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Psychedelic Christianity: From evangelical hippies and Roman Catholic intellectuals in the sixties to clergy in a Johns Hopkins clinical trial

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ABSTRACT

As the wider culture is experiencing what some call a “psychedelic renaissance,” various Christian voices are beginning to comment on this cultural moment in the press and social media. Some are curious, even open minded, about the developments; others are expressing concern about what they see as the inauthenticity and danger of psychedelics as a spiritual practice. In the academic literature, most work on the intersection of Christianity and psychedelic medicine treat either the historical question of psychedelics’ possible role in the foundations of the religion or on the practical question of “should we or shouldn’t we?” Absent, however, is discussion of how a Christian psychedelic practice might look. This article seeks to address this shortfall by showcasing three extant examples of what we term “psychedelic Christianity”: 1) hippies who converted to Christianity while still using psychedelic substances during the “Jesus movement”; 2) mid-twentieth-century Catholic intellectuals experimenting with the compounds for spiritual and therapeutic reasons; and 3) contemporary clergy who participated in the Johns Hopkins and NYU study with psychedelics and religious professionals. In all of this, we give special attention to the healing experienced by these Christians who undertook a psychedelic Christianity in their recourse to these substances.

KEYWORDS

Christianity, psychedelic, LSD, Clare Boothe Luce, John Courtney Murray, Jesus movement, psilocybin, healing

INTRODUCTION

With the continuing development of the “psychedelic renaissance” of research on the therapeutic and spiritual value of psychedelic compounds and particularly with the appearance of Michael Pollan’s *New York Times* bestseller on psychedelics (2018), a growing literature has emerged responding to this cultural moment from a Christian point of view. Most of these reside in the popular sphere—on Christian organizational or influencer websites and in religiously-oriented periodicals—where voices well-known and unknown alike weigh in on the question, “to take or not to take?”: pro (Graves, 2023; Lorenz, 2022), con (Greenfield, 2022a, 2022b; Steele, 2018), or somewhere in between. In one of the more complicated cases, Rod Dreher initially wrote a relatively supportive piece (2018a) but, the next day, qualified his initial post, expressing “concerns” (2018b). Then, five years later, he sounded a full alarm on DMT (2023).

Academic work on psychedelics and religion/spirituality, both before and since the advent of the renaissance, has generally focused on whether these substances might facilitate a “perennial” religiosity or universally accessible mysticism. Foundational in popularizing this approach is Aldous Huxley (1954), which was famously attacked by R. C. Zaehner (1954, 310–321; 1957). Also influential in this vein is Walter Pahnke’s celebrated “Good Friday Experiment,” discussed in his Harvard Ph.D. dissertation under Timothy Leary (1963).

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Pahnke's dissertation explicitly presupposed the contention of W. T. Stace (1960) that mystical experiences share essential features not restricted to particular religions or cultures. On this basis, it devised a "phenomenological typology" to determine whether psychedelic states could be deemed "mystical," regardless of whether they counted as "religious" (Pahnke, 1963, xi). Zaehner, in turn, criticized Pahnke's presupposition of this distinction (1972).

Interestingly, as Rick Doblin pointed out in his long-term follow-up to the Good Friday Experiment, "Pahnke hypothesized that psychedelic drugs, in this case psilocybin, could facilitate a 'mystical' experience in religiously inclined volunteers who took the drug in a religious setting [...] Pahnke believed the most conducive environment for his experiment would be a community of believers participating in a familiar religious ceremony designed to elicit religious feelings" (1991, 2–3). So, although the results anticipated were mystical and not necessarily religious, the idea was to test whether an explicitly religious mindset and environment combined with a psychedelic substance could render those not-necessarily-religious results more likely. And, indeed, one participant in Doblin's follow-up explicitly noted that his psilocybin experience in Pahnke's study was not religious:

I don't think Christ or other religious images that I can remember came into it. That's the only reason I didn't think it was religious. [...] I was convinced after the experiment that I had had quite an experience but that it was really into my psychological depths, and it was not a religious experience. [...] I didn't think I had experienced a God that was particularly outside of me. What I experienced was a God that was inside of me. And I think that ... [sic, Doblin's elision] made me say, I don't think this is religious" (Doblin, 1991, 19–20).

The issue of just what constitutes "religious," as opposed to "mystical," if indeed either of these is stable as a term or as a concept, remains unsettled in religious studies. Our purpose here is not to register a conclusion with respect to this debate but to represent the literature studying psychedelics in relation to what it takes to be non-religiously specific mystical experience. The recent psychedelic renaissance has also included work utilizing this perennialist approach, most notably, that resulting in Griffiths, Richards, McCann, and Jesse (2006) and Griffiths, Richards, Johnson, McCann, and Jesse (2008).

