DEPT. OF PSYCHOPHARMACOLOGY

THIS IS YOUR PRIEST ON DRUGS

Dozens of religious leaders experienced magic mushrooms in a university study. Many are now evangelists for psychedelics.

By Michael Pollan

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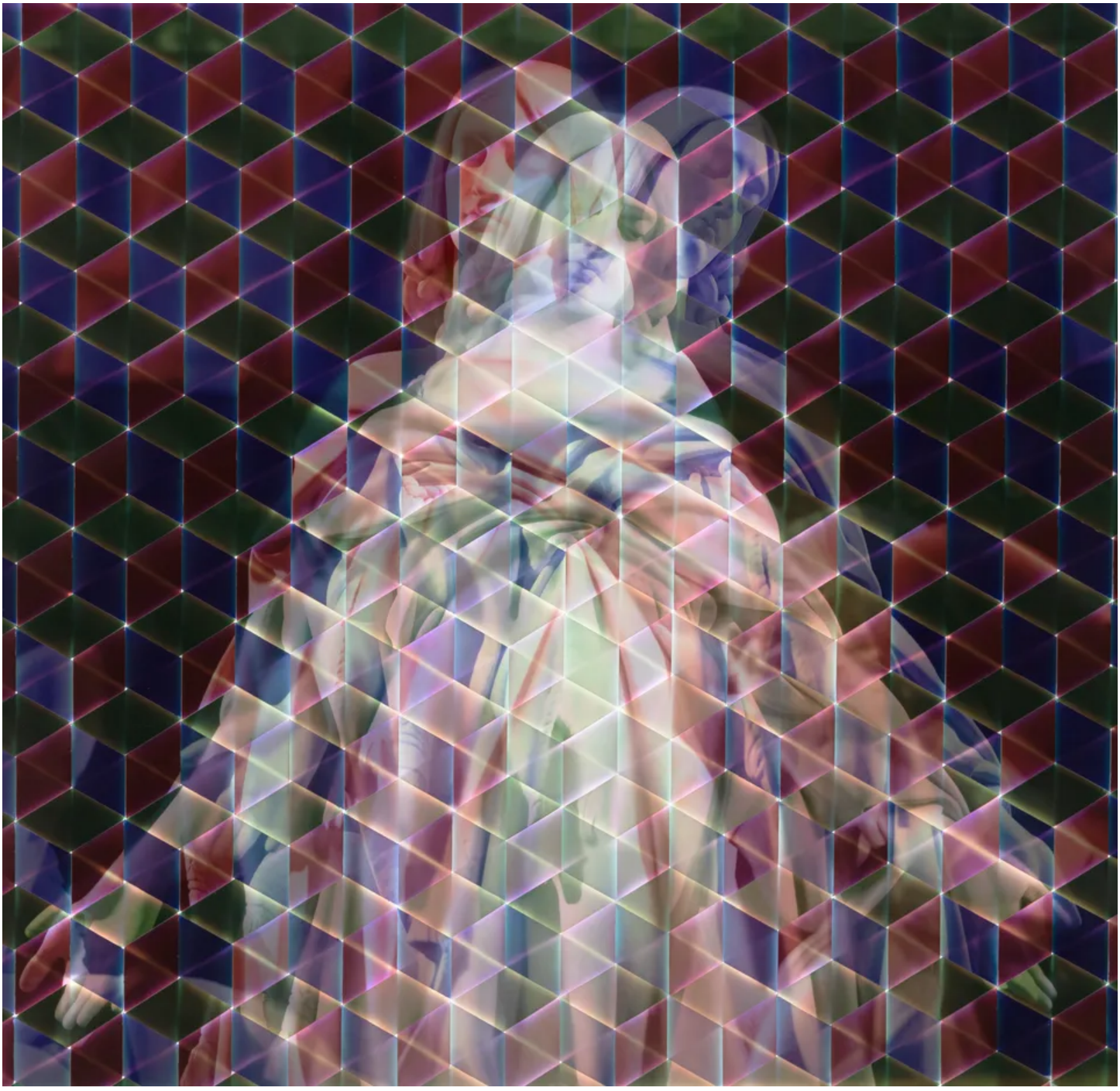

Researchers at Johns Hopkins and N.Y.U. gave psilocybin to Christian and Jewish clergy members, an Islamic leader, and a Zen Buddhist roshi. Photo illustration by David Samuel Stern

