluations of psychedelics and how current scientific research demands reconsideration of the significance of these powerful entheogens and their implications for understanding spiritual experiences and human nature.

Review

William Richards is an elder of the psychedelic therapy movement and an early participant in the psychedelic treatment of alcoholism and other drug dependencies. His career spanned the early and more recent phases of clinical research with psychedelics. Furthermore, Richards’s professional formation in theology, comparative religion and the psychology of religion brings a powerful combination of perspectives to bear on clinical accounts, scientific research and his personal experiences with psychedelics to address issues of core importance in religious studies and society in general.

Richards tells us that *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experience* is about “encountering the sacred and the discovery of eternal realms in consciousness” (p. xxv). The major thrust of Richards’s book is that there are broad and profound implications of psychedelic-induced experiences for issues in religious studies and mysticism, across a range of academic disciplines, and for the broader society. Richards weaves together the evidence from psychedelic experiences in his personal life and clinical research to address some basic issues that remained unresolved in the minds of some who study mysticism. A secondary intent of the book is to educate professionals across a range of disciplines and to inform the general public about the promise of psychedelic substances, countering decades of negative propaganda of the drug war that has unjustifiably discredited them.

Richards’s perspectives are based on experiences across 25 years of legal psychedelic research projects involving Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), *N,N*-Dipropyltryptamine (DPT), Methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDA) and *N*,*N*-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT). These spanned the early period of the 1960’s until their suspension in the 1970s, and then again since the resurgence of research in this area almost 2 decades ago. It was in 1999 in the context of his participation in the renewal of psychedelic research at the John Hopkins School of Medicine using a sophisticated double blind clinical trial (Griffiths et al., 2006) that perhaps the most revolutionary implications of psychedelics were confirmed: a significant proportion of the people receiving psychedelics have classic mystical experiences and consider them to be the most significant spiritual experiences of their lives.

Psychedelics as Agents of Mystical Experience

One of the undeniable implications of psychedelics manifested in thousands of clinical records and across cultures and time is the ability of these substances, when used in supportive contexts, to produce what people report as genuine mystical experiences. These accounts are phenomenologically indistinguishable from reports of mystical experiences that result from devoted spiritual practices—or which may occur spontaneously without chemical agents or personal intention.

What makes the psychedelics so enigmatic is their repeated ability to produce mystical experiences—as well as their often-unreliable ability to do so. Richards had a mystical experience in his first encounter with psilocybin, ironically in the context of a study to examine its psychosis-mimicking effects. But in subsequent sessions with comparable doses and expectations of repeated mystical experience, nothing at all similar occurred.

Whatever role the psychedelics have in provoking mystical experiences is more than a simple drug effect. Psychedelics do not produce a single form of experience, but a wide variety of states generally reflective of the set and setting—the individual psychological predispositions and the social factors in the context of administration, respectively.

The double blind studies by Roland Griffiths et al. (2006) establish, however, the intrinsic ability of psychedelics to produce mystical experiences and associated behavioral changes in the participants’ lives. Furthermore, while psychedelic ingestion does not always produce mystical experiences, when failing to do so, they generally engage the user with a variety of personal experiences related to childhood trauma or unresolved emotions, especially fears, grief, anger and guilt. This reveals another powerful potential of these substances to provide a variety of forms of relief for conditions often found intractable by modern medicine (i.e., see Michael Winkelman and Thomas Roberts’ [2007] *Psychedelic Medicine*).

The core of *Sacred Knowledge* is about the nature of forms and features of mystical consciousness that are manifested in psychedelic experiences. Clinical cases show how psychedelics produce the common core of mystical experiences, namely: experiences of intuitive knowledge and unity, transcendence of time and space, sacredness, ineffability and positive mood. The mystical aspects of psychedelic experiences are strongly supportive of the classic perennialist view of mystical experiences, the notion of fundamental commonalities to mystical experiences across people, cultures and time.