Some work investigating the relation of psychedelic drugs to Christianity specifically is also available. Especially influential in this regard is Brian Muraresku's defense and development of Carl Ruck's hypothesis that a psychedelic brew was decisive in the Eleusinian mysteries and spawned, as Muraresku puts it, a psychedelic, "paleo-Christian" "religion with no name" elided by the later institutional Christianity (2021). And our own contributions have sought to demonstrate that the therapeutic and spiritual outcomes suggested by the literature of the psychedelic renaissance are at least potentially compatible with the faith and practice of traditional Christianity (Kyles, 2021; McCarthy, 2023; McKinless & Davis, 2023).

In all this, however, very little has been said about how a traditional Christian mindset might shape the psychedelic experience and, conversely, how the latter might interact with a traditional Christian faith and practice. It is this subject we intend to address in brief here. Our method will be to present elements from the psychedelic trips of some practicing Christians in twentieth and twenty-first century United States, with an eye to demonstrating what a contemporary psychedelic Christianity might entail. In particular, we aim to show how such an orientation relates to healing. Much work can be done in this space and we do not pretend to offer anything like an exhaustive catalog of recorded Christian psychedelic experience. We present only a snapshot of three groups of Christians in U.S. history: psychedelic hippies who converted to Christianity during the "Jesus movement" of the 1960s and 70s, intellectual Catholics who were experimenting with LSD in the 60s to augment or understand their existing faith and/or evolving spirituality, and Christian clergy who participated in a recent psychedelic study with religious professionals.

Moreover, not all the "psychedelic Christians" we have chosen were durably so: Some of them gave up their psychedelia in pursuit of Christianity and some of them conversely relinquished their Christianity as they experimented with psychedelics and other spiritual modalities. Nevertheless, in the transition from one to the other way of being as well as in the experience of those who maintained a psychedelic Christianity for a longer period, a reciprocal interaction between the psychedelic experience and Christian faith is on display. This reciprocal interaction, where the psychedelic experience and the Christian faith of the experiencer inform, illuminate, and/or shape each other, we term "psychedelic Christianity." This is neither identical to nor incompatible with a definition provided by Jack Call: "A psychedelic Christian is just a Christian who acknowledges that psychedelic experience is a way of learning how to be in the right relationship to God" (2017, 27). While we regard Call's definition as indicating an important moral dimension to our question, we here employ the term more broadly to capture the process or journey involved in the interaction between psychedelic use and Christian faith and practice. The examples we cite provide hints for answers to the question of what the phenomenon in the ongoing psychedelic renaissance might involve, and how that relates to the healing of people who practice it. We now turn to the first Christian group in our inquiry.

PSYCHEDELIC EVANGELICALS IN THE SIXTIES

In studying the impact of the Jesus movement on contemporary American Protestantism, Larry Eskridge details the evangelical conversions of several key figures in the hippie scene of the Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco. All these figures were users of psychedelic and other drugs prior to their conversion. While most of them eventually abandoned drugs, usually at least in part because of pressure from other evangelicals, this was oftentimes a gradual retirement,



and, in the intervening time, many of them reflected on the relationship between their drug use and their evolving Christian spirituality. It is therefore possible to see such orientation as an intentionally psychedelic Christianity.

In particular, Eskridge highlights the conversion of Warren “Ted” Wise. Ted’s wife, Elizabeth “Liz,” who had become a Christian as a child, started attending a Baptist church in Mill Valley, CA, often still coming down from LSD she had taken the previous night. Before long, Ted began accompanying her to the services, read the New Testament, and embraced Christianity. Eskridge narrates a subsequent experience on LSD:

he and Liz took a healthy hit of LSD and traveled to Berkeley to visit an old friend, Danny Sands. At the party, they found a house full of pot-smoking people plundering a major score Sands had just brought north from Mexico. Isolated in the midst of the mellow, marijuana-imbibing crowd, Wise began announcing that “Jesus is my Lord,” much to his fellow partiers’ discomfort and befuddlement. Leaving the party, Wise, who had driven before while on LSD, experienced a nightmare of a ride back across the Bay Bridge. “It seemed like the bridge was going straight up,” Wise remembered years later. Even more disconcerting, he claimed, “it seemed like I was out of the car, somewhere else, [but] conscious of myself still driving the car.” Hearing demonic voices urging him to “Flee!” he prayed and was rationalizing his past behavior when he claimed he heard an audible angelic voice telling him that excuse-making was inappropriate when speaking to God: His best option would be to “Shut up!” Eventually, the Wises returned home, and Ted believed that God had rescued him—and had audibly ordered him to attend church the next morning. [Eskridge, 2013, 15]

As this passage indicates, Wise had already converted intellectually and emotionally prior to his drive “straight up” the Bay Bridge on LSD. His rationale for having consulted the New Testament in the process of that conversion was that “I didn’t want to be hypocritical about it; I was always putting it down but [had] never actually read it” (Eskridge, 2013, 14). Upon correcting this perceived hypocrisy, he embraced his takeaway “that we are saved in the midst of our sins” (Eskridge, 2013, 15) and wanted to acknowledge the resulting faith publicly. This apparently motivated his proclamations at the party, but the Bay Bridge experience further inspired him to attend church the following morning, where he declared his newfound belief. The point, for the purposes of this analysis, is that Wise believed God “had audibly ordered him,” via his LSD experience, to make the Sunday appearance and that this LSD-assisted order happened after he had already been moved to convert due to reading the New Testament. Albeit incipient in this passage, Wise’s was thus a psychedelic Christianity, wherein psychedelic experience shaped Christian faith and *vice versa*.