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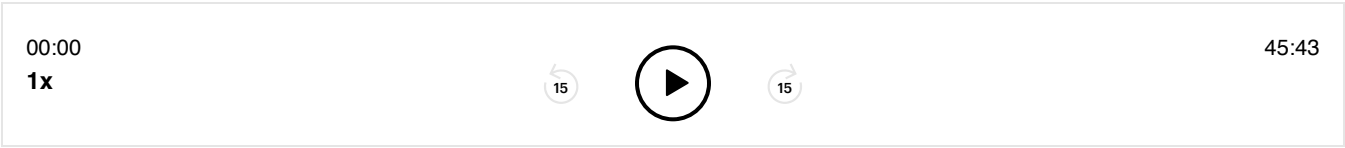

In October, 2015, Hunt Priest, then a minister at Emmanuel Episcopal Church on Mercer Island, in Washington State, was flipping through *The Christian Century*, a progressive Protestant magazine, when an advertisement caught his eye: "Seeking Clergy to Take Part in a Research Study of Psilocybin and Sacred Experience." Psilocybin is a hallucinogenic compound found in certain mushrooms; researchers at Johns Hopkins University and N.Y.U. wanted to administer it to religious leaders who had "an interest in further exploring and developing their spiritual lives."

Priest, a slight, bearded, and disarmingly open man from small-town Kentucky, grew up in a Protestant churchgoing family and felt a religious calling as a teenager. He went to work for Delta Air Lines, but he told me that, in his thirties, "I began to feel something was missing in my spiritual life." He started reading Buddhist texts, including Thích Nhất Hạnh's "Living Buddha, Living Christ," which eventually steered him back toward Christianity. At thirty-seven, he entered seminary.

By the time Priest saw the ad, he was burned out. He ministered to an affluent bedroom community near Seattle and felt that his work had become "more about institutional administration and maintenance. That will wrench the spirituality out of most people." He had never experienced psychedelics—a requirement for participation in the study—and had heard some horror stories. Still, he had always been curious. The study was at respected universities, and legal. *Why the hell would I* not *do this*? he thought. He began the arduous process of qualifying to participate: a series of phone calls, long questionnaires, in-person interviews in Baltimore, and a medical exam.

The team behind the ad included Roland Griffiths and William Richards, Hopkins scholars who had contributed to the so-called renaissance of psychedelic research, which began around the turn of the millennium. Griffiths, a psychopharmacologist, first became interested in psychedelics after he had a mystical experience while meditating. That day, he encountered "something way, way beyond a material world view that I can't really talk to my colleagues about, because it involves metaphors or assumptions that I'm really uncomfortable with as a scientist," he told me in 2014. His most influential research focussed on therapeutic applications of psychedelics. In a 2016 paper published in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, Griffiths, Richards, and several other scientists reported that psilocybin could help treat fear and anxiety in cancer patients; the study has been cited more than a thousand times. Numerous clinical trials of psilocybin, MDMA, and other psychedelics followed.

I first encountered the small community of psychedelic researchers while writing about the cancer study for this magazine. I met many more when I wrote a book about their work, and since then I've argued that psychedelics have the potential to treat mental illness and teach us about the mind. In 2020, I helped establish a psychedelic research center at U.C. Berkeley and, after I learned that Griffiths was dying of cancer, I donated to a new chaired professorship that he considered a part of his legacy.

Along the way, I learned that in 2012 Richards and Anthony Bossis, a clinical psychologist at N.Y.U., had started discussing psychedelics and religion. “To me, these experiences can be spiritual,” Bossis told me, when we met in his Manhattan office. The researchers set out to answer several questions. Would psychedelic experiences enhance the well-being and vocation of religious leaders, as compared with study participants in a control group who were still waiting for a session? Would the experience renew their faith, or make them question it?

The group secured financial support from several major funders in the psychedelic world, including T. Cody Swift, a philanthropist who has a master’s degree in existential-phenomenological psychology, and Carey and Claudia Turnbull, who have funded studies and invested in companies that are pursuing psychedelic medical treatments. Swift and Claudia Turnbull both went on to participate in the research—Swift by interviewing participants and writing a narrative account of their sessions, and Turnbull by facilitating sessions at Johns Hopkins.

Priest was ultimately accepted into the study, alongside about thirty other religious leaders, including a Catholic priest, a Baptist Biblical scholar, several rabbis, an Islamic leader, and a Zen Buddhist roshi. (The joke about walking into a bar almost writes itself.) Priest was one of four Episcopalians. The final sample, like the demographics of the study team, skewed white (ninety-seven per cent), Christian (seventy-six per cent), and male (sixty-nine per cent). Recruitment, through ads and direct outreach to religious communities, proved difficult, especially for religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism; religious proscriptions against mind-altering substances may have played a role. Finding willing rabbis, however, was easy—the challenge was finding ones who were “psychedelically naïve.”

