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Psychedelics in History and World Religions Editorial

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EDITORIAL

Recent research has given new hope that psychedelics might provide important tools for treating some of our more intractable ailments. Assessment of the therapeutic applications of psychedelics for various conditions (Winkelman & Sessa, 2019) offers tantalizing promises of what may be seen as miracle cures for their immediate results and effectiveness.

As new technologies expand our understandings of the effects of these substances, we are entering a new epoch of understanding the systemic effects of psychedelics on the brain. These findings regarding the effects of psychedelics have not only opened vistas into the future, but also into the past. As we move from the misnomer of “hallucinogens” to more aptly descriptive words such as psychedelic (“mind-manifesting”) and entheogenic (“manifesting the divine within”), our views of the role of psychedelics in the past must also change. While “hallucinogen” evoked images of distorted perceptions and delusions, the “entheogenic” paradigm recasts our ancient experiences with these substances not as delusionary, but as experiences of spiritual engagement. Contemporary understandings of their effects on cognition also lead to new views of their contributions to human evolution (Winkelman, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2015).

These new paradigms of the effects of psychedelics lead to different views regarding their roles in the past. The central dilemma for these new queries is that these enigmatic substances – often characterized as drugs having debilitating effects – come front and center as key factors in the evolution of religion and cultural developments. The implications that flow from these new perspectives are paradigm shattering. The significance of their roles as “plants of the gods” has profound theological implications and forces us to ask, “Can people find god in a plant or fungi?”

The answer presented here is a resounding yes. We did and we do.

Time and again across millennia and cultures, we find clear evidence of the seminal role of psychedelics in spiritual inspiration and experience, and even in the foundations of religious traditions. When Allegro (1970) made this paradigm-shattering proposal regarding the roles of entheogens in early Christianity, he was ridiculed, mocked, character assassinated, and finally ignored.

Yet, facts have a way of persisting and even growing in their significance. The occasional outsider pointing to the entheogenic elements of religions of the past has finally given way to a growing recognition of the entheogenic pasts of not just shamanic practices, but of many religions.

The articles presented here on the entheogenic elements of religions are not merely a prod to stop and think. Here, we see the documentation of entheogenic elements, if not an entheogenic core, in the major religious traditions worldwide. These include not only the shamanic traditions, but also major world religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and even Mormonism.

What are the implications for theology of these worldwide entheogenic practices? What actions should we take based on this evidence that psychedelics and the experiences that they provoke may be at the origins not just of a primordial shamanism, but also of the major world religions?

The profound implications of psychedelics for understanding humans, our nature, our evolution, and our spirituality are far beyond the scope of this issue. Our contributors here have mostly stayed with the facts rather than exploring their paradigm-shattering implications. Nonetheless, it is certain that psychology, religious studies, comparative mysticism, anthropology, evolutionary psychology, and other fields will have major shifts in their fundamental understandings of religion and spirituality and their relation to human nature once these findings have been incorporated.

And what might these implications be? What is the import of finding psychedelic plant use in the ancient core of so many religions around the world?

The entheogenic paradigm must be a psychobiological paradigm as well. The impulse to spirituality and religion was undoubtedly found time and again in the experiences of spirits generated within humans by these powerful substances. As claimed by many religious traditions, there was not just a religious impulse found in these plants, but the foundations of culture and society also emerged from the experiences produced by these substances and the enhanced perspectives provided by the profound alterations of consciousness they produced.

The implications of the cross-cultural presence of entheogenic religions are that these changes in consciousness are not simply some spiritual force as traditionally conceptualized in cultures worldwide, but also a psychobiological phenomena at the core of human nature. The recurrent patterns of psychedelic use as spiritual tools are a reflection of the specific kinds of transformations of our neurochemistry that result. We are led to the simple conclusion that such interpretations – the experience of spirits produced by ingesting special plants – are best understood not as merely a cultural belief, but as a biologically revealed truth. There are plants that have the inherent capacity to

stimulate what sages across religions and centuries have told us is the perception of spiritual reality.

What modern scientists can tell us about their molecular properties that their neuropsychological effects and neuro-phenomenological dynamics will ultimately help us better understand the mechanisms behind the simple truth: these plants have been the source of numerous religious traditions and countless spiritual encounters and have had central contributions to the evolution of culture. Evidence indicates that human spirituality across traditions has its origins in using entheogens, such as *Amanita muscaria* and *Psilocybe* species. Our various contributions here on the entheogenic elements of religions of the past provide ample data for assertions about a common worldwide basis of religious experiences in these and other psychedelics and their influences in the formation of humanity's religious impulses.

Our past can be seen as a pointer to a possible future as well. On one hand, religion is paradoxically a powerful tool for unifying groups, and a source of the most irreconcilable differences between peoples on the other hand. Is this the lasting legacy of our ancient spiritual foundations, differences which leave us separated from most of humanity at a most basic level? Or do entheogens lead us to a different future, one in which an embrace of entheogenic spirituality can heal wounds, religious divisions, and our disconnect from nature?

I propose that our authors here offer us such hope with a view of the numerous ways in which entheogens have united humans in the past. We have yet as humanity to embrace the possibility of profound spirituality and

reconciliation via these powerful spiritual tools. In times such as now, perhaps there is no greater calling for these ancient spiritual substances.

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