The Wises did sometimes refrain from taking LSD and other drugs and, in an interview with Eskridge for the Jesus movement study, Ted noted the psychological risk of LSD in relation to its physiological safety, commenting, “It’s not the drug that’s dangerous; it’s the experience” (Eskridge, 2010a, 1:11:52). In general, however, the couple continued their use

of cannabis and psychedelics after their conversion. Concerning the former, Eskridge explains,

There was still a fair amount of drug use going on, and marijuana was routinely trotted out down at the Page Street Mission [a Haight-Ashbury storefront ministry started by Wise, Jim Doop, et al., also known as the “Living Room” in the press]. One of the basic factors was that a social joint was an aid to evangelism: “It gave me the opportunity to share the Word,” Jim Doop later stated. Indeed, an unwillingness to smoke grass often proved detrimental to their witnessing efforts in those early days, as wary hippies were prone to suspect that anyone who would not partake in the counterculture’s primary social lubricant was “a narc.” [...] As Jim Doop wrote years later, “They never considered that there was anything wrong with smoking (pot)” in and of itself. [Eskridge, 2013, 45]

In the aforementioned 2010 interview, Wise and Eskridge discussed the matter:

Wise: [...] we were still smoking pot, taking LSD, and everything else. And he [Jon MacDonald, the Wises’ pastor] had made the assumption that we weren’t doing anything—but he had never asked; we just told him. Nobody was hiding it.

Eskridge: What about the LSD? When did you finally cashier that?

Wise: Cashier LSD? Let’s see...mmm...mmm...

[pause]

Well, I’d probably still take some mushrooms if I had some.

[Both laugh.]

Yeah, I think I would. It’s different from LSD. [Eskridge, 2010b, 48:01ff.]

Eskridge interrupts this last statement with a question about the health benefits of psychedelic compounds and, after they discuss them, he moves onto another subject so Wise never elaborates on how his understanding of the difference between psilocybin and LSD leads him to be open more especially to the former.

However, in the discussion of health benefits, Eskridge refers to the potential benefit of psychedelics for rheumatoid arthritis, an application about which there is some promise (see Szabo, 2015; Thompson & Szabo, 2020; Flanagan & Nichols, 2018 for discussions of psychedelics in relation to this and other autoimmune and inflammatory conditions), though the still-sparse literature was even sparser at the time of the interview. Wise responded to Eskridge’s reference to this medical application by adducing another use case: “They’re doing a study with cancer patients [...] using [psilocybin] for the fear of death.” Wise here refers to the study described in Grob et al. (2011), but research on the matter has continued in other studies, resulting in Ross et al. (2016) and Griffiths et al. (2016), among others. Concerning the results of the Grob study, Wise says,

The evidence that presented itself was that it was palatably observable to [the] control group, cancer doctors, patients,



everybody knew, could see that the results were positive. They didn't have to wait for anything. It was visible, perceptible. You know, the people who were moaning stopped moaning, or anxious and frightened became calm. And I have no idea why. I've taken lots of the things and I would say that they might have found the switch, or something inside for producing that endorphin or something; I don't know. But it would be possible because it's something that *yogis* claim and everyone's always noted the similarities between deep meditation and experiences with indole hallucinations. [Eskridge, 2010b, 49:33ff.]

These words are difficult to interpret because Wise seems to be coming to his conclusions as he states them. He is clear that he does not know how the psychological healing available through, in this case, psilocybin happens, but he also makes it clear that the cancer study results are within the range of what he might expect, given what he knows about psychedelics and spiritual practice. Something in having “taken lots of the things” allows him to believe that psychedelics can help people “find the switch” to the kind of healing being demonstrated in the studies of the psychedelic renaissance, even if such results had not occasioned in his own history with the compounds.

Moreover, some indication of how Wise has thought about the impact of psychedelics on Christian faith and practice is available in what he says about his pre-conversion usage, and this may, in turn, indicate something about their healing role in that context. Eskridge summarizes, “on one of his frequent LSD trips, [Wise] began to be troubled by insights into his own character or, more precisely, his lack thereof. He became increasingly convinced that, at bottom, Ted Wise was a self-centered liar, cheat, and thief; as he put it: ‘I went into the palace looking for the prince on the throne but discovered only the rat in the basement’” (Eskridge, 2013, 14). In the early days of their friendship, Wise shared this story and insight with Doop while they were smoking cannabis and discussing their experience with LSD. Doop laid back, enveloped in the effects of the cannabis, and contemplated Wise's point about “the Rat that lives in the cellar of our soul.” Doop later recalled, “I finally got it. I was the rat. And it was my soul that was repenting. I thought to myself, ‘Maybe there is a God.’ [...] I understood in an instant that God is my Father and I am His child” (Eskridge, 2013, 18–19).

