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Handbook of Medical Hallucinogens

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Mystical/Religious Experiences with Psychedelics

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Introduction

Experiential discoveries of realms within human consciousness often described as “sacred”, “awesome” or “holy”, with and without the facilitation of psychedelic substances, have been and continue to be reported within the histories of the major world religions. Often they are reported by quite ordinary people, some of whom may not even view themselves as “religious” or be associated with religious institutions. Perhaps there are common neurological, biochemical and/or energetic substrates that correlate with these awe-filled states of awareness. Researchers in the future may be able to describe these factors more clearly than we can at our current stage of trying to decipher the enigmas of consciousness and the relationships between the brain and the human mind. Tantalizing clues include the knowledge that our bodies naturally manufacture dimethyltryptamine (DMT), usually in minute quantities, a molecule very similar in structure to psilocybin, that may play a role in the occurrence of some so called “non-drug facilitated” experiences often labeled religious or mystical (Strassman 2001; Barker *et al*, 2013).

As will be subsequently surveyed, these inspiring and sometimes frightening experiences range from (1) states of perceptual or aesthetic enhancement to, (2) cathartic experiences of personal insight and rebirth/forgiveness, to (3) states in which the everyday self (often called the “ego”) beholds, approaches, encounters and often interacts with transpersonal content, often called *visionary* or *archetypal*, to (4) unitive states that most psychedelic researchers and other scholars in the psychology of religion today call *complete mystical consciousness*.

The content of the experiential domains themselves appears very similar if not identical regardless of whether the alternative state of consciousness seemed to occur spontaneously, was encountered during the implementation of meditative procedures, occurred during the action of a psychedelic substance, or was facilitated by some other technology (e.g. sensory deprivation or overload, natural childbirth, fasting, sleep deprivation, athletic feats, artistic performance, etc.). This range of experiences was encompassed in Abraham Maslow's term *peak experiences* (1964). They have also been discussed in books by many other authors, notably including William James (1902), James Bissett Pratt (1920), Walter T. Stace (1960), Robert Masters & Jean Houston (1966), Marghanita Laski (1968), Stanislav Grof (1975), and the present writer (Richards, 2015),

The usual religious word for these many different states of consciousness is *revelation*. In medicine, some prefer to refer to such experiences simply as "non-ordinary" or "alternative" states of mind, aware that similar, though often more disorganized, experiences sometimes also are reported by persons we diagnose as psychotic. When such experiences occur, the person in whose consciousness the content is unfolding typically feels that "truth" is being manifested and "deeper" or "higher" insights into the nature of the mind (or "reality") are being encountered or manifested. Some would refer to these diverse human experiences as stages on a continuum of "enlightenment", as if some internal rheostat is revealing more and more light or truth, both about the growing edges and opportunities of one's personal or spiritual development and about frontiers regarding the ultimate nature of what may be called "mind", "consciousness" or "reality".

On the basis of an expanding professional literature, including carefully designed protocols with double-blind, controlled features, (e.g. Griffiths *et al.*, 2004, 2006, 2016, 2017; Grob *et al.*, 2011; Ross *et al.*, 2016) it appears that the potential significance of these sacred epiphanies extends beyond the inspiring wonder and memories of beauty, meaning and sometimes transient terror that they leave in their wake. Recent psychedelic research has documented, and continues to demonstrate, potent positive changes in attitudes and behavior in the days, months and years following many of these experiences. Some changes are dramatic, as illustrated by St. Paul's vision on the Road to Damascus and his subsequent leadership in the formative stages of Christianity; others are more subtle, reflected in shifts towards more humanistic values, increased genuineness in interpersonal relationships, and gradual increases in compassion, tolerance of diversity and care for the planet on which we discover ourselves. Some experiences, often called sacred or religious, may indeed effect "quantum change" (Miller & C'de Baca, 2001), rapidly accelerating the processes of psychotherapy and/or psychological and spiritual development. This is why an increasing number of mental health professionals find themselves investigating the promise of psychedelic substances as powerful tools in facilitating substantial changes in human distress, notably in the treatment of addictions, depression and states of anxiety, and perhaps in changing the ways in which we approach the process of dying and death itself.

