

9 SACRED MUSHROOM PENTECOST

Thomas J. Riedlinger

Thomas J. Riedlinger is a writer and lecturer. A fellow of the Linnean Society of London, he earned his undergraduate degree in psychology from Northwestern University and his master's degree in world religions from Harvard Divinity School. His published works include *The Sacred Mushroom Seeker: Essays for R. Gordon Wasson* and articles appearing in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, the *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, *Medical Hypotheses*, and *Gnosis*.



The secrets the mushrooms revealed to me are enclosed in a big book that they [the mushrooms] showed to me. . . . At one point a duende [elf] came toward me. He asked a strange question, "But what do wish to become, you, Maria Sabina?" I answered him, without thinking, that I wished to become a Saint. Then the spirit smiled and immediately he had in his hands something that was not there before, a big Book with many written pages. "Here," he said, "I am

giving you this book so that you can work better and help people who need help and know the secrets of the world where everything is known." I thumbed through the leaves of the Book, many and many written pages, and alas I thought I didn't know how to read. . . . And suddenly I was reading, and understanding all that was written. . . . It was as though I had become richer, wiser, in a moment I learned millions of things, I learned and learned and learned. . . .

MARIA SABINA, FROM ÁLVARO ESTRADA, *MARIA SABINA AND HER MAZATEC MUSHROOM VELADA*, 1974

SOCIETY PHOTOGRAPHER ALLAN Richardson later said that what he experienced that night in the darkened room of a hut in the mountains of southern Mexico seemed three thousand miles and a thousand years removed from his home in New York City (Richardson 1990, 196). He and his traveling companion, a Wall Street banker named R. Gordon Wasson, had been invited by Mazatec Indians to participate in a secret religious ceremony that included the ingestion of entheogenic mushrooms. Wasson and Richardson thus became the first white "outsiders" in recorded history to partake of the sacred mushrooms in a Mazatec mushroom *velada* (night vigil). As Wasson described the experience two years later in *Life* magazine:

On the night of June 29–30, 1955, in a Mexican Indian village so remote from the world that most of the people speak no Spanish, my friend Allan Richardson and I shared with a family of Indian friends a celebration of "holy communion" where "divine" mushrooms were first adored and then consumed. The Indians mingled Christian and pre-Christian elements in their religious practices in a way disconcerting for Christians but natural for them. The rite was led by two women, mother and daughter, both of them *curanderas*, or shamans. . . . The mushrooms were of a species with hallucinogenic powers; that is, they cause the eater to see visions. We chewed and swallowed these acrid

mushrooms, saw visions, and emerged from the experience awestruck. We had come from afar to attend a mushroom rite but had expected nothing so staggering as the virtuosity of the performing curanderas and the astonishing effects of the mushrooms. (Wasson 1957)

“For the first time,” Wasson added, “the word ecstasy took on real meaning. For the first time it did not mean someone else’s state of mind” (Wasson 1957). In other words, for the first time, at age fifty-six, he had experienced *enthusiasm* during a religious rite. Ecstatic transports of this type are not uncommon in shamanic rites that utilize entheogens, vigorous dancing, or other techniques to induce altered states of consciousness. But they are rare in mainstream Christian churches, of which modern Pentecostals are the only ones whose worship aims specifically to stimulate a form of religious enthusiasm bearing some resemblance to ecstatic transport. As a lifelong Episcopalian, Wasson had no analogues in his experience with which to compare the religious awe that shook him to the center of his bones that night. Yet his written accounts of the velada represent it in a way that begs comparison, I think, to certain elements of Pentecostal worship.

In the following pages I briefly describe: the known history of the velada, from its suppression by Spanish conquistadors to its relatively recent rediscovery by Westerners, how Wasson and his wife became interested in it and arranged for him and Richardson to be the first outsiders to fully participate, Wasson’s written accounts of what they experienced in the velada held on June 29–30, 1955, and a survey of the Pentecostal references found in these accounts. Finally, in my conclusion, I discuss the possibility that Wasson perceived the velada as a prototype for using entheogens as sacramental substances in mainstream Christian worship.

HISTORY OF THE VELADA

The Mazatec mushroom velada represents a syncretic conflation of different religious beliefs that collided and fused at the time of the

Spanish Conquest. Catholic friars who accompanied the Spaniards in the early 1500s found the Indians ingesting mushrooms that reportedly caused visions. The Indians, who called these mushrooms *teonanácatl*, an Aztec word often translated as “god’s flesh” or “divine flesh,” used them in religious rites of prehistoric provenance. The friars condemned this practice. An example quoted by Wasson is the following sixteenth-century account by Fray Toribio de Benavente called *Motolinía*:

They had another way of drunkenness that made them more cruel and it was with some fungi or small mushrooms, which exist in this land as in Castilla; but those of this land are of such a kind that, eaten raw and being bitter, they drink after them or eat them with a little bees’ honey; and a while later they would see a thousand visions, especially serpents, and as they would be out of their senses, it would seem to them that their legs and bodies were full of worms eating them alive, and thus half rabid they would sally forth from the house, wanting someone to kill them; and with this bestial drunkenness and travail that they were feeling, it happened sometimes that they hanged themselves, and also against others they were crueler. These mushrooms they called in their language *teunana-catlth* [var. *teonanácatl*], which means “flesh of god,” or the devil whom they worshipped; and in this wise with that bitter victual by their cruel god were they houseled. (Wasson 1980, xvii)

According to Wasson, the friars condemned the ritual ingestion of entheogenic mushrooms by the Mazatecs and other Nahuatl tribes because, in his opinion, they considered this practice to be “an appalling simulacrum of Holy Communion” (Wasson 1980, xviii).