Theologically, several points could be made here. Both altered-state-enhanced moments—Wise's realization of his being a rat in the basement and the parallel realization it inspired in Doop—have an interesting point of connection in some of Karl Rahner's comments on the phenomenon of repentance. While the latter's Roman Catholic perspective might not emphasize repentance as much, or imagine it in the same terms, as the evangelical outlook influencing Wise and his friends, Rahner spoke of repentance's “free decision as an inner distress and condemnation” in a way that overlaps with their experience. As he put it in a discussion on *concupiscentia*, “One's own morally wrong decision can only be experienced as inner distress and condemnation when it does not succeed in removing from one every

resistance offered to it by what is given prior to freedom (by the ‘nature’)” (1963, 366, n. 20). In this dense analysis, Rahner says theologians usually grant that “nature” can resist the human desire to do good, “as when the ‘flesh’ refuses to follow the willingness of the ‘spirit,’” but he adds that it can also resist the human desire to do ill, as “when a man blushes in the act of lying” (1963, 366) or when the bravery of a “rogue” is interrupted by a “trembling” that “spontaneously reacts against baseness” (1963, 366, n. 18). In the latter sort of situation, he says in the initial quote above, the performance of a wrongful act will only sting the actor's conscience if the protestations of “nature” remain. One plausible way of construing the relationship between the Christianity of Wise and his friends on the one hand and their use of psychedelic drugs on the other is that the latter sometimes functioned as catalysts for repentance by amplifying nature's resistance to wrong decisions and ways of being, i.e. the “rat in the basement.” Specifically, psychedelics facilitated “blushes” at Wise's and Doop's realizations of being a “rat in the basement” rather than a “prince on the throne” and facilitated “trembling” at Wise's “nightmare of a ride back across the Bay Bridge [...] ‘going straight up’” and “Hearing demonic voices urging him to ‘Flee!’” According to this picture, these instances of nature's resistance would then permit, as Rahner says, the “morally wrong decision [to] be experienced as inner distress and condemnation,” to wit, repentance.

Similarly, with reference to the therapeutic ecclesiology of Christianity's Orthodox stream, we might think of Wise's and Doop's encounters with “nature's resistance” as occasions of healing. As Orthodox theologian Alkiviadis Calivas puts the ecclesiology, “salvation is viewed essentially as healing and therapy [...] Hence, the church is not a court in which men are tried, brought to justice, and punished but a hospital that offers healing inasmuch as she ‘has in her custody the riches of the work of redemption’” (Calivas, 2006, 127–8; the embedded citation is from Orthodox theologian Nikos Matsoukas). On this account, contrary to a rigidly secular perspective, “Health is more than a robust body and an agile mind. It is liberation from everything that fragments and damages the human person and separates us from the Author of life” (Calivas, 2006, 139). Consequently, the salvation that constitutes therapeutic healing is intimately related to a “willingness to enter into the mystery of repentance, the ongoing conversion of the heart, that leads to salvation” (Calivas, 2006, 139), as seen in Wise's and Doop's “rat in the basement” conversions. Thus, the wholeness they obtained in those moments and in their post-conversion lives is a kind of healing brought about by the “willingness to enter into the mystery of repentance” through what they experienced on psychotropic compounds.

Another indication, not of how Wise specifically envisioned the relation between psychedelics and Christian faith and practice but of how it obtained in his social life, comes from a group outing to Lands End park in San Francisco, where he and others took LSD to celebrate the Christian conversion of their friend, Stefano. Eskridge cites Rick Sacks' recollection:



I [was] in...this little hole in the side of the cliff just so stoned I couldn't talk. And I'm watching God spinning clouds around and imagining seeing His finger reaching down and touching the clouds and giving 'em a swirl, and God's displaying His power and majesty for me....All of a sudden Stefano gets up and he's about to jump off this cliff—and I couldn't talk. I remember praying and saying "God, I realize that I'm doing something that's preventing me from saving this guy's life and don't know what to do—help him." And Ted started talking to him and Ted talked him through it and Stefano sat down. And that was my last time taking LSD. It was then that I realized I couldn't do what God was calling me to do...because of this thing I thought I was doing to get closer to God...I was here as an ambassador with a job to do. [Eskridge, 2013, 46]

Many commentators would point out the importance of "setting" in relation to the wisdom of being under the influence of psychedelics in any location that would permit such a jump in the first place. This term, which denotes the environment in which one takes a psychedelic or other psychotropic drug, was first discussed in print by Timothy Leary (see, e.g., T. Leary and R. Alpert [1992, 11]), though Michael Pollan (2018, 151 and 190) notes that the concept and its importance were first articulated by Humphrey Osmond and Abram Hoffer in the 1950s. Neuropsychopharmacologist David Nutt explains its relevance for mishaps like Stefano's: "Obviously there is a greater chance of having an accident if a lot of the normal 'housekeeping' functions in the brain aren't operating, although the risk of this is often overstated" (2012, 254). Thus, as he points out, "Undertaking normal activities like driving"—or, we might add, being near the edge of a cliff—"is a very bad idea if you've taken LSD" (2012, 255).