An Overview of States of Consciousness with Potential Religious Import

Shifts in Sensory Perception Though some would consider sensory changes in an artistic rather than a religious context, they are worthy of note. The dead grass, as reflected in Van Gogh's paintings, is seen as golden grain, scintillating in the sunlight; a wrinkled human face suddenly reflects wisdom and the richness of a life fully lived; a tree is transformed from a mere object in the environment to a living being reflecting intelligence in nature. Such changes in perception are known to occur with open eyes following the ingestion of low or threshold doses of psychedelic substances as well as in more intense alternative states of awareness. They are also reported in sensory modalities other than vision, for example when one claims to "enter into the structure of music" or feels an intuitive sense of a nonverbal message within a composer's musical composition.

Personal Psychodynamic Experiences As is well known in many forms of psychotherapy and in religious circles with an emphasis on "conversion" (typically in the evangelical protestant tradition in Christianity), emotions of formerly repressed grief, guilt and anger can be experienced in remarkable intensity, often culminating in feelings of relief, forgiveness and fresh, and/or new beginnings. Psychedelic substances in relatively low dosage (called *psycholytic therapy* in Europe) are known to facilitate the occurrence of these experiences, and thus are believed to have promise in "accelerating psychotherapy."

Visionary/Archetypal Experiences In this fascinating experiential realm, the ego (or everyday personality) encounters vibrant mental imagery, often including gods, goddesses, angels, demons, dragons, precious gemstones, elaborate architectural forms, other civilizations and similar content. Such imagery is often reported as having a strong sense of substance, portentousness and reality, evoking responses of awe and humility. Not infrequently the images encountered appear to arise from traditions unfamiliar to the person experiencing them and his/her enculturation, supporting Carl Jung's concept of a "collective unconscious" within us all, perhaps encoded in our DNA.

Archetypes (i.e. "foundation stones" of psychic structure) thus are "beheld" and approached (sometimes with "fear and trembling"). As in a dream sequence, this may lead to a dialogue, an epiphany, a message received or a lesson learned. Such experiences tend to vividly remain in memory and may be facilitative of changes in attitudes or behavior. This is the realm of the vision of the Christ or the Buddha, of the Virgin Mary, Quan Yin or Fatima Zahra, of Jung's "Wise old man", "Great Mother" and "Child"; it is also the terrain in which various mythological figures including angels, demons, elves, witches, guardian deities, extra-terrestrials, etc. may be visualized and encountered. Sometimes these visual encounters may progress further, as reflected in reports of "entering into the essence of the image" and "becoming it", or "going through the image" as a portal into unitive mystical states of awareness.

Mystical Consciousness By general consensus among psychedelic researchers and many psychologists of religion, complete mystical consciousness tends to be defined as a state of awareness preceded by the "death" of the ego, followed by a unitive immersion in an experiential realm beyond time and space (often called "eternal" or "infinite"), and then followed by the "rebirth" of the ego back into the everyday world. Like experiences labeled

“visionary/archetypal”, they include deep positive emotion, feelings of sacredness/awe/reverence and claims of ineffability. But they also tend to be characterized by reports of union/unity and of convincing intuitive knowledge. In the literature of world religions there are many terms that point to this revelatory state: *moksha* and *samadhi* in Hinduism, *nirvana* and *satori* in Buddhism, *sekhel mufla* in Judaism, *the beatific vision* in Christianity, *baqá wa faná* in Islam, or *wu wei* in Taoism. Though fine distinctions can be found in many of the individual attempts to describe such experiences, many scholars consider those descriptions as evidence in support of a “perennial philosophy”, a state of being intrinsic to the core of each human mind that has been discovered and rediscovered throughout the ages (Huxley, 1945; Stace, 1960; Hood, 2006; Kelly, 2007; Richards 2015).

Before psychedelic substances became implemented as research tools in the psychology of religion, the academic literature on mysticism tended to distinguish between “Western Mysticism” with an emphasis on the personal relationship with the Divine (as in Visionary/Archetypal experiences) and “Eastern Mysticism” with its emphasis on unitive consciousness—in Hinduism, the “drop of water of the atman merging with the ocean of Brahman”, or perhaps in the concept of the protestant theologian Paul Tillich of God as “the ground of Being” (1951). Now through psychedelic research, it appears that most human beings, whether born in the East or the West, may be capable of experiencing both of these incredibly profound states of human consciousness, given carefully determined dosage, personal openness, supportive preparation and skillful guidance.