One can imagine the many trembling confabulations of the friars as they would whisper together how to meet this Satanic enemy. The *teonanácatl* struck at the heart of the Christian religion. I need

hardly remind my readers of the parallel, the designation of the Elements in our Eucharist: "Take, eat, this is my Body . . .," and again, "Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son . . . and to drink His blood. . . ." But the truth was even worse. The orthodox Christian must accept on faith the miracle of the conversion of the bread and wine into God's flesh and blood: that is what is meant by the Doctrine of Transubstantiation. By contrast the sacred mushroom of the Aztecs carries its own conviction: every communicant will testify to the miracle that he has experienced. (Wasson 1980, xviii)

Not surprisingly, therefore, the Spaniards made an effort to suppress the mushroom velada and believed that they succeeded. So completely did the practice disappear from the light of day that over time Western scholars concluded that the friars had made a mistake: that *teonanácatl* was peyote cactus buttons, not mushrooms. However, for hundreds of years, secret mushroom veladas thrived in mountain villages of central and southern Mexico. And while they continued in secret, something interesting happened. Christian concepts began to get mixed with the pagan ones. The mushrooms themselves got conflated with Christ—the story that the mushrooms sprang up from the ground where Christ's blood fell at the time of his Passion is an example (Wasson 1980, 46). Since the mushroom veladas were secret this conflation was not done to please the authorities. Rather, it was spontaneous and sincere—a classic syncretism, such as marked the original spread of Christianity through pagan Europe.

In 1936, a Mexican ethnobotanist named Blas Pablo Reko rebelled against the prevailing scientific view that *teonanácatl* was peyote. He began to consult with indigenous peoples in the mountains of Oaxaca in south central Mexico about the possible existence of entheogenic mushrooms. They not only confirmed for him their existence, but also revealed that the mushrooms still were used in secret veladas. In 1938 Reko was joined in his field research by a young ethnobotany student

from Harvard named Richard Evans Schultes, who secured and identified voucher samples of entheogenic mushrooms in the Mazatec village of Huautla de Jiménez. One year later, a Mexico City anthropologist named Jean Bassett Johnson and his wife, Irmgard Weitlaner, became the first outsiders to attend a mushroom velada, though their hosts did not offer them mushrooms; they participated only as observers. Also that year, Schultes published a paper identifying *teonanácatl* as a specific mushroom (Schultes 1939; Wasson 1990, 252), but the onset of World War II ensured that it was overlooked for several years.

WASSON'S ROAD TO THE MUSHROOM VELADA

Meanwhile, Gordon Wasson was pursuing his career as an investment banker at the prestigious Wall Street firm of J. P. Morgan & Co., where he rose to the rank of vice president before retiring in the early 1960s. Descended from British ancestors, he had been born on September 22, 1898, in Great Falls, Montana, and grew up in Newark, New Jersey. His father, Edmund, was a somewhat controversial Episcopal priest who wrote a book in 1914 called *Religion and Drink*, which used Bible references to refute prohibitionists. According to Wasson, his father “never tired of pointing out that Christ’s first miracle . . . was the conversion of water into wine (not wine into grape juice), and that the last act of his ministry was to invite his apostles to drink wine in remembrance of him” (Riedlinger 1990, 252). Wasson also told a story of the time his father helped him with a grammar school assignment.

There came a year when my teacher in school asked us to memorize each week a verse of our own selection from the Bible, and then recite it in class. Our father felt contempt for this homeopathic approach to the vast subject of Bible study, and he conspired with me to find the most absurd, the most embarrassing, verses for me to take to class. Imagine my glee! It was known of course that my

father was a clergyman, and the confusion of my teacher was all the more extreme. After she had called on me two weeks running, she thenceforth ignored my presence. (Wasson 1990, 248)

At home Wasson's father took pains to teach him and his brother a deep appreciation for the Bible. Together they carefully read it from cover to cover three times, with Edmund expounding the text.

according to the latest interpretations of scholars and critics—the Higher Criticism, as this body of Bible exegesis was called. How extraordinary must have been the spectacle of us little boys, in short trousers, prattling about the Vulgate, the Septuagint, the Pentateuch and Hexateuch, the use of Yahweh and Elohim, and of Adonai, interpolations of Priestly Redactors, the reconstructed Sayings of Jesus, and all the other terms then current in Bible study! Moreover, we each learned a verse of the Bible by heart every day, and it was our practice to repeat the nine verses learned on the nine previous days as well. (Wasson 1990, 246)

Thus Wasson was thoroughly versed in the Bible. He retained this knowledge all his life, affirming in his sixties that the Bible “stands in a class by itself, head and shoulders above” even Homer and Herodotus (Wasson 1990, 247). In his opinion,

It is the autobiography of a gifted people, an autobiography in which every facet of the peoples' inner life is exposed eloquently to view, every weakness shown with naked candour, its manner of living and dying, its beliefs as to its own past, its history, its tabus and rules governing the *minutiae* of its daily existence, its aspirations, a wealth of illuminating episodes both fictional and veridical, the poetry and romance of its supreme moments, all expressed in words of matchless splendour. In many intelligent and cultivated circles the Bible suffers today from the people who keep it company, from the proprietary

claims on it of extreme sectarians with whom no civilized person cares to consort. (Wasson 1990, 247)

After serving in the army during World War I, Wasson earned his degree in English at Columbia University. Upon graduation he visited London, where he met Valentina (Tina) Pavlovna Guercken, a Russian emigré who was studying to be a pediatrician. He then returned to New York and taught English at Columbia for a year, in 1921,* before taking a job as a business journalist for newspapers in New England. In 1928 he was hired as a banker with the Guaranty Co. of New York and in 1934 joined the staff at J. P. Morgan & Co., where he remained until his retirement in 1963.