But regarding the religiosity expressed in the passage, Sacks speaks of an encounter with God on the substance: "I'm watching God spinning clouds around and imagining seeing His finger reaching down and touching the clouds and giving 'em a swirl, and God's displaying His power and majesty for me." Like so many other hippies turned evangelical protestants, Sacks here goes on to say he abandoned "this thing I thought I was doing to get closer to God" in favor of being "an ambassador with a job to do." Nevertheless, for a brief stretch, he understood his use of psychedelic drugs to augment rather than distract from his fledgling Christian faith, specifically in increasing his proximity and relationality to God via the experience.

PSYCHEDELIC ROMAN CATHOLIC INTELLECTUALS IN THE SIXTIES

Five years before Wise was building hippie Christian community with an evolving relationship to drugs, Gerald Heard, a well-known former BBC science commentator and popular author who had expatriated to the United States with Aldous Huxley (see Stevens [1987, 36ff.] on their friendship), was introducing intellectuals to LSD, several of them Roman Catholic (see Robb [1985] on Huxley's

influence in the United States). As Don Lattin succinctly puts it, "Heard, who lived the last half of his life in Southern California, turned on *Time* publisher, Henry Luce, and his wife, Clare Boothe Luce, Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray and William Mullendore, the chairman of the board of Southern California Edison. He also inspired Dr. Oscar Janiger, a Los Angeles psychiatrist, who turned on Cary Grant, James Coburn, and Jack Nicholson" (2012, 191).

Heard, together with Los Angeles psychiatrist Sidney Cohen—the actual supplier of the drug (Siff, 2008, 129; Novak, 1977, 95)—did indeed "turn on" Fr. Murray and the Luces. The former, in turn, introduced a younger Jesuit, Don Hanlon Johnson, to the compound. Johnson recalls it thus:

I first heard of LSD in 1963 from an older Jesuit political scientist and theologian, John Courtney [sic] Murray. He was a hero for many of us younger Jesuits, having been condemned by Pope Plus XII for having written a series of scholarly articles in a theological journal in 1950 arguing that a democratic society was a better environment for the truly adult practice of religion than a monarchy or a totalitarian regime. In 1963, when he was in his late sixties, he had been publicly rehabilitated at the opening of the second Vatican Council by Pope John XXIII who embraced Murray's spiritual affirmation of democratic institutions.

In between sessions of that Council, Murray had come to the Jesuit house in Los Angeles, where I was living, to take LSD in an experiment sponsored by The Fund for the Republic, a think-tank under the direction of Robert Hutchins, founder of the Great Books Program at the University of Chicago. He stayed in his room with a tape recorder for three days and left without saying a word to anyone. [Johnson, 1994, 71–2]

And, Johnson tells us, other Jesuits in Los Angeles were experimenting with the drug as well (1994, 72).

Johnson would go on to have his own trip, complete with Christian and other spiritual elements, as he says, "the kinds of things that have been well, and usually tediously, documented: heaven and hell, the universe in a grain of sand, the unity of inner and outer" (1994, 72) as well as "visions of angels and demons fighting through [my] costal gates, the angels winning, and preparing my bronchioles for an orgasmic [sic] inspiration of the Holy Spirit" (1994, 73). With the latter phrase, Johnson encapsulates the erotic development in his inaugural experience with the drug. "Up until the day I entered the Jesuits," he tells us, "I had intense sexual impulses even though I never dared to have intercourse. Within a few weeks of engaging in Ignatius's spiritual practices, I stopped having those impulses outside of meditation and penances, and didn't experience any until ten years later when I first smoked marijuana" (1994, 59).

And now, he says, during his LSD trip,

I found myself only beginning a slight movement of my hips to get up out of my chair, and in that movement I was overwhelmed by layers upon layers of experiences ranging from the bare feeling of muscle and bone, memories of early childhood toilet training, to scenes from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, to the transcendental logic of Immanuel Kant, to the bare peace (or terror or love) devoid of content, spoken of by



Ignatius. Each of those images was accompanied by feelings whose intensities were magnified to such an extent that I could not mistake what they were: unspeakable terror, lush sexual desire, joy beyond my imaginings. The images, ideas, and feeling were not separated but were instead deeply embedded in that simple hip rotation. [1994, 72]

Johnson summarizes the experience: “It brought about a major change in my sense of *body* and *spirit*” (1994, 72; emphasis original).