The commonalities in the effects of psychedelic experiences reinforces that mystical experiences are not merely the product of cultural expectations but rather represent something intrinsic to human nature. The profound spiritual experiences of thousands who have been administered psychedelics, including studies that have used double-blind control conditions, attest to the evocation of some patterns of response that are universal. These similarities in mystical and psychedelic experiences across people and cultures reveals their transcendental innate nature rather than personal or cultural features. The origin of mystical experiences in factors intrinsic to human nature is illustrated by their elicitation and production by such diverse means as psychedelics, rituals, mental practices and even behavioral activities such as ultrarunning.

While more than a century of scholarly research has debated whether these experiences should be considered regressive or progressive, in the context of comparative religion and mystical studies, these experiences have constituted the most significant contrast with rational thought. Mystical traditions extol the comprehensive superiority of these mystical forms of perception, considering the truths revealed to far exceed the comprehensions of reality rendered by ordinary consciousness. The effects that such experiences have on people’s subsequent beliefs, attitudes and behaviors are also a significant factor in understanding the role and significance of these substances in human evolution.

In one of his short concluding chapters, Richards points out that the implications of these experiences demand new paradigms of explanation. The traditional concepts of consciousness, time, causality and intuition fall short of explaining the complex forms of consciousness revealed by psychedelics. Perhaps if Richards had also been trained in physics, biochemistry, neurosciences, epistemology, evolutionary psychology and cognitive sciences he might have felt empowered to attempt to build this new paradigm. Clearly the explanation of the nature, significance and effects of psychedelics requires such interdisciplinary endeavors.

Richards perhaps approaches a general theory of psychedelic and mystical experiences in addressing the archetypal quality of many visionary experiences. Referencing Carl Jung’s notions of collective unconscious and the notion that certain universal experiences reflect the innate foundations of our unconscious minds, he rejects the longstanding notion of a the brain as a *tabula rasa* in favor of an understanding of the human mind as innately structured. It is these innate structures that are reflected in the constants of psychedelic and mystical experiences.

The psychedelic experiences themselves reveal something about their nature, and have direct ties to longstanding issues in the philosophy of knowledge. Classic forms of mystical experiences (i.e., the noetic, void, and selfless qualities) can be characterized in neuroepistemological terms in reference to the functioning of the major information systems of the brain and in relation to various forms of self reference (see Winkelman, 2010, Chapter 4). The “I-Thou”—self and other—relationship so often found in the personalized theistic mystical experiences points to the significant role of self-concept and social reference – or their loss—in the fundamental features of mystical experiences. The visual and ineffable aspects of the experiences point to a system of knowledge and representation of reality long recognized in philosophy in its tangled engagement with concepts such intuition, tacit and implicit knowledge. The ineffable and visual features—incapable of being expressed in language but incredibly complex images—point to the manifestations of a pre-linguistic symbolic system known as presentational symbolism.

The effects of psychedelics on the brain also inform a neurophenomenological approach to shamanic experiences (Winkelman, 2010). Serotonin is the primary neurotransmitter (neuromodulatory) system affected by psychedelics. Psychedelics produce hypersynchronous slow wave brain discharges in the serotonergic circuits that link the hypothalamus, limbic brain and lower brain systems. Psychedelics initially stimulate serotonergic (especially 5-HT2a) receptors, but also have blocking effects at some serotonin receptors. Psychedelics are resistant to the normal reuptake mechanisms and saturate the serotonergic system by locking into serotonergic transmitter sites, eventually reducing the regulatory processes of the serotonergic system and modifying control and coordination among the major brain subsystems. Psychedelics release serotonergic blockage of the ascending flow of information and emotional responses, stimulating an upward flood of information from ancient levels of the brain. Psychedelics stimulate emotional areas and visual information systems, resulting in the release of normally unconscious personal and emotional dynamics.

Psychedelics change our normal mental states through interference with typical coupling and networks, decreasing functional coupling of the frontal cortex and medial temporal lobe nodes and other brain areas that are typically synchronized and functionally connected. This disorganizing of high-level networks results in the release of primary cognitive states involving somatic awareness and subjective feeling states. The visionary experiences similarly reflect the loss of the inhibitory effects of serotonin on the mesolimbic temporal lobe structures and resulting in visionary experiences. These visual experiences engage a presentational symbolic modality, a nonverbal symbolism that represents self, others, emotions, and attachments and their connection with the body-self at a pre-egoic level through processes of ancient brain levels.