Wasson and Tina married in 1926. Their honeymoon, delayed until late summer 1927, was spent in a cabin in the Catskill Mountains. It was there that the mushroom quest started. When out for a walk one day, Tina rushed off the path into the woods to gather mushrooms she saw growing in the shadows. Wasson begged her to stop, fearing Tina was going to poison herself. She just laughed at him and said she would cook them up, which she did upon returning to their cabin. "That evening she ate them, alone," recalled Wasson. "I thought to wake up the next morning a widower" (Wasson 1957). Later he wrote:

This episode made so deep an impression on us that from then on, as circumstances permitted, we gathered all the information that we could about the attitude of various peoples toward mushrooms—what kinds they know, their names for them, the etymology of those names, the folklore and legends in which mushrooms figure, references to them in proverbs and literature and mythology. (Wasson 1959)

*One of Wasson's students who remembered him was poet Langston Hughes: "As for the instructors at Columbia whom I knew, the only one who interested me much was a Mr. Wasson, who read Mencken aloud all the time." Hughes, L. *The Big Sea*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1986: 84.

By the 1940s and early '50s they were working together on a Russian cookbook, *Mushrooms, Russia and History: An Introduction to Russia through the Kitchen*. One long chapter on mushrooms grew bigger and bigger, until it became the whole book. Based on their research the two of them wondered if mushrooms may not have been worshipped or used sacramentally by ancient Europeans. Thus some Europeans—the Russians and Czechs, for example—now regard them with delight, while others, such as the English, regard them with suspicion, even horror. Wasson and Tina theorized that both intense reactions are degraded forms of what had once been powerful religious awe.

Tina happened to mention this theory to their friend Robert Graves, who told them in the early 1950s of Schultes's paper on *teonanácatl*, which he had seen footnoted in a newsletter published by a pharmaceutical company. Wasson and Tina promptly contacted Schultes, who by then had assumed the position of director of Harvard Botanical Museum, and Schultes referred them to his contacts in the village of Huautla de Jiménez.

Thus it was that, beginning in 1953, Wasson, sometimes accompanied by Tina and their teenage daughter Mary (Masha), made the first of ten annual visits to the Oaxaca region. In 1953 they sat in on a mushroom *velada* but were not invited to participate. The male shaman who presided said the mushrooms had the power to take those who ingested them "*ahí donde Dios está*"—there where God is (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 294). Wasson noted at this time that the mushrooms are treated respectfully by the Indians, so he always made it a point to do likewise. "After all," he wrote, "it was a bold thing we were doing, strangers probing the innermost secrets of this remote people. How would a Christian priest receive a pagan's request for samples of the Host" (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 250)?

THE VELADA OF JUNE 29–30, 1955

Beginning in 1954 Wasson hired Allan Richardson to accompany him on the next few expeditions and take photographs. These were difficult

journeys by foot and by mule on deplorable mountain roads winding over the mountains to villages such as Mazatlán and Huautla at elevations up to a mile and a half. At first they succeeded only in compiling information about the velada—for example, that it is not a regularly scheduled event such as Christian worship services but rather is convened for “healing” purposes, broadly defined. Therefore the shaman who conducts it holds the title *curandera* if a woman, *curandero* if a man; both words mean “healer.” Furthermore, mushroom veladas are not strictly liturgical though they are ritualized with the mushroom used sacramentally.

A breakthrough came on June 29, 1955, when Wasson and Richardson met Cayetano and Guadalupe García, a married couple living at the edge of town in Huautla. That afternoon, the Garcías and some of their friends took Wasson and Richardson down the mountainside to gather entheogenic mushrooms growing on sugar cane refuse. The mushroom they gathered, *Psilocybe caerulescens*, is locally known as the “landslide mushroom,” either because of the cascading visions it evokes or because of the way that it grows, in clustered masses resembling an avalanche.

Cayetano then sent his brother, an interpreter, along with Wasson and Richardson to meet a shaman who lived in Huautla by the name of María Sabina. Believing that she had no choice because Wasson had apparently been authorized by Cayetano, an official of the town, she agreed to conduct a velada that evening with her daughter Apollonia at the home of the Garcías. María was then about fifty-five years old, the same age as Wasson. Guadalupe described her to him as “*una Señora sin mancha*, a lady without blemish, immaculate, one who had never dishonored her calling by using her personal powers for evil” (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 289). To Wasson she seemed “the hierophant, the thaumaturge, the psychopompos, in whom the troubles and aspirations of countless generations of mankind had found, were still finding, their relief” (Wasson 1980, 28). He later recalled:

On that last Wednesday of June, after nightfall, we gathered [at about 8:15] in the lower chamber. . . . In all, at one time or another, there must have been twenty-five persons present. . . . Both Allan . . . [and I] were deeply impressed by the mood of the gathering. We were received and the night's events unrolled in an atmosphere of simple friendliness that reminded us of the agape of early Christian times. . . . We were mindful of the drama of the situation. We were attending as participants a mushroomic Supper of unique anthropological interest, which was being held pursuant to a tradition of unfathomed age, possibly going back to the time when the remote ancestors of our hosts were living in Asia, back perhaps to the dawn of man's cultural history, when he was discovering the idea of God. (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 289)

The ceremony started at about 10:30 when María and her daughter took their positions before a small table that served as their altar. Photos were not allowed in this first session once the mushrooms took effect, leaving Richardson nothing to do but ride out the experience. Apparently no photos have survived that show Wasson consuming his mushrooms, though he took one of Richardson eating his share, which accompanied the article in *Life*. In this photo Richardson appears somewhat worried, perhaps because he was remembering the promise he made to his wife not to let "those nasty toadstools" touch his lips (Wasson 1957). He did so anyway because, he later explained, he did not want to risk insulting his Indian hosts.