Scientifically speaking, the study had serious limitations, many of them

acknowledged by its authors. The sample was small, self-selecting, and unrepresentative, several faiths were not included, and there was no placebo control. “Expectancy effects” can also have a profound impact on psychedelic research, and a case can be made that participants were primed to have a certain kind of experience. On questionnaires filled out months after their sessions, for example, participants were asked about their “sacred experience.” Andrew Gelman, a statistician at Columbia who is an expert on study design, read a draft of the paper that resulted from the study and told me in an e-mail, “I guess the punch line is that if you enroll people in a study and tell them they’re gonna have a sacred experience, then some people will have a sacred experience.” Zac Kamenetz, a Berkeley-based rabbi who participated in the study, also told me that the language used by some researchers, as well as the music played during sessions (the playlist included Enya, a Christmas choral work, “Om Namah Shivaya,” and lots of Bach), betrayed a distinctly Christian slant.

As an odd sort of ethnography, though, the study tells a provocative story. It’s not often that a group of clergy members recount a high-dose psilocybin trip. Would people steeped in theology and religious practice offer uniquely informed or nuanced accounts of mystical experiences? Would they encounter imagery or symbolism from their faiths—or might their experiences point to something more universal, a common core shared by all religions? Among participants who had two sessions, the researchers found that a striking number —seventy-nine per cent—reported that the experience had enriched their prayer, their effectiveness in their vocation, and their sense of the sacred in daily life. Ninety-six per cent rated their first encounters with psilocybin as being among the top five most spiritually significant experiences of their lives.

Perhaps the most intriguing question went unmentioned in the scientific paper, although it came to mind for many study participants. At a time when organized religion has been struggling with declining membership, especially

among the young, could carefully prepared and guided psychedelic experiences—whether for clergy or for members of their congregations—have the potential to spark a revival of interest in religion? This is a controversial idea, so I was surprised to hear Priest and several other participants say that they believed they could. Most of the researchers were more circumspect, but Richards—an infectiously cheerful clinical psychologist who is now in his eighties—was happy to entertain the possibility. Before Richards completed a Ph.D. in counselling, he earned master's degrees in divinity and theology. Psychedelics "can give new life to the dogma, by helping people understand where the dogma came from," he told me at his home, in West Baltimore. "One way to look at psychedelics is as revelation happening in the present." Then, perhaps mindful of the potential for religious or scientific backlash, he added, "Let's not frighten the horses!"

Richards's convictions, and his aspirations for psychedelics, prompt questions about the objectivity of such research. Rick Strassman, a psychiatrist at the University of New Mexico who conducted psychedelic research in the early nineties, suggested to me that at least some of the researchers came to the study with "a mission" to demonstrate the spiritual and psychological value of psilocybin. He pointed to the risk of selection bias: those who volunteer are likely to be "spiritually hungering for a mystical experience," which increases the chance that they will have one. "I would not think that a stodgy Talmudic scholar would want to participate," he told me. "For them, it's the word and the law. Spiritual experience alone is not that important." In 2020, Matthew Johnson, a Johns Hopkins researcher and a co-author of the religious-leaders study, made similar warnings in an article titled "Consciousness, Religion, and Gurus: Pitfalls of Psychedelic Medicine." He wrote of "scientists and clinicians imposing their personal religious or spiritual beliefs on the practice of psychedelic medicine."

"I can do this the quick way or the dun-dun, dun-dun, dun-dun way."

Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

When Priest stepped into the psychedelic-session room at Johns Hopkins, he felt both excited and anxious. The vibe of the space was more living room than clinic; it had a cozy couch for participants to lie on, vaguely spiritual-looking art work on the walls, and a small statue of the Buddha on a bookshelf. Richards, who has a wide, toothy grin, was one of two facilitators, or "guides," present to supervise the experience. Priest told me that, before he took the blue capsule that Richards offered him in an incense burner shaped like a chalice, he admitted to feeling nervous. He couldn't recall exactly what Richards said in response, but he remembered the message that he received: You should be nervous. You're about to meet God.

The cross-pollination of religion and psychedelics has a long history. In the psychedelic community, it is virtually an article of faith that hallucinogenic plants and fungi played a role in the visions and mystical experiences that helped give rise to some religions. The Eleusinian Mysteries, the annual rite honoring Demeter that was performed in Greece for nearly two thousand years, climaxed with the consumption of a potion called the *kykeon*, which was said to give participants visions of the afterlife and enable them to commune with their ancestors. Albert Hofmann, the Swiss chemist who discovered LSD, in 1938, suspected that the recipe included ergot, the fungus on which his discovery was based. (Demeter is the goddess of agriculture and fertility; ergot grows on grain.)

In the New World, peyote, psilocybin mushrooms, and the seeds of the ololiuqui—a type of morning glory—have had sacramental uses for millennia. In the early aughts, scientists dated two specimens of peyote, found in a cave near the Rio Grande, at more than five thousand years old. After Spanish colonizers arrived, the Catholic Church banned the use of mushrooms in Aztec rituals; the Nahuatl word for them—*teonanácatl*—translates roughly as "flesh of the gods," which must have sounded like a direct challenge to the Christian sacrament. The practice continued underground, however, and similar customs persist today.