Similarly, the findings of psychedelic research support two ways in which the unity in mystical states may be approached. During the transition in consciousness to “internal unity”, typically occurring when relaxed with closed eyes, awareness of the everyday self fades while consciousness itself continues and expands through various so-called “dimensions of being” until a non-temporal unitive state prevails. “External unity” is reported to occur with open eyes through focused sensory perception, moving through various transformations until the perceiver and the perceived seem to merge and the insight “All is one” becomes convincingly dominant. Some have described this in the language of the physicist/philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1978), as if the energy or sub-atomic particles that make up reality themselves become conscious and somehow resonate with one another.

These mystical states of consciousness are typically claimed to be very convincing and self-validating. They are claimed to be “more real” than everyday awareness and somehow to be beyond our usual concepts of time, space and substance.

Psychedelics in the History of Religions

Not only have various seers, prophets and mystics in the histories of most world religions reported visionary insights, but some scholars have posited that revelatory states of consciousness may be found at the very origins of religious systems of belief and practice. They point to the references to *soma* in the Hindu Rigveda and *homa* in ancient

Zoroastrian literature, the drink called *kykeon* in the Greek mystery religions, drunk by Plato and others, and even the *manna* that the early Israelites consumed in the early mornings enroute to Canaan (Wasson *et al.*, 1986, 1998; Ruck, 2006; Smith, 2000; Hoffman, 2009 [1983]; Merkur, 2001). Native Americans are thought to have used mescaline from the Peyote cactus for spiritual purposes for at least fifty-five hundred years (El-Seedi *et al.*, 2005). Cave paintings of human like figures with mushrooms, found on the Tassili Plateau in Northern Algeria, believed to indicate early psychedelic use, have been dated to 5000 BCE (Samorini, 1992). One theologian, on the basis of his research in ancient languages, has posited that some references to Jesus in early Christianity were actually references to a sacred psychoactive mushroom (Allegro 1970).

An Indian Sanskrit scholar notes a practice called *aushadi*, as “the most powerful and rapid method of awakening” (Sarawati, 1984). It entails the use of “specific herbs” that “can bring about either partial or full awakening”. Although he distances himself from “drugs like marijuana, LSD and so on”, he notes the critical importance of pursuing this path only with “a guru or qualified guide”, akin to the guidelines employed today in implementing psychedelic interventions in ways that ensure safety and promote efficacy. Religions in the 21st Century that employ psychedelic substances in their practices include the Native American Church, indigenous groups in Central America and beyond that use psilocybin-containing mushrooms as a sacrament, and religions based in Brazil and neighboring countries in South America that honor the use of dimethyltryptamine (DMT) in the form of the brew called ayahuasca.

The Discovery of Religious/Mystical Experiences in Modern Psychedelic Research and the Importance of Interpersonal Support

In the earliest days of modern psychedelic research, when LSD and similar substances were administered to volunteer subjects by investigators who lacked knowledge of the critical importance of psychological set and the physical and interpersonal setting (environment), experiences dominated by panic, paranoia and confusion often occurred. Thus, it was believed that these substances were “psychotomimetic” and caused “model psychoses”. This led to hypotheses that they might be employed to facilitate an experience similar to *delirium tremens*, a “hitting bottom experience” that might motivate an alcoholic to work towards sobriety and/or somehow facilitate helpful changes in brain chemistry for some persons (Dyck 2008), or that they might provide new perspectives to help us better understand schizophrenia and bipolar disorders (Leuner, 1962).

As the importance of set and setting was gradually recognized and implemented, so-called “psychotomimetic” experiences decreased and positive, highly valued “mysticomimetic” experiences increased in research centers on both sides of the Atlantic (Chwelow *et al.*, 1959). With this change came many proposed uses of psychedelics in accelerating psychotherapy with diverse forms of psychopathology and a gradual

confidence that these substances were not capriciously unpredictable in their effects, and could be administered safely to medically-screened volunteers (Crocket *et al.*, 1963, Abramson, 1967, Aaronson & Osmond, 1970, Johnson *et al.*, 2008).