Wasson noted during this and later veladas he attended that the Mazatecs normally follow a certain procedure with ritual overtones. The healer first praises the mushrooms while passing them through the smoke of copal incense to purify them before handing them out to the other participants. Wasson and Richardson each ate about six pairs of mushrooms, which in a velada are always distributed in pairs and eaten facing the altar. María's dose was twice as much. After the mushrooms are eaten, all the candles are extinguished (veladas always take place

after dark), followed by silence for about twenty minutes. The healer then starts humming, and the humming eventually modulates into a chant that continues at intervals throughout the night. María's songs put Wasson in mind of "age-old chants" that sometimes seemed to him "soaked in weary melancholy" (Wasson 1980, 19). They were punctuated by percussive sound effects produced when María and her daughter clapped their hands and thumped their chests. Much of the chanting involved a declaration by María of her spiritual credentials, such as this from a later *velada*:

*Woman of space am I,
 Woman of day am I,
 Woman of light am I, . . .
 Lawyer woman am I, woman of affairs am I,
 I give account to the judge,
 And I give account to the government,
 And I give account to the Father Jesus Christ,
 And mother princess, my patron mother, oh Jesus, Father
 Jesus Christ,
 Woman of danger am I, woman of beauty am I, . . .
 I am going to the sky [heaven], Jesus Christ, . . .
 Whirling woman of the whirlwind am I, woman of a
 sacred, enchanted place am I,
 Eagle woman am I, and clock woman am I,
 Isn't that so now? . . .
 With breast milk, with dew,
 The world can be cheered up, let's cheer up, let's be
 enlightened.
 Let our Father come out to us, let Christ come out to us,
 We wait for our Father, we wait for our Father, we wait for
 Christ, with calmness, with care,
 Man of breast milk, man of dew,
 Fresh man, tender man, . . .*

*And there I give account, [the mushroom] says,
 There I give account to him face to face, before your glory,
 [the mushroom] says,
 There I give him account, [the mushroom] says,
 Yes, Jesus Christ says, there I have an owner, [the
 mushroom] says . . . (Halifax 1979, 203–5)*

At about 11:20 p.m., Richardson reported feeling chilly just before the visions started. A notebook, now in my possession, that he had brought with him intending to write down his experiences as they occurred contains only a few scribbled entries as the mushrooms took effect. His handwriting quickly becomes almost illegible after the intriguing statement, "Spirit comes down from above." In *Mushrooms, Russia and History*, Wasson tells what happened next in words of great beauty and piety. Speaking for Richardson as well as for himself, he reports that they first saw

geometric patterns, angular not circular, in richest colors, such as might adorn textiles or carpets. Then the patterns grew into architectural structures, with colonnades and architraves, patios of regal splendor, the stone-work all in brilliant colors, gold and onyx and ebony, all most harmoniously and ingeniously contrived, in richest magnificence extending beyond the reach of sight, in vistas measureless to man. . . . They seemed to belong . . . to the imaginary architecture described by the visionaries of the Bible. (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 293)

This was obviously something very different from the horrible visions ascribed to the mushrooms by Fray Toribio de Benavente, who presumably did not try them before writing about them. In Wasson's case (and Richardson's), the experience was more like an epiphany:

Spirit came down
for above.

Only light coming
thru. Stalled window in
went down in white
cath. coming 11 PM
heavy breathing.

envelopes above
Picture in left holy Child
" in right Baptism
of Christ

There is no better way to describe the sensation than to say it was as though . . . [my] very soul had been scooped out of . . . [my] body and translated to a point floating in space, leaving behind the husk of clay . . . [my] body . . . We had the sensation that the walls of our humble house had vanished, that our untrammelled souls were floating in the universe, stroked by divine breezes, possessed of a divine mobility that would transport us anywhere on the wings of a thought. . . . There came a moment when it seemed as though the visions themselves were about to be transcended, and dark gates reaching upward beyond sight were about to part, and we were to find ourselves in the presence of the Ultimate. We seemed to be flying at the dark gates as a swallow at a dazzling lighthouse, and the gates were to part and admit us. But they did not open, and with a thud we fell back, gasping. We felt disappointed, but also frightened and half relieved, that we had not entered into the presence of the Ineffable, whence, it seemed to us at the time, we might not have returned, for we had sensed that a willing extinction in the divine radiance had been awaiting us. (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 293–95)

After the visions had diminished in intensity, Wasson and Richardson fell asleep at about 4:00 a.m., waking two hours later to enjoy some bread and chocolate with their hosts. When Wasson later asked Cayetano what he could pay him for having arranged the velada, the Indian “turned to his wife and let her speak. *No hicimos esto por dinero,*” she said, which is to say, ‘We did not do this for money,’ and they would accept none” (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 304). Two days later Wasson ate mushrooms again in another velada conducted by María in the same house. Richardson was present but did not participate. Having decided that once was enough, he never again took the mushrooms (Richardson 1990, 198). Wasson, however, went on to ingest them about thirty times (Riedlinger 1990, 215), both in Mazatec Indian rituals and at home.

In the years before his death due to stroke or heart failure on

December 23, 1986, he published numerous scholarly books in addition to *Mushrooms, Russia and History* on the subject of the use of sacred mushrooms in various cultures. He was cremated and his ashes interred in a closed columbarium adjacent to the Chapel of St. Joseph of Arimathea in the Washington Cathedral.

The Mazatecs, meanwhile, came under pressure from several quarters soon after Wasson published his *Life* magazine article, even though he used false names for María (Eva Mendez), her fellow Indians, and the town of Huautla. In any case, pseudonyms would not have fooled the local Christian missionaries. Two of them, Eunice Pike and Florence Cowan, published a paper with the ominous title "Mushroom Ritual vs. Christianity" in a 1959 issue of the Christian journal *Practical Anthropology*. In it they wonder, "How can one effectively present the message of divine revelation to a people who already have, according to their belief, a means whereby anyone who so desires may get messages directly from the supernatural world via a more spectacular and immediately satisfying way than Christianity has to offer" (Pike and Cowan 1959)? The authors then answer their own question:

The thing that has helped is study of the Scriptures . . . until the person concerned comes to understand God's idea of sin, his love and plan for the sinner, and something of God's greatness. That seldom happens after the study of a few brief passages; it seems to take a considerable amount before a person's eyes are opened. (Pike and Cowan 1959)