The U.S. banned peyote in the late nineteenth century, but the Native American Church, which fuses Indigenous and Christian beliefs, fought a prolonged legal and legislative battle for the right to use the peyote cactus in its ceremonies. The effort ended successfully in 1993, when Congress passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Since then, two churches that originated in Brazil have secured the right to use ayahuasca during ceremonies in the U.S. Psychedelic churches, some sincere in their spiritual convictions and others not so much, are opening at an accelerated rate. Lawyers in the newly formed Psychedelic Bar Association say that this trend has been encouraged by the

Supreme Court's expansive approach to religious liberty.

In 1962, Walter Pahnke, a Harvard graduate student who studied under the psychologist and psychedelic advocate Timothy Leary, administered either a pill containing psilocybin or a placebo to twenty volunteers, mostly Protestant divinity students. The volunteers then sat in the basement of Marsh Chapel, at Boston University, and listened to a Good Friday sermon piped in from the pulpit above them. Of the ten volunteers who received the drug, eight reported powerful mystical experiences. In the placebo group, one did. The researchers' definition of mysticism mirrored the one in "The Varieties of Religious Experience," a 1902 collection of lectures by the psychologist and philosopher William James, who experimented with nitrous oxide. James associated mystical experiences with a sense of well-being, timelessness, ineffability, and unity with "ultimate reality."

Pahnke's published research failed to mention that, as participants recalled years later, one person fled the chapel and headed toward Commonwealth Avenue, possibly to spread the word of Jesus to passersby; he had to be restrained and given an injection of the antipsychotic Thorazine. Another participant, Huston Smith, was a leading scholar of religion. "Until the Good Friday Experiment," he told an interviewer in 1996, "I had had no direct personal encounter with Him/Her/It."

Griffiths, Richards, and their colleagues were inspired in part by the Good Friday Experiment. In a study published in 2006, they administered psilocybin to several dozen volunteers, who then filled out surveys that included a "Mystical Experience Questionnaire." The questionnaire drew on Pahnke's experiment and James's writings. The researchers ultimately concluded that psilocybin could reliably occasion mystical experiences.

Priest's psychedelic journey at Johns Hopkins followed norms that have

become common in modern psychedelic research: After several preparatory sessions with two guides, the participant swallows the capsule, lies down on a couch, and dons a pair of headphones and an eye mask, to encourage an inward focus. The facilitators say little, but share words of advice or comfort if the experience turns frightening; "in and through" is a common refrain. Although touch is considered a boundary violation in conventional psychotherapy, psychedelic therapists sometimes offer a hand to hold or a pat on the shoulder. Consent for touch is discussed in advance and reiterated in the moment; participants and facilitators also rehearse touch beforehand. After the Hopkins and N.Y.U. sessions, participants filled out multiple questionnaires and wrote a narrative of their experience. The next day, they returned for an "integration session," to help make sense of what can be a confusing experience. They could also participate in a follow-up psilocybin session. Of the twenty-nine participants who completed a first session, five did not return for a second.

Like virtually all the religious leaders I spoke with, Priest reported an encounter with the divine. His session began with gorgeous visuals—fractal patterns that reminded him of mosaics in a mosque. Then a spiralling current of electricity seemed to take up residence in his left thigh. He felt it move powerfully up his body and lodge in his throat. "I thought my Adam's apple was about to explode," he told me. Both guides could sense his distress and one reached out to comfort him. (Priest later spoke publicly about a guide touching his head, which drew criticism online, but a university review of video recordings contradicted Priest's account.)

To Priest, the touch felt like the ritual Christian gesture of the laying on of hands. He remembers a guide holding his feet as the electrical sensation intensified. "It blew out of the top of my head, and then I started making these sounds that felt religious and spiritual and sacred," Priest recalled. "I realized I was speaking in tongues, which I had never done before. Speaking in tongues is not an Episcopal sort of thing."

Looking back, Priest described the experience in distinctly religious, but not strictly Christian, terms. “I would say now that my throat chakra had been blocked for a long time,” he said. “I just felt blocked in what I was preaching.” Priest described the quality of his encounter with the divine as “erotic.” So did a couple of other participants; one talked about having “a spiritual orgasm.” Priest also spoke of a reversal of gender roles. “The divine felt more masculine, and I felt like I was experiencing it the way a woman would,” he told me. “It felt so foreign to me as a man that I felt this must be how a woman experiences sexuality.” After the session, a friend came to pick Priest up and was surprised to find his face flushed. “I looked completely different,” Priest said. “I was like a new creation.”