In contemporary psychedelic research and treatment, regardless of dosage, it has become accepted that ethical use of these psychoactive substances requires the prior establishment of significant rapport with volunteer subjects, skillful though not intrusive support during the period of drug action should it be needed, and initial assistance in integrating and applying whatever new experiential insights may occur during the period of drug action to the routines of everyday living. For most people to be able to relinquish ego-controls sufficiently to explore and permit the full experiencing of intense alternative states of consciousness, especially those deemed of a religious or mystical nature, a safe and secure set and setting is now a basic research requirement.

The Potential “Fruits for Life” of Religious/Mystical Experiences

The intensification and acceleration of processes well known in psychodynamic forms of psychotherapy, such as the resolution of various conflicts, of guilt and grief, tends to take place when psychedelics are administered in relatively low or moderate dosage. Personal memories emerge, sometimes from early childhood, often accompanied by intense emotional catharsis, often culminating in new insights and feelings of relief, freedom and relaxation. Treatment with psychedelics in this *psycholytic* (mind-releasing) format typically has been implemented with a series of sessions, sometimes several times in a week for several months. The content of most sessions is “in the realm of the ego”, that is the history of the individual person from birth to the present (e.g. Sandison, 1954; Frederking, 1955; Leuner 1981).

As the critical importance of a supportive set and setting became recognized, it was discovered that higher dosage often facilitated the occurrence of states of consciousness beyond the ego (or personal life history) that were often called peak, religious, or mystical. Though psychological insights and catharsis that were focused on life-history events or syndromes still sometimes occurred either prior to or following the transcendental states of mind, the memories of the transcendental states themselves began to become recognized as a uniquely powerful factor in the healing process. Claims of changes in self-concept were reported, including intuitive convictions of intrinsic worth, of loss of estrangement and a sense of belonging to the human family, of being able to receive and give love and forgiveness, and of a vision of reality that offered meaning and ensured safety in the midst of life challenges. The “higher power” of Alcoholics Anonymous was often claimed to have been encountered, along with a convincing awareness of inner strengths and resources that hitherto had been fictitious or speculative at best. This has become recognized as a potent factor in the psychedelic treatment of addictions to alcohol, narcotics, cocaine and nicotine (Bogenschutz *et al.*, 2018; Johnson *et al.*, 2014).

In evaluating the potential significance of mystical experiences, the pragmatic philosopher and psychologist, William James (1902) first called attention to the “fruits for life” that often are claimed to follow and, in one degree or another, to influence attitudes

and behavior in the months and years following their occurrence. This theme was continued by Walter Pahnke in his definition of mystical consciousness which included “Persisting Positive Change in Attitudes and Behavior” (Pahnke & Richards, 1966).

The therapeutic potency of mystical experiences has been especially noteworthy in projects of research with psychedelic substances and persons with terminal illnesses. Cancer patients not only have reported decreases in depression and anxiety following glimpses of transcendence during the action of psychedelics, but have also claimed loss of a fear of death, decreased preoccupation with pain and increased capacity to nurture and appreciate genuine interpersonal relationships (Richards *et al.* 1972, 1977; Richards , 1978; Griffiths *et al.*, 2016; Ross *et al.*, 2016). What is especially unique about this high-dose approach to treatment, which is designed to facilitate transcendental forms of consciousness, is that often a single administration of the psychedelic substance, or at most three administrations, constitutes a significant intervention.

Future Investigations and Applications

In terms of applied treatment in the future, it may well be that both low-dose “psycholytic” and high-dose “psychedelic” sessions will be employed by clinicians. Though appreciative of the psychotherapeutic impact of transcendental experiences in high-dose psychedelic interventions, some investigators historically preferred to continue administering the substances in serial sessions in low or moderate dosage, focusing on psychological dynamics in the mainstream of psychoanalytic thought (Leuner 1981). A Dutch psychiatrist, G.W. Arendsen-Hein, valuing and integrating both psychedelic and psycholytic approaches, coined the term “psychodelytic” to refer to applied clinical usage in mental health treatment outside of a research context.

The study of transcendental states of human consciousness, often labeled religious or mystical, may well be of importance beyond their applications in medical treatment. These inspiring revelatory states may also have their place in education and in religious study and practice (Richards 2015). Initial studies are in process, exploring their potential value in enhancing meditative practices and in the training of clergy and other professional religious leaders. Ultimately, such research may provide clues, scientific, philosophical and spiritual, that may assist us in deciphering the mysteries of consciousness itself.

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