More immediately damaging was the attention that Wasson's *Life* article brought from a variety of seekers who flocked to Huautla in search of enlightenment or simply a good high. Included among them were hippies, beatniks, rock stars, and journalists whose sometimes inappropriate behavior made life difficult for people in Huautla. Things got worse when *federales*, under pressure from the Mexican and U.S. governments, threatened to prosecute anyone using the mushrooms, on

the grounds that they were trafficking in dangerous drugs. At one point angry townspeople burned down María's house because they blamed her for having made public their long-standing secret, but eventually they reconciled with her. By the time she died in 1985, at age eighty-seven, she was regarded with honor not only in Huautla but also throughout Mexico. It later was reported that

Father Antonio Reyes Hernandez, the Catholic Bishop who resides in the parish where María Sabina lived, never admonished or condemned her for her work in the village. He was aware that her rituals and practices had been handed down to her through the ages from her ancestors. He knew that her services were valid treatments for those who sought her shamanic talents. Father Hernandez also recognized that her work with the sick and suffering was the mark of a true Christian—one willing to help the less fortunate. Although he knew that Doña María used the mushroom and pagan practice to heal and cure, he also understood that María Sabina's nature was not of a demonic spirit, satanic or even heretic. He appreciated her spirituality and treasured her work as a life-long member of his church. . . . As Doña María believed in the power of Christ, she also believed in the power of the mushrooms. (Allen 1994)

PENTECOSTAL ELEMENTS IN THE MUSHROOM VELADA

The Pentecostal elements that seem to be part of Wasson's written accounts of the mushroom velada do not necessarily indicate that he was familiar with Pentecostalism. Rather, these writings are keyed to certain sections of the Bible that inspired the beginning of the modern Pentecostal movement, especially chapters 1 and 2 of Acts of the Apostles. There it is reported that Jesus "presented himself alive" to his disciples several days after his crucifixion and stayed with them for

forty days. During that time, Jesus instructed his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for a sign—a baptism by the Holy Spirit that would imbue them with power. When he left them again, reportedly ascending into heaven, his apostles took up residence in “the room upstairs” (or “upper chamber”) of a building in Jerusalem, where they and “certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus,” constantly devoted themselves to prayer. What transpired, circa 34 C.E., is described as follows in Acts 2:1–17:*

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans [i.e., followers of Jesus the Galilean]? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” . . . All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” But Peter, standing with the eleven [apostles], raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel [in Joel 2:28–32]:

*All biblical quotations are from: *The Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version*. New York: HarperCollins, 1989.

*'In the last days it will be,
 God declares,
 that I will pour out my Spirit
 upon all flesh,
 and your sons and your
 daughters shall prophesy,
 and your young men shall
 see visions,
 and your old men shall
 dream dreams. . . .'*"

William Joseph Seymour, who founded the modern Pentecostal movement in Los Angeles in 1906, believed that the Christian church had lost its way soon after this first Christian Pentecost by getting too dogmatic and that consequently few of the wonders foretold had come to pass. To rectify this he preached an alternative form of worship that encourages "speaking in tongues" (glossolalia), trances, faith healing, visions, dreams, and other such manifestations of enthusiasm. Pentecostals believe that these states are induced when a person is filled with the Holy Spirit, usually during a worship service. Most of them also believe that the end times are near, when the kingdom of God will prevail. In the meantime, they experience brief previews of this kingdom when the Spirit enters into them during their practice of what Harvard theologian Harvey Cox has labeled "primal spirituality" (Cox 1995, 17).

The emphasis here is on "practice." Cox points out that "while the beliefs of the fundamentalists, and of many other religious groups, are enshrined in formal theological systems, those of Pentecostalism are imbedded in testimonies, ecstatic speech, and bodily movement" (Cox 1995, 15). Thus their meetings, which initially were held whenever possible in upper rooms to simulate the setting of the Pentecost described in Acts of the Apostles (Anderson 1992, 77), are liturgically designed to encourage such outbursts of "glory" (Anderson 1992, 69),

which believers ascribe to a kind of possession by the Holy Spirit. For while Pentecostal worship does include the historical practice of baptizing people in water, Pentecostals interpret Acts 1:5 as a mandate for Christians to also seek a second "Spirit baptism." Many interpret Joel's prophecy quoted by Peter to mean that the end times will involve a "latter rain" of Spirit pouring down, empowering people to prophesy and have visions in addition to other miraculous signs such as faith healing.

The Mazatec mushroom velada likewise has no formal theology, calls down an empowering Spirit as its pivotal event, includes healing, and accommodates enthusiastic outbursts in the form of spontaneous utterances, walking toward the altar on one's knees, prolonged ecstatic dancing, and similarly pious demonstrations (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 296–98). Its participants, like those who attended the first Christian Pentecost, include both women and men; in fact, the velada may be led by either gender. And Wasson's pointed observation that the velada of June 29–30, 1955 took place in a "lower chamber" seems to echo, in reversal, the New Testament report that the first Christian Pentecost occurred in an "upper chamber." Before discussing the significance of these and other similarities between Pentecostal and Mazatec Christianity it needs to be recalled that Wasson's training in the Bible was exceptionally rigorous. It is therefore unlikely that any apparent allusion to biblical concepts in his writing is an accident. For example, the chapter in *Mushrooms, Russia and History* containing Wasson's first detailed account of the mushroom velada of June 29–30, 1955, is titled "Teonanácatl" and subtitled "The Mushroom Agape." We have already heard that he compared this "agape" to that of "early Christian times" (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 289). The prototypical Christian agape is, of course, the Pentecostal gathering described in chapter 2 of Acts of the Apostles. We have also heard that sixteenth-century friars denounced the state of mind evoked by mushrooms as mere drunkenness, a charge that Wasson refutes on behalf of his Indian hosts when he observes, "The proceedings went forward with an easy decorum. Neither on this occasion nor at any other time or place did we see or hear the mush-

rooms treated as a subject for jocularity, of the kind that marks the use of alcohol among fully civilized peoples" (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 289–90). Peter likewise defended his fellow Christians when outsiders confused their enthusiasm with inebriation.