Not everyone in the study left their session with such theological clarity. A Catholic priest from Mexico told me about hearing directly from Jesus, but a Protestant minister said with a shrug that “there was nothing particularly Christian about it.” The Buddhist roshi told me that her experience was “not life-altering” but led her “into a completely nonconceptual realm,” which she could find no words to describe. Rita Powell, now the Episcopal chaplain at Harvard, declined a second session, because her first, at N.Y.U., brought her face to face with “the abyss.” Speaking about her experience on a Harvard panel about psychedelics and religion, Powell said that her facilitators had not prepared her for something so dark. One of them “kept trying to reassure me that experiences of psilocybin were good, and beautiful, and unitive,” she said. “It seemed like kind of sloppy hippie stuff about love and harmony.” She said that, at one point in her session, she was “nowhere”: “There was neither color nor its absence. There was no form, or its absence. There was not fear. There was not joy. There was not revelation. There was nothing.” She described it as “maybe the hardest thing I had done in my life,” something that took her to “the furthest limit of human capacity.”

peer-reviewed academic paper, “Effects of psilocybin on religious and spiritual

A attitudes and behaviors in clergy from various major world religions," appears in *Psychedelic Medicine* this month. Its senior authors are Bossis and Stephen Ross, a psychiatry professor at N.Y.U. Swift, the funder who helped debrief some of the participants, also sent me a narrative account that highlights themes from sixteen interviews. It reads almost like a psychedelic oral history. Interviewees tended to report "authentic spiritual or religious experiences," the account notes. A priest is quoted as saying, "I wasn't dreaming, I wasn't imagining, I wasn't hallucinating." Many participants likened their experience to those of historical and scriptural figures. "I was able to experience what the mystics were for some reason able to experience spontaneously," a pastor said. "I don't think that . . . my experience was less than theirs."According to the interviews, the divine was not usually embodied or visible but, rather, felt as a presence that suffused reality, or as a sense of oneness. "I realize my very pulse is God, my very breath is God," a rabbi said.

Several participants were surprised to encounter imagery or dogma outside their own faith. A Congregationalist minister described turning into an Aztec god and then the Hindu god Shiva. No one I spoke to, not even the rabbis, described seeing the stereotypical God of the Old Testament. And many of the religious leaders, men and women alike, experienced the divine as a feminine presence. Participants characterized God as "soothing," "maternal," or "womb-like." A United Methodist pastor from Alabama called this "mind-blowing." (Jaime Clark-Soles, the Baptist Biblical scholar in the study, told me, "God struck me as a Jewish mother at one point, which is funny, since I'm a Jesus follower.") One of Priest's fellow-Episcopalians, a man, reported, "I had a total deconstruction of patriarchal religion."

It was common for participants to gain an appreciation for religions other than their own. "All the truths are in all the religions," one rabbi said. "The active ingredients are all the same." A Congregationalist who previously had little patience for charismatic expressions of Christianity—"the hands in the air, the

talking, speaking in tongues, and all the weirdness"—observed after his session that "pathways towards the truth are even more varied than I thought." Some felt a marked tension between the conventions of their faith and the immediacy of their psilocybin experience. "I think I have less tolerance for institutional religion now," a Presbyterian minister is quoted as saying. "There are other ways to connect with the divine." Here was the entire history of world religions in a nutshell: orthodoxy and authority in tension with the direct spiritual experience of the individual.

Sughra Ahmed, the only Muslim in the religious-leaders study, told me that she was petrified before her first session. Like many others, she was apprehensive about what she would learn about herself. She also feared that her participation would be considered taboo in her community of British Muslims. "Would they think I was bringing shame on us as a people?" she told me. She asked that the researchers obscure her identity in their papers, and for years she spoke to no one about her experience. But more recently she concluded that, for the sake of her personal authenticity, she needed to go on the record.

Ahmed, who is in her forties, has a round, open face and speaks in complete paragraphs. She grew up in the North of England, the daughter of immigrant Pakistanis. She went to the mosque after school every day; her parents prayed at home and fasted for Ramadan. She studied English language and literature at university and was working in I.T. when 9/11 happened. Determined to better understand both the roots of Islam and the sudden surge of prejudice—she remembered people treating her "as a security threat" when she was boarding a bus—she earned a graduate degree in Islamic studies. For a time, she wore the hijab. She was the first woman to chair the Islamic Society of Britain, and then became an associate dean for religious life at Stanford, leading prayers and preaching ecumenically at a church on campus.

Ahmed describes herself using a feminine honorific given to religious scholars

or teachers: *ustadha*. She volunteered for the study in part because her faith wasn't represented among the participants. "Someone had to be the Muslim seat at the table," she told me. But, as the only Muslim, she felt that participating meant "stepping into a space not designed with you in mind." She had also read that psychedelics had shown promise in the treatment of trauma, which the Muslim community knows something about.