Psychedelics, Society and the Future

Richards reviews a variety of ways in which the use of psychedelics can contribute to the quality of life for many and bring significant implications for a number of scientific fields. The implications of Richards’s book are not just theoretical and academic, but also practical in addressing how these substances can be applied to address serious mental health issues and intractable social problems such as addictions, where it is increasingly recognized that there are powerful healing effects that can be released by these substances (c.f., Winkelman and Roberts, 2007; Winkelman, 2015).

Richards contributes protocols for administering these substances and supporting the person during the experience. Richards also speaks to the importance of the subsequent integration of psychedelic experiences. This involves the repetitive intention to move between our memories of these profound insights and inspirations and our engagement with everyday life where we work on the modification of our thoughts and actions.

Richards’s short book is for anyone with an interest in psychedelics, drug treatment policy or mysticism. It is an easily accessible introduction to the relations of psychedelics to spiritual experiences, an area of inquiry that has spawned a complex interdisciplinary field within consciousness studies. One can find broader coverage of psychedelics and therapeutic issues in the two edited volumes *Psychedelic Medicine* (Winkelman and Roberts, 2007); of the religious implications of psychedelics in J. Harold Ellens’s (2014) two edited volumes *Seeking the Sacred with Psychoactive Substances*; more in-depth consideration of potential implications for society in Roberts’s *The Psychedelic Future of the Mind*; and a broader assessment of the ramifications for human rights and drug policy in Ellens and Roberts’s (2015) edited collection *The Psychedelic Policy Quagmire*. Notably Roberts contributed to many of these edited volumes.

But none of these works follow Richards’s groundbreaking path, the history and personages revealed through his recounting of his personal engagement with the field, and his highlighting of what may be arguably the most important implications of the clinical research with psychedelics revealed in the empirical reports of many of the sessions that he supervised. It is this repeated unexpected direct encounter with primal religious and mystical experiences provoked by psychedelics and the full array of features of classic mystical experiences which are often produced that have the most profound implications for religious studies, mysticism, philosophy, epistemology and our understanding of the spiritual and sacred.

*Sacred Knowledge* serves as a call to recognize the biases that have entered into our assessments of the psychedelics and the necessity for using current scientific research to reevaluate the significance of these powerful entheogens for understanding human nature. Richards’s account serves to catalyze us to rethink the cultural taboos that we have acquired regarding psychedelics, and instead place them in the context of more dispassionate rational and scientific examination. There we will discover the irrefutable evidence of psychedelics’ immense potential for addressing and ameliorating many intractable personal and social issues that afflict humankind.

References

Cardeña, E., & Winkelman, M. (Eds.). (2011). *Altering consciousness: Multidisciplinary perspectives.* Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger ABC-CLIO.

Ellens, J. H. (Ed.). (2014). *Seeking the sacred with psychoactive substances: Chemical paths to spirituality and god*, 2 Volumes. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger/ABC-CLIO.

Ellens, J. H., & Roberts, T. (Eds.). (2014). *The psychedelic policy quagmire: Health, law, freedom, and society*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger/ABC-CLIO.

Griffiths, R. R., Richards, W., McCann, U., & Jesse, R. (2006). Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences having substantial, sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance. *Psychopharmacology,* *187*(3), 268–83.

Roberts, T. (2013). *The psychedelic future of the mind: How entheogens are enhancing cognition, boosting intelligence, and raising values*. Rochester, VT: Park Street Press.

Winkelman, M., & Roberts, T. (Eds.). (2007). *Psychedelic medicine: New evidence for hallucinogenic substances as treatments*, 2 volumes*.* Westport,CN: Praeger/Greenwood Publishers.

Winkelman, M. (2010). *Shamanism: A biopsychosocial paradigm of consciousness and healing* (2nd ed.). Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

Winkelman, M. (2014). Psychedelics as medicines for substance abuse rehabilitation: Evaluating treatments with LSD, peyote, ibogaine and ayahuasca. *Current Drug Abuse Reviews*, *7*, 101-116.