According to Wasson, two "holy pictures" were displayed on the table that served as an altar for the *velada* (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 291). One depicted Jesus as a child, the other, his baptism in the Jordan River. This confirmed that the Indians viewed their mushroom service as related in some basic way to Christianity. Furthermore, Wasson reports, "The Señora had asked us to take care not to invade the corner of the room on the left of the altar table, for down that corner would descend the Holy Ghost" (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 292). Later, as the mushrooms took effect, she reportedly talked "as though invoking the Spirits or as though the Holy Ghost was speaking through the mushrooms. We heard the names of Christ (which she pronounced with an intrusive 'r,' *Khristos*), of St. Peter and St. Paul" (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 297). These spoken utterances differed from the chanting, Wasson said, in being "fresh and vibrant and rich in expressiveness. The mushrooms were talking to the point" (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 297). By this he meant that her pronouncements sounded more authoritative than her chanting, which outsiders such as Wasson, who did not speak the Mazatec language, tend to experience as rambling and monotonous.

Moreover, Wasson almost certainly perceived the ecstasis evoked by the mushrooms as something akin to possession by the Christian Holy Spirit, relative to which María's chanting was perhaps a ritual beckoning. That is how I interpret the emphasis he placed on the following anecdote. During one of his first visits to Oaxaca he was told by Eunice Pike, the Christian missionary, that the Mazatec language term for the mushrooms translates to "the dear little tykes that leap forth" (Wasson 1980, 45). A Spanish-speaking Indian later explained to him that

El honguillo viene por sí mismo, no se sabe de dónde, como el viento que viene sin saber de dónde ni porqué.

The little mushroom comes of itself, no one knows whence, like the wind that comes we know not whence nor why. (Wasson 1980, 45)

Wasson clearly saw something significant in this explanation, first because he quotes it as a couplet and second because he so often repeats it in his many books and papers. In light of his rigorous Bible training, it seems likely that he must have remembered the following words of Jesus in John 3:5–8:

Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished when I say to you, "You must be born from above." *The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.* So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. [emphasis added]

This biblical connection—reinforced, as we shall see, by other comments made by Wasson in his writings—introduces an important concept. He seems to be suggesting that the Mazatecs regard the capricious emergence of their *teonanácatl* from the earth as a form of gratuitous grace bestowed by God's Spirit. Like Jesus when he was alive, the mushroom both embodies and proclaims this Spirit. As such it comprises an *actual* grace, which enables those who eat it to experience God's presence. In effect they are transported to God's "kingdom," much as Pentecostal worshippers believe that when the Spirit enters into them they preview in the "already" what will come in the "not yet" at the end of historical time. I think that Wasson is describing something similar when he relates that the mushrooms "took full and sweeping possession" of him (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 295), temporarily transporting him "there where God is" (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 294). Recall that his visions reminded him of those that are reported in the Bible, such as "resplendent palaces all laid over with semiprecious stones," "mountains

rising tier above tier to the very heavens," "gardens of ineffable beauty," and "river estuaries, pellucid waters flowing through an endless expanse of reeds down to a measureless sea, all by the pastel light of a horizontal sun" (Wasson 1957; Wasson and Wasson 1957, 294–95). These descriptions clearly echo certain features of biblical Eden, the garden of God, which according to Genesis 2:8–14 was watered by a river with four estuaries running through a land containing gold and onyx—precious substances also found, along with "stones of fire" (apparently meaning gems), at the site of God's holy mountain in the Eden of Ezekiel 28:11–14. Of the objects he saw in his visions, Wasson says:

No patina of age hung on them. They were all fresh from God's workshop, pristine in their finish. . . . They seemed the very archetypes of beautiful form and color. We felt ourselves in the presence of the Ideas that Plato had talked about. In saying this let not the reader think that we are indulging in rhetoric, straining to command his attention by an extravagant figure of speech. For the world our visions were and must remain "hallucinations." But for us they were not false or shadowy suggestions of real things, figments of an unhinged imagination. What we were seeing was, we knew, the only reality, of which the counterparts of every day are mere imperfect adumbrations. (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 294)

Thus it is that the mushrooms, according to Wasson, "express religion in its purest essence, without intellectual content" (Wasson, Ruck, and Hofmann 1978, 23). They stimulate a mystical experience that cannot be reduced to words or concepts, much in contrast to most Christian worship based on "learned" theological systems. In that sense the Christian religion of the Mazatec mushroom eaters is defined, like Pentecostalism, not by doctrine or by dogma but phenomenologically. Both religions are examples of the primal spirituality that Cox describes as "reaching beyond the levels of creed and ceremony into the core of human religiousness, into . . . that largely unprocessed nucleus of the

psyche in which the unending struggle for a sense of purpose and significance goes on" (Cox 1995, 81). Although necessarily subjective, such experiences foster the formation of communities as other people validate this purpose and significance according to shared or consensual beliefs, as Wasson learned firsthand from his Indian hosts. Surrounded in the darkness by an "irregular chorus, subdued in volume, of ecstatic exclamations from the Indians reclining on the ground" (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 299), he experienced something with them that was remarkably like an event at the original Christian Pentecost.