Early in her first session, Ahmed told me, she felt God right behind her. "Like, if I turned around, I would bump into God," she said. "There's a verse in the Quran in which God says, 'I'm closer to you than your jugular vein.' The jugular is the life-giving source. God was with me the whole time." For her, God was neither masculine nor feminine. "God was above gender, above everything . . . an existence, not a figure," she said. "And God was love." Her epiphany was a familiar psychedelic trope, but that did not make it any less profound. "It was just mind-blowingly clear how wrong we have it as human beings, and how we need to nurture love, to put it at the center of our engagement with humanity and animals and the planet," she told me.

Ahmed said that, during her second session, "it dawned on me that the womb is the center of everything." The memory still makes her heart beat faster, she said. "How incredibly glorious that women should have this exclusively and not anybody else! So why don't we have a culture where we drop down at the feet of these women in awe and love and respect?" When I asked whether some Muslims would regard these ideas as heretical, she laughed. Not in her reading of Islamic scripture, which often accords women great respect—but yes, she said, in some Muslim cultures they might. "In Islam, we prostrate to God and no one else," she said.

For years after her psilocybin sessions, Ahmed felt unmoored, as though she were struggling to regain her sense of equipoise and purpose. In her community, those who knew about psychedelics tended to lump them in with

other illicit drugs. She felt that she could not talk with anybody, not even her family, about her experience, even though it was one of the most important in her life. She also felt that the team at Hopkins hadn't done enough to help her make sense of the experience. She called the sessions "extractive"—"they were extracting data for the study"—and wished she'd had a chance to process them with people who looked like her. She found herself drifting away from prayers and rituals, and what little tolerance she'd had for misogyny and patriarchy was gone.

Yet, as her relationship with God became less formal, it became more direct. "I feel a closeness to God, even to this day, that I've never experienced before," she told me. She said that, after the sessions, "I would be in conversation with God when I was going down the stairs or getting on the bus or going into a meeting. We would chitchat. It's a two-way conversation."

Many of the religious leaders experienced a change that was both personal and professional. Several reported that attendance at services was up. An Eastern Orthodox priest, who requested a pseudonym so he could speak freely, told me a particularly dramatic story of recommitting to his church. Father Gregory, as I'll call him, is a burly man with a salt-and-pepper beard who looks more like a big-city cop than like a stereotypical clergyman. He told me that, when he was a teen-ager, his father, on his deathbed, "sought the comfort of a priest, and had a conversion moment." After witnessing that, Gregory made the decision to join the priesthood and took a vow of celibacy. Over time, however, he grew frustrated with the Church. "I was not only burned out but I wanted to burn other people," he told me. "I struggled with Church politics and bureaucracy. I was a bitter person, someone other people would avoid. I had gotten stuck in this cycle of anger, frustration, pornography, isolation, and was kind of spinning out of control." He knew nothing about psychedelics or psychedelic-assisted therapy until he heard about the study.

Gregory said that his first psilocybin session, at N.Y.U., "was the beginning of my softening—what I think of as the de-callousing of my heart." During the session, he felt that he was laid out on a stone slab in the tomb of Christ, covered in rose petals. "I realized I was dying, but it wasn't sad and I wasn't afraid," he told me. "My body had died, but love was still in it and love would survive my death." This was God's love, he understood, and it felt unexpectedly sensual—which, for a celibate priest, "was very dangerous territory." At first, he tried to hold back; he kept getting up and removing his eye mask and headphones to quell the intensity of the experience. But eventually he let go. "It was ecstatic," he said. "I was making love to love." It was disarming to hear a priest I'd only just met say such things without a whisper of irony, doubt, or embarrassment. He told me that at one point, rather than interrupt the powerful feelings washing over him with a trip to the bathroom, he released his bladder.

A mentor in the Church hierarchy quickly perceived that Gregory had changed and asked what had happened. "I don't think I really believed in what I had been doing," Gregory told me. "I hated the liturgy. Dreaded it. It was mechanical, something I put on a mask to do. But now it's a lot more meaningful and satisfying." I asked him how he understood the fact that this change was occasioned by a little blue capsule. "It came through a pill, but the pill was touched—blessed—by God," he said. "People can be salvaged." His remarks echoed something that Roger Joslin, a study participant who serves two Episcopal congregations on Long Island, told me. "I'm more awake," Joslin said. "I just am. The experience made me a better person and a better priest." Joslin is in his seventies, but he has shelved plans to retire; he argued that pastors have a role to play in helping parishioners make sense of psychedelic experiences, even while psychedelics are illegal. "I don't want to leave them to corporate America or to the therapists," he told me. "Why should we be left out of these spiritual experiences? I thought we were in that business!"