That major change would precipitate a further change in religious direction, amounting to the reverse of the trajectory Wise and his friends traced. Unlike the latter, who gradually pivoted from many psychotropic drugs after their conversion to Christianity, Johnson would follow his drug-infused sexual awakening out from his strict adherence to Roman Catholicism onto a path of additional drug experiences and a wide array of body-centric spiritual practices. Jeffrey Kripal explains,

As he put it to me years later, until Murray’s introduction, he simply had experienced “no temptation” at all, so effectively repressed were his sexual energies by the Ignatian exercises. Then he took the LSD with a Jesuit friend and another acquaintance during a retreat, came home with a huge erection, and began to witness psychedelic explosions and stars in his head. That was the beginning of the end of his celibacy. [2007, 226]

Nevertheless, as Johnson tells us in the quotes above, this erotic trip also had him encountering heaven and hell as well as angels beating demons in the race to bust through his ribs so they could prepare his lungs to breath in the Holy Spirit. Clearly, Johnson’s Christianity shaped the experience, and even though his religious movement was away from rather than toward or deeper into his erstwhile faith, the experience with LSD certainly shaped his Christianity.

Besides Fr. Murray, the other Catholics on the list of Heard’s LSD-converts were Henry and Clare Boothe Luce, who knew Fr. Murray and between whom he intermediated during a rocky period in their marriage (Siff, 2008, 129). A conversation between Clare and Heard suggests that the latter was agnostic when it came to the question of God’s existence, a fact she said troubled Fr. Murray (Heard, 1960b, 2). Nevertheless, Clare’s tendency to wax theologically while under the influence of LSD matched Heard’s insistence that the chemical provides a mystical experience, an idea he and Huxley jointly introduced to the world (Novak, 1977, 109).

The active role that Clare’s faith plays in her experiences with LSD and *vice versa* comes out in her unpublished, real-time trip reports, mostly documented by Heard, though she herself and Fr. Murray each recorded one also. In her psychedelic journey from March 11, 1959, for example, she muses about what it means to be a burden to others and observes that when people imagine themselves to be committing this infraction, they often announce it: “I’m a such a burden.” Moreover, she opines that it is a burden not to love others (Heard, 1959, 14), stipulating, however, that

you must love yourself first, because if you don’t love yourself, you’re a burden to yourself. Am I lovable? Sometimes I think only to God. I suppose I’m the good Lord’s

little Ginny [Clare’s dog]. Can I say as much to him as Ginny says to me? I don’t suppose it would do any good for me to talk back to God any more than for Ginny to talk back to me. Puppy can’t talk back to me. I can’t talk back to God. Now can God talk to me? But first do I want to listen? Frankly, for the moment, no. I want to go back to the seashore and play with pebbles. But then when I want to listen, He may not be there—as when mother calls child, child doesn’t answer. Mother leaves house, child flies in. [Heard, 1959, 15]

Later in the trip, she picks up the matter again:

In an article I wrote called “Under the Fig Tree,” I described how I felt as a girl of 16—just like this. I didn’t get anywhere near God—I didn’t want to—isn’t that awful? I don’t mean I didn’t really want to—I only wanted to stay on the seashore and play with pebbles for a while before going indoors. Innocent egotism—if it’s ever innocent. Why not admire His universe? Look at that [Heard’s clarification: “pointing to a bird”]! Who wants to go indoors when you can look at that? [Heard, 1959, 21–2]

In the first of these passages of recorded speech from Clare while on LSD, she raises questions about the nature of prayer and whether she and God can meaningfully dialogue. The second then makes the point that while she may not even want to talk to God, her competing desire to enjoy God’s creation should be understandable if not equally acceptable to God. Interestingly, with the phrase “just like this,” she compares her childhood experiences outdoors—playing with pebbles on the seashore and, presumably, sitting “under the fig tree”—with her present, LSD-enhanced enjoyment of the birds outside her window. Neither in childhood nor at present did she “really” avoid conversation with God; it’s just that being outdoors, admiring “[God’s] universe” is so compelling.

One theme that runs throughout Clare’s experiences with the drug is an emphasis on the present moment and paying attention to things, which she contemplates from a Christian perspective. While listening to Bach’s *Mass in B minor* during her March 1959 trip, she reflects on the impoverished nature of recorded music relative to the live performance thereof—in her words from a later trip, “Always in [*sic*] LSD, I resent the artificial” (Heard, 1960b, 4)—and then says, “To give a thing your attention is so important” (Heard, 1959, 6–7). Subsequently, she compares her current marveling at a petunia in her garden with lying supine at the edge of a lake as a child, staring at a tadpole. Her mother told her she did not need to spend hours at it and then glossed, “But of course you do!” After ruminating on this moment, Clare procures a pen and paper, starts drawing the petunia, and says, “eternity in a flower” (Heard, 1959, 19). She calls her experience of reality under LSD “organic time, life time [*sic*], seeding and fruiting time, blood time,” “subjective time, psychological time,” “which comes close to timelessness,” as opposed to “clock time, machine [time]” (Heard, 1959, 20). In her trip from April 16, 1960, she calls the former state “this now moment, this existential self” (Heard, 1960a, 3) and in her trip from February 14,



1961, she says “if you could really seize the *now* moment, one would have the illusion of standing still—of being eternal” (Heard, 1961, 4; emphasis original).