Confined though we were in a room without windows or open door, at one point we felt a swish of air, just as if we were really suspended in the great outdoors. Was this too an hallucination? If so, all shared it, for when the wind blew on us, there was a general excitement, flashlights were switched on, and our Indian friends were sitting up, amazed at being stroked by the Divine Afflatus. (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 299)

This strengthens the linkage already suggested between the Holy Spirit and the Mazatec Indian concept that the mushrooms come "no one knows whence, like the wind that comes we know not whence nor why." It also strengthened the sense of community that Wasson and Richardson shared with their Indian hosts. For when they lit what Wasson calls, a few lines later, their "electric torches" (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 300), euphemistically suggesting tongues of flame, he saw María

in a state of excitement, her eyes flashing, her smile no longer that grave smile which we had observed before, but now quick with animation and, if we may use the word, *caritas*. For there is another aspect to the mushrooms that we must mention. The spirit of the agape of which we have already spoken was a prelude to a wave of generous or tender feelings that the mushroom aroused in everyone. . . . On the two nights that we passed in Cayetano's house, we were

aware of no erotic stimulation among those present and we think there was none. But the feeling of brotherly love was strong indeed. Twice in the course of that first night the Señora reached out her right hand to [me] and sought contact with [my] fingers in friendly greeting, across the chasm of the language barrier. The Indians of Middle America are known for their reticence in the display of affection, even within the family circle. It was now clear that the mushrooms emancipate them from inhibitions of this kind. (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 300)

In sum, concluded Wasson, the mushrooms “transport one for the nonce to heaven, where all the senses unite in a joyous symphony shot through with an overwhelming feeling of *caritas*, of peace and affection for the fellow communicants” (Wasson 1980, xvii). The effect is a transcendence of the barriers existing between people, including—as Wasson observed, no doubt remembering the Pentecostal miracle in Acts—the chasm of the language barrier.

CONCLUSIONS

We have heard that the Mazatec Indians and Wasson both interpreted the mystical ecstasis evoked by the mushrooms as somehow connected with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, Wasson’s description of the *velada* seems to correspond significantly with much of the New Testament account of the original Christian Pentecost. An additional twist is the following observation made by Wasson in his 1980 book *The Wondrous Mushroom*. Recalling that María had informed him that “the Word” (which he had previously called the Holy Ghost) would come down to the left of the altar, he noted that she had explained to Álvaro Estrada in a book about her life.

... veo que el Lenguaje cae, viene de arriba, como si fuesen pequeños objetos luminosos que caen del cielo. El Lenguaje cae sobre la mesa

sagrada, cae sobre mi cuerpo. Entonces atrapo con mis manos palabra por palabra.

. . . I see the Word fall, come down from above, as though they were little luminous objects falling from heaven. The Word falls on the Holy Table, on my body: with my hand I catch them, Word for Word. (Wasson 1980, 13)

Compare Wasson's translation to that of Henry Munn in the English edition of Estrada's book, which came out one year later. There María is quoted as saying: ". . . I also see that words fall, they come from up above, as if they were little luminous objects falling from the sky. The Language falls on the sacred table, falls on my body. Then with my hands I catch word after word" (Estrada 1981, 94). Was it the Word that fell, or words? While Munn's translation is perhaps more literally accurate, Wasson's is presumably more faithful to María's point of view, insofar as he was present and alert to every nuance of her performance. In that case, her description calls to mind the "latter rain" prophecy that Spirit will someday pour down upon the flesh, producing prophecies, visions, and dreams. It could even be argued that Wasson's *Life* article fulfilled or helped prepare for the fulfillment of this prophecy by introducing entheogenic mushrooms to the Western world. Certainly, it was a factor in launching the so-called psychedelic movement of the early 1960s—even Timothy Leary's first "trip" was on mushrooms in Mexico (Leary 1995, 11–34)—which resulted in an estimated ten million people using entheogens by 1977 in the United States alone (Grinspoon and Bakalar 1979, 79). Alexander Shulgin, who once shared a room with Wasson for a week at an Esalen conference where both were featured speakers, came away with the opinion that

he thought his most lasting contribution was allowing that article in *Life* to appear, and to appear in the form that it took. It was, for many devout and curious readers of the magazine, their first exposure to the concept of a union between nature and God. And that

there are many different ways to be in the presence of God. And that a lowly mushroom, like ordinary bread and wine, can allow, can insist that you identify with and acknowledge the divine. (Shulgin 1990, 228)

What then shall we make of Wasson's statements, which also appear in *The Wondrous Mushroom*, that today we cannot accept that entheogens speak "with the voice of God" and that "the awe and reverence that these plants once evoked" in traditional cultures such as that of the Mazatecs are "gone for good" (Wasson 1980, xxiii)? I believe that he meant this ironically—that such statements are perhaps a thinly veiled provocation. Wasson once made a similar comment to me when I visited him in his home near the end of his life, in 1985. We had been talking about U.S. government prohibitions that ban the possession and use of the mushroom and other entheogens. Wasson said that he thought they would nonetheless return to popularity in ten to thirty years. His explanation for the temporary setback was that "people don't want to be awed these days" (Riedlinger 1990, 214). He certainly did not impress me as believing that the spiritual potential of the mushroom and other entheogens is gone for good. In fact, he elsewhere states without qualification that the "advantage of the mushroom is that it puts many, if not everyone, within reach" of having mystical experiences. "It permits you to see, more clearly than our perishing mortal eye can see, vistas beyond the horizons of this life, to travel backwards and forwards in time, to enter other planes of existence, even (as the Indians say) to know God" (Wasson, Ruck, and Hofmann 1978, 19). His opinion of what this portends for Christian worship is likewise unequivocal.

. . . God's flesh! How those words echo down the centuries of religious experience! (In the Book of Common Prayer, in the Prayer of Humble Access, the faithful are summoned to eat "the flesh of thy dear son Jesus Christ.") The Christian doctrine of Transubstantiation is a hard saying, calling for great faith. . . . The Mexican Indian

with his *teonanácatl* has no need for Transubstantiation because his mushroom speaks for itself. By comparison with the mushroom, the Element in the [formalized, post-Pentecostal] Christian agape seems pallid. The mushroom holds the key to a mystical union with God, whereas only rare souls can attain similar ecstasy and divine communion by intensive contemplation of the miracle of the Mass. (Wasson and Wasson 1957, 319)

That Wasson regarded the mushrooms to be an authentic such key was abundantly clear to María Sabina. She stated that he and his friends were the first to come seeking the mushrooms not “because they suffered from any illness. Their reason was that they came to find God. Before Wasson nobody took the mushrooms only to find God” (Estrada 1981, 73). What he and Richardson experienced was therefore not the same as it was and had been for their Indian hosts, and what they took away with them had different implications for the Western world. In that sense it is true, as Wasson noted, that the “Old Order does not mix with the New. The wisdom of the *Sabia* [Wise Ones], genuine though it was, has nothing to give to the world of tomorrow” (Wasson 1980, 223). In other words, it cannot be appropriated whole; it cannot be transplanted from one culture to another and retain its indigenous purity. As Paul advised the early Christians, there are many different voices in the world that are meaningful unto themselves, but if I do not understand them, “I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me” (1 Corinthians 14:10–11). Often it is possible, however, for different cultures to assimilate “translations” of each other’s wisdom. When this occurs they do not mix in the sense that an Old Order might be subsumed to a New one or vice versa. Rather, both evolve into something entirely different, a syncretic transformation.