No one has taken this idea further than Hunt Priest. In November, 2020, after becoming the pastor at an Episcopal church in Georgia, he went on a retreat in the Texas desert with some friends. “I spent a day trying to figure out what my role in life was going to be,” he told me. In his view, he was part of an institution that was failing to satisfy its members’ spiritual needs. “Driving to church, I pass the yoga studio, where people are lined up on Sunday morning,” he told me. No such crowd was clamoring to get into church services. He called yoga an “embodied spiritual practice” and pointed to his forehead. “We’re all stuck up here,” he said.

Priest decided to leave his job and start an organization called Ligare, which in Latin means “to tie” or “to bind.” Swift, the study funder, had interviewed Priest; his family foundation eventually contributed twenty-five thousand dollars. On its website, Ligare describes itself as a Christian psychedelic society that believes “psychedelics may be used sacramentally as a way of experiencing God’s grace.”

Over time, many faiths pivot from a focus on direct spiritual experience, such as encounters with God or moments of transcendence, to a focus on tradition and belief. “We’re dealing with a kind of desert of experience in American religious life,” Charles Stang, a professor of early Christian thought at Harvard Divinity School, told me. “That’s not normal in the history of

religion." He finds psychedelics interesting because of their focus on experience. But he emphasized that spiritual experiences can be much more challenging than the ones the researchers were advertising—less like Priest's sensation of the divine moving through him and more like Powell's encounter with nothingness. "It can involve a God that actually spurns you, or an encounter with God's unknowability, or with the annihilating nonexistence of the abyss," Stang said. "That's a very different kind of mystical experience than the warm, loving embrace, which seems to be what this study is pushing."

Ariel Goldberg, a rabbi and a psychotherapist in Maryland, told me that lasting religious experiences come from years of "striving for understanding and wrestling with God." He added, "This is not to say that psychedelics can't play a role in that process, but it's a limited role." His remark made me think of Huston Smith, the scholar and Good Friday Experiment participant, who once observed that a spiritual experience is different from a spiritual life. "We Americans are always looking for a shortcut," Goldberg said.

Priest contends that psychedelics can be more easily folded into established faiths than shaped into a religion of their own. "I already have a church, and I think we have something to offer," he said. In the spring of 2022, Ligare took thirteen Christian ministers and five trained facilitators to the Netherlands, where some forms of psilocybin are legal. "Institutional religion has a lot to learn from psychedelics," Priest told Don Lattin, a reporter who has written extensively about religion and psychedelics. "And the psychedelic community has a lot to learn from organized religion." He told me that the gathering, which lasted five days, was "a very normal Christian retreat . . . except there was this big experience with psilocybin truffles halfway through it."

Priest and I had our conversation over lunch in 2023, in Denver, where we were both speakers at a conference called Psychedelic Science. More than ten thousand psychedelic researchers, entrepreneurs, therapists, and so-called

psychonauts were there. So was Sughra Ahmed. Also in Denver were Jaime Clark-Soles, the Baptist scholar—she is now writing a book called "Psychedelics and Soul Care: What Christians Need to Know"—and Zac Kamenetz, the rabbi from Berkeley. All were on panels about psychedelics and religion.

This year, Ahmed quit her job to focus on an organization she founded, Ruhani, which plans to host psychedelic retreats and create a specifically Muslim "container" for psychedelic experiences. Kamenetz, who had worked at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco, launched a group called Shefa, which will serve Jews who are interested in psychedelics—including "Hasids going to Friday-night services tripping on mushrooms," Kamenetz said—by placing their experiences in a Jewish framework. Shefa, too, is funded in part by T. Cody Swift. "Political safety required Jews, by and large, to give up their more mystical and ecstatic practices, both at home and in the synagogue, in order to look more like their Protestant neighbors," Kamenetz said. He argued that psychedelics could help bring Jewish mysticism back. Such perspectives clearly resonated at the conference. After one panel, a woman stepped up to the microphone and said, "I would go back to church if I knew my priest had done this!"

Nearly a decade has passed since the first religious leaders were given psilocybin. One reason for the delay in publication is that two people, one linked to Ligare and one affiliated with the study, made accusations of ethical lapses surrounding the research. Reverend Joe Welker, a Presbyterian pastor in Vermont who was once an intern at Ligare, published a critique of the study on Substack, writing that it was "part of a strategy to integrate psychedelics into mainstream religion," and reached out to the Johns Hopkins Institutional Review Board, which is charged with protecting participants in human trials. (Fifteen of the participants signed an open letter disagreeing with Welker.) Johnson, the Hopkins researcher who co-authored the paper, had concerns that

Roland Griffiths wanted psychedelic research to influence religious groups, and contacted the I.R.B.