Subtle nuances about the state emerge in the latter, St. Valentine’s Day trip, however. Early on, she says, “Funny, isn’t it? Anything you observe very attentively, and it becomes sacred to you. Then you worship what at first you had simply attended to. This is how idol worship begins” (Heard, 1961, 3). In using the phrase “idol worship” from her Christian frame of reference, Clare seems to be carving out a space for just what should be considered appropriate vs. inappropriate in this practice of paying attention to things in the “now moment.” Later, she says,

Been thinking about [the] origin of fairy tales, and [their] connection with Christianity. [Heard’s narration: “Looking at cacti in <the> garden. Describes coronation <of the> king and queen of Sagueros <i.e. Sagueros.>”] If you look long enough, things *become* real persons and you have a fairy story. This contemplation, loving contemplation, of nature is the source of fairy stories. It is animism, of course, but loving animism, playful animism. [Heard, 1961, 6; emphasis original]

Here, another nuance emerges: Looking at things long enough allows them to transform into persons living out a story akin to a fairy tale and, Clare says, this amounts to animism. From a scholarly point of view, some regard “animism” as a problematic term with limited application; see Wilkinson (2017) for a recent analysis of the problem. But Clare’s sense of it probably corresponds to the usage of Edward Burnett Taylor, the Victorian scholar who popularized the term but himself attributed it to Georg Ernst Stahl (Taylor, 1920 [1871], 425, n. 1), i.e.—in the words of Hervey C. Peoples et al.—“the belief that all ‘natural’ things, such as plants, animals, and even such phenomena as thunder, have intentionality (or a vital force) and can have influence on human lives” (2016, 266). Clare’s point, then, is that protractedly gazing at the Sagueros in her garden under the influence of LSD resulted in the transmogrification of two cacti into a King and Queen Saguaro being coronated outside her pool house. Because she specifies that such hallucinogenic personification results in “real” people, she admits that the way she embraces this experience amounts to animism, which, she appears to believe, is incompatible with Catholicism. But, she qualifies, it is a “loving animism, playful animism” and perhaps therefore less of a problem than it might otherwise be. The important point here, however, is not one concerning the orthodoxy of Clare Boothe Luce’s LSD-infused ruminations. Rather, we argue that this and the preceding passages from her trip reports demonstrate that her religious beliefs partially shaped the content of her trips and that her trips partially shaped her religious beliefs, at least during the experiences themselves. In other words, they show she practiced a psychedelic Christianity.

And this psychedelic Christianity appears to have been healing for her. As Sylvia Jukes Morris narrates in the second volume of her biography of Clare Boothe Luce,

After the election, Father Murray saw signs of melancholy reappear in Clare, and wrote Dr. Cohen for help. [...] “The suicidal impulse has not asserted itself,” Murray said, “though there has been the not unusual talk of it.”

LSD had seemed to improve Clare’s mood in the past, so with her consent he asked the doctor to travel to Phoenix, administer the drug, and return periodically until her mental health was restored. Since such visits would constitute medical treatment, Clare was prepared to pay. Cohen replied that he would certainly charge for his services. He flew to Phoenix on November 27 [1960], and after administering LSD stayed overnight.

On December 6, Clare wrote him to say that she was feeling much more able to cope. “While the melancholy lurks, it is background, *chiaroscuro*, without which the highlights have no meaning. The best part of it all is that I feel *almost* ready to accept my own face, with all its sadness and imperfections.” She said that her experiences with Gerald as invigilator, while usually “marvelous,” were “not as *corrective*” as with him [i.e. Dr. Cohen]. [Morris, 2014, 516–17; emphases original]

PSYCHEDELIC CLERGY IN A JOHNS HOPKINS CLINICAL TRIAL

As noted above, Ruck, Muraresku, and others have argued for the evidence of psychedelic use in early Christianity. And, as further outlined, the mid-twentieth century also saw extensive use of psychedelics by Christians, including cultural elites and hippies or “Jesus freaks.” But Christian psychedelic usage is not a phenomenon limited to the dustbin of recent history. As we write this, Johns Hopkins University and New York University are preparing to release the results of their religious professionals study, which gathered twenty-four religious professionals from the Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian traditions. Within Christianity, seven mainline Protestant denominations were represented, as were Roman Catholicism and the Orthodox tradition. While we have not yet seen the full report, two participants shared their session write-ups and post-study interviews with us. In these documents, the participants reflect on how their involvement in the study provided healing in their personal lives and broadened their theological understanding of love and the interconnectedness of suffering and healing.

Andrea Smith is a pastor in the United Methodist Church and serves a church she helped start in a lake community near Charlotte, North Carolina. She had never used psychedelics prior to her participation in the study, which was the expectation the researchers had of all the study participants. Her adult son had seen a news article about the study and suggested she apply. As she prepared for her participation, she “knew that there were places in my soul that needed to heal. I knew that, because of my childhood, I wrestled with self-image and not feeling like I was enough. And it’s only been since my time with Hopkins that I’ve been able to articulate probably more solidly that I’ve



felt and have had to wrestle with feeling unlovable” (Smith, 2018, 11).