Wasson knew that the *velada* he attended on the evening of June 29–30, 1955, was quite different from what it must have been before the conquest. He knew that many centuries ago the Mazatec Indians combined what was to them a new religion, Christianity, with their

ancient pagan practices, producing a syncretic hybrid focused on physical healing. Is it not feasible that modern Christianity could likewise adopt certain elements of this indigenous hybrid, producing an experiential form of Christian worship in the Pentecostal mode that uses entheogens for calling down the Spirit?

REFERENCES

- Allen, J. "Chasing the Ghost of María Sabina." *Psychedelic Illuminations* no. 6 (1994).
- Anderson, R. M. *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1992.
- Cox, H. *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1995.
- Estrada, Á. *María Sabina: Her Life and Chants*. Translation and commentary by Henry Munn. Santa Barbara, Calif.: Ross-Erikson, 1981.
- Grinspoon, L., and J. B. Bakalar. *Psychedelic Drugs Reconsidered*. New York: Basic Books, 1979.
- Halifax, J. *Shamanic Voices: A Survey of Visionary Narratives*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979.
- Leary, T. *High Priest*. Berkeley, Calif.: Ronin Press, 1995.
- Pike, E., and F. Cowan. "Mushroom Ritual vs. Christianity." *Practical Anthropology* 6 (4): (1959) 145–50.
- Richardson, A. B. "Recollections of R. Gordon Wasson's 'Friend and Photographer.'" In *The Sacred Mushroom Seeker: Essays for R. Gordon Wasson*. Edited by T. J. Riedlinger. Portland, Ore.: Dioscorides Press, 1990. All unattributed facts in "Sacred Mushroom Pentecost" are based on information from this book.
- Riedlinger, T. J., ed. *The Sacred Mushroom Seeker: Essays for R. Gordon Wasson*. Portland, Ore.: Dioscorides Press, 1990.
- Schultes, R. E. "The Identification of Teonanacatl, a Narcotic Basidiomycete of the Aztecs." *Botanical Museum Leaflets*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University 7 (3) (1939): 37–54.
- Shulgin, A. "Celebrating Gordon Wasson." In *The Sacred Mushroom Seeker: Essays for R. Gordon Wasson*. Edited by T. J. Riedlinger. Portland, Ore.: Dioscorides Press, 1990.
- Wasson, R. G. "Seeking the Magic Mushroom." *Life*, May 17, 1957, 100–20.

- . "The Hallucinogenic Mushrooms of Mexico: An Adventure in Ethnomycological Exploration." *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences, Series II* 21 (4) (1959): 325–39.
- . *The Wondrous Mushroom: Mycolatry in Mesoamerica*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980.
- . "Gordon Wasson's Account of His Childhood." In *The Sacred Mushroom Seeker: Essays for R. Gordon Wasson*. Edited by J. Riedlinger. Portland, Ore.: Dioscorides Press, 1990.
- Wasson, R. G., C. A. P. Ruck, and A. Hofmann. *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.
- Wasson, V. P., and R. G. Wasson. *Mushrooms, Russia and History*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1957.

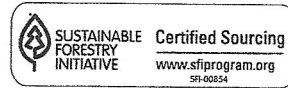
ENTHEOGENS *and the* FUTURE *of* RELIGION

EDITED BY ROBERT FORTE



Park Street Press
Rochester, Vermont • Toronto, Canada

Park Street Press
One Park Street
Rochester, Vermont 05767
www.ParkStPress.com



Text stock is SFI certified

Park Street Press is a division of Inner Traditions International

Copyright © 1997, 2012 by the Council on Spiritual Practices

Originally published in 1997 by the Council on Spiritual Practices

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Note to the Reader: The information provided in this book is for educational, historical, and cultural interest only and should not be construed as advocacy for the use or ingestion of entheogens. Neither the author nor the publisher assumes any responsibility for physical, psychological, or social consequences resulting from the ingestion of these substances or their derivatives.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Entheogens and the future of religion / edited by Robert Forte.

p. cm.

Summary: "A study of the importance of psychedelic plants and drugs in religion and society"—Provided by publisher.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-59477-438-6 (pbk.) ISBN 978-1-59477-797-4 (e-book)

1. Hallucinogenic drugs and religious experience. 2. Psychology and religion. 3. Psychotropic drugs. 4. Spiritual life. I. Forte, Robert, 1956–
BL65.D7E58 2012

2011039799

Printed and bound in the United States by Lake Book Manufacturing, Inc.

The text stock is SFI certified. The Sustainable Forestry Initiative® program promotes sustainable forest management.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Text design and layout by Virginia Scott Bowman

This book was typeset in Garamond Premier Pro with Perpetua as the display typeface

"Isa and the Doubters," from *Tales of the Dervishes*, used by permission. Copyright © 1967 by Dutton Signet, division of Penguin Books USA Inc.

"When the Waters Were Changed," from *Tales of the Dervishes*, used by permission.

Copyright © 1967 by Dutton Signet, division of Penguin Books USA Inc.

"The Worm's Waking," from *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks, used by permission. Copyright © 1995 HarperSanFrancisco.