After an audit and a review that lasted more than a year, the I.R.B. told the study's authors that it had identified several instances of "serious non-compliance" with its policies and procedures, including conflicts of interest. It found, in part, that the researchers had failed to accurately report their funding sources and did not secure I.R.B. approval for two members of the research team, one of whom was a funder (presumably Turnbull). In addition, it failed to report that a registered researcher (presumably Swift) was also a funder. The I.R.B. reported its findings to the F.D.A. and said that the study team would need to disclose them. "All research performed across Johns Hopkins is expected to meet the highest standards for integrity," the I.R.B. said in a statement to *The New Yorker*. "When concerns were raised about this study, which was not federally funded, we immediately responded and conducted a comprehensive investigation."

Stephen Ross, at N.Y.U., acknowledged that these entanglements were inappropriate. "A donor shouldn't be conducting research. It looks like paying to play," he told me. The fact that Swift gave money to Ligare and Shefa "fits into conspiracy theories that we're all colluding to create a psychedelic religion." (Ross described himself as a Jewish atheist.) "I was not aware that my dual role wasn't reported to the I.R.B.," Swift told me. "We had always planned to disclose it in the paper." Alta Charo, a bioethicist who served on the I.R.B. of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and who is not affiliated with the study, told me that a funder who participates in the research process "introduces the potential for bias, conscious or unconscious, that goes beyond the biases that all researchers have."

When I first asked Griffiths about participants I might interview, he did not mention Zac Kamenetz or Hunt Priest. Later, I asked why, and was told that

they were "outliers." Perhaps the researchers didn't want to stoke the narrative that some study participants have become advocates, even evangelists, for religious uses of psychedelics. Yet the only sense in which Priest and Kamenetz are outliers is that they left jobs in religious institutions to establish formal psychedelic organizations. "It is fascinating that such a high percentage of them have decided to make psychedelics a real interest beyond the study," Swift told me. The researchers seemed divided on whether this was a good thing. All stressed that it was never their intention to inject psychedelics into organized religion. Yet some, such as Swift and Richards, have been openly supportive of that effort. (Richards has spoken at a public Ligare event.)

Other co-authors seemed more anxious about the aftermath. "I've been worried from the beginning," Ross told me. "Could this be something that really angers organized religion?" Griffiths died in October, 2023, but when we spoke at his home, in suburban Baltimore, a few months before that, he expressed concern about the "implication that we should be introducing psychedelics into religion." He told me that psychedelics have great potential, but he worried that if they spread too rapidly they could have unforeseen and potentially disastrous consequences, including the kind of backlash that brought psychedelic research to a halt in the sixties. "We need to be cautious," he said, and later added, "You don't want to mess too quickly with the institutional structures that support the entire culture." Here, he sounded considerably more careful than he had a few years earlier, when he routinely spoke of psychedelics as important for the survival of the species. (When I asked Kamenetz if he could imagine a backlash, he joked, " 'Experiment Inspires Weird Drug Clergy'—there's your headline.")

I reached out to Elaine Pagels, a historian and a professor of religion at Princeton, for a reality check. In her 2018 memoir, "Why Religion?," Pagels wrote about taking LSD with her husband, the late physicist Heinz Pagels, in 1969, when she was in her twenties. "The experience was astonishing and

ecstatic," she told me in an e-mail. "After several hours when I was too absorbed to speak, I said, 'I guess that solves the death problem.' We both laughed." In subsequent decades, Pagels didn't closely follow developments in psychedelic research, but her interest was rekindled when Anthony Bossis reached out to her with questions about psychedelics in antiquity. *Psychedelic Medicine* later invited her to write a commentary about the religious-leaders study. "I think the use of these chemicals under appropriate conditions can be enormously beneficial," she told me. "At the same time, they can be nearly catastrophic for some."

Pagels has written extensively about the early years of Christianity, when religious leaders suppressed followers who were more mystical. In certain ways, clergy who embrace psychedelic rituals resemble the second- and third-century Christians that Pagels has written about, many of whom believed that revelation was potentially available to everyone, that God had a feminine dimension, and that it's possible for individuals to experience God directly.

Organized religion often opposes such figures. Religions can't survive if they're wide open to the claims of every individual with supposed experience of the divine. "You can't have people going around saying, 'God told me to do this or that,' " Pagels told me. "Because you can really go off the rails." Even so, she was heartened by the depth and passion exhibited by many of the religious leaders in the study. "Traditions can become fossilized," she said. Religious institutions will need to be "enlivened and reimagined and transformed" if they are to survive and serve people today. "It's like art," she added. "We don't just stay with the art of the fifteenth century. People are still making paintings!" ♦

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