In addition to the healing Rev. Smith received around childhood trauma, including a diminished self-esteem and feelings of abandonment after the early death of her mother, she came to experience what she had been taught about religious practice and belief: There is “a love that transcends all of our understanding and our consciousness and our current states of consciousness, and I think that love and that energy is present, always present, and I think it holds us together in our darkness. I think a lot of times we’re afraid of darkness, and what I learned in my journey is that darkness is beautiful and that love is still ever-present” (Smith, 2018, 6).

Roger Joslin, another study participant, is a priest in the Episcopal church, currently serving a congregation on Long Island, but at the time of his psilocybin sessions, he was serving as the founding priest of an Episcopal congregation in Bentonville, Arkansas. He was also amid a divorce and his mother had recently died. During the session he realized his marriage was over, that he “had lost her completely and the realization filled me with pain and loss and grief. I began to weep. It felt as if I wept for hours, that tears flowed from every part of my body. It felt as if I was floating in my own tears” (Joslin, 2016, 1). His grief over his marriage ending “became intertwined with the grief over my mother’s recent death, and then grief over the loss of everyone whom I had ever loved and lost. I mourned the loss of friendships. It was as if a lifetime of love and loss arrived at one moment of exquisitely painful suffering” (Joslin, 2016, 1).

Upon deeper reflection about the difficult and emotionally painful experience, Rev. Joslin began to make spiritual and theological meaning of it. “I thought of love and that even though my experience tells me that love and loss often go hand I recognize that it’s not in me to put up protective barriers that would shield me from loss—and prevent me from loving. Underlying all the pain I was feeling was also a real sense of the pervasive presence of love, shared love, universal love” (Joslin, 2016, 2).

CONCLUSION: STANDING AT THE DOORWAY

In this paper, we have showcased three kinds of psychedelic Christianity from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and their relation to healing: psychedelic Evangelicals from the “Jesus movement” of the 1960 and 70s, intellectual Catholics experimenting with LSD during the same period, and Christian clergy who participated in the recent psychedelic study with religious professionals. The aim here has been twofold: 1) to demonstrate not only that a psychedelic Christianity is possible but has both historical precedent and contemporary instantiation; and 2) to adumbrate some of what psychedelic Christianity has entailed, particularly noting the ways it facilitated healing.

There is much more work to be done in this arena that is far beyond the scope of this piece but that we hope it partly

inspires. For example, we have highlighted psychedelic Christianity and healing as it obtained in these specific cases, but further research in theology could mine these and other examples for common features to delineate a model. Alternatively, it might show how tensions between historic Christianity and the common effects of psychedelic usage (whether once or regularly) might have contributed to the reasons the above psychedelic Evangelicals ultimately abandoned their psychedelic usage and how, therefore, these tensions might be respected and/or transcended. These are just two of the many directions future work might take. Here, we have sought simply to demonstrate that there is a psychedelic Christianity to investigate in the first place.

In addition, much work remains on the pastoral front. The renewed interest in clinical and recreational use of these substances creates an opportunity to explore how Christian communities, institutions, and individuals might respond while maintaining faithfulness to the inherited tradition. A potential entry point is to thematize the implications of the psychedelic renaissance for the church’s self-understanding as a community of transformation and healing for individuals and the whole created order. This has both theological and practical dimensions. Regarding the former, Christian leaders must theologize the healing people find in the use of psychedelics, which involves reconceptualizing past Christian repudiation of indigenous use and repairing the relationships broken by that repudiation and other aspects of the church’s colonialism.

Regarding praxis, there is the matter of how non-clinical psychedelic use might relate to the existing culture and habits of Christian communities. One promising approach would incorporate these substances into retreats, utilizing the well-established practice of “time away” from the regular patterns of life to join others interested in deepening and expanding their spiritual lives. Time and resources could be committed to preparing for the experience and then making meaning of it in community, using the resources of the Christian tradition and modern psychology to facilitate ongoing healing and spiritual growth. The word “entheogen” itself signals such a possibility. In explaining his misgivings with the term, Ralph Metzner says, “it suggest[s] that the divine (*theos*) [i]s somehow being generated (*gen*) in these states, with these substances” (Metzner, 2018, 59). If, therefore, one of the primary intents of using psychedelics as entheogens is to have an encounter with the divine, somehow conceived, then Christianity has a wealth of existing spiritual practices, rituals, story, and communities of caring to support Christians in this work.

The conversation is only beginning within Christianity about how psychedelic healing and spiritual growth and development may or may not be integrated into Christian communities of faith and practice. The quantitative and qualitative reports of the religious professionals study and other emerging literature will spark important conversations among clergy, academics, lay people, and the general public about the role of religion in psychedelic experiences and the role of psychedelic experiences in the life of religious people.



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