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## COMMENTARY



# Psychedelic Christianity: Commentary and reply Commentaries on: McCarthy & Priest (2024). Psychedelic Christianity: From Evangelical hippies and Roman Catholic intellectuals in the sixties to clergy in a Johns Hopkins clinical trial

MICHAEL J. WINKELMAN<sup>1\*</sup> , G. WILLIAM BARNARD<sup>2</sup>,  
MARC G. BLAINEY<sup>3</sup>, JERRY B. BROWN<sup>4</sup>,  
THOMAS B. ROBERTS<sup>5</sup>, JOSEPH LORENZ<sup>6</sup>,  
JAIME CLARK-SOLES<sup>7</sup>, WILLIAM A. RICHARDS<sup>8,9</sup>,  
HARRY T. HUNT<sup>10</sup>, TIMOTHY R. GABRIELLI<sup>11</sup>,  
DAVID M. ODORISIO<sup>12</sup>, TRACY J. TROTHEN<sup>13</sup>,  
BRAD STODDARD<sup>14</sup>, PAUL JONATHAN UNGERLAND II<sup>15</sup>,  
GEORGE G. LAKE<sup>16</sup>, J. KALEB GRAVES<sup>17</sup>,  
BRYAN MCCARTHY<sup>18</sup> and HUNT PRIEST<sup>19</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Human Evolution and Social Change, Arizona State University, USA

<sup>2</sup> Southern Methodist University, USA

<sup>3</sup> University Health Network, Toronto, Canada

<sup>4</sup> Florida International University, USA

<sup>5</sup> Northern Illinois University, USA

<sup>6</sup> Facultés Loyola, Paris, France

<sup>7</sup> Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, USA

<sup>8</sup> Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, USA

<sup>9</sup> Sunstone Therapies, USA

<sup>10</sup> Brock University, Ontario, Canada

<sup>11</sup> University of Dayton, Ohio, USA

<sup>12</sup> Pacifica Graduate Institute, Santa Barbara, CA, USA

<sup>13</sup> Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

<sup>14</sup> McDaniel College, Westminster, Maryland, USA

<sup>15</sup> DaLand LLC, USA

<sup>16</sup> Independent Scholar, USA

<sup>17</sup> Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, USA

<sup>18</sup> University of Pittsburgh, Greensburg, USA

<sup>19</sup> Ligare: A Christian Psychedelic Society, USA

\*Corresponding author.

E-mail: [michaeljwinkelman@gmail.com](mailto:michaeljwinkelman@gmail.com)

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COMMENTARY BY MICHAEL J. WINKELMAN<sup>1</sup>

The fledgling Psychedelic Christianity renaissance described here by McCarthy and Priest (2024) is not recovery of Christian traditions, but rather incorporations resulting from contacts with other cultures. These stimulated a neuropharmacological research tradition and cultural revolution that has emerged in a contemporary Psychedelic Renaissance now affecting Christian churches. But this current Psychedelic Christianity lacks connection with its ancient entheogenic roots, traditions which were lost or even violently eliminated early in development of the Holy Roman Empire and modern European states.

Yet psychedelic roots to Christianity were clearly there, exhibited in the European and Middle Eastern spiritual traditions with entheogenic practices that were amalgamated into early Christianity. Judaic traditions show evidence in scripture, history, and bioarcheology identifying entheogenic plants and fungi involved in Old Testament sacraments (Manna, Showbread), the Holy Ointment, and ritual incense (Nemu, 2019). Wasson, Hoffman, and Ruck (1978) identified the Greek's sacramental offering to Apollo as *Amanita muscaria*, (and later other psychoactive substances), and *A. muscaria* remained a persistent feature across diverse Greek mythological figures (Ruck, Staples, & Heinrich, 2001). Early Christianity incorporated Greek influences in Mithraism and Zoroastrian entheogenic practices (Hoffman, Ruck, & Staples, 2002), which diffused with the spread of the Roman Empire, where Mithraic rites were practiced among the Roman army and its political appointees. The Catholic Church later viciously persecuted Mithraic religions but they persisted in pagan practices and even secret sects within the Church. Entheogenic practices persisted or were re-incorporated into European Christianity, with the evidence in mushroom images in early and medieval Christian art (Brown & Brown, 2019; Rush, 2011).

But currently Psychedelic Christianity is a metaphoric orphan going hungry in the wastelands of post-modern consumer capitalism, suffering still a past trauma from the demonizing of entheogens. While past Christian entheogenic practices can inform the present and future, the first concern is "What kind of experiences do Christians want to optimize with psychedelics?" Some of the most important effects of these psychedelic "plastogens" are their tendency to amplify the influences of set and setting, cultural mindset and social context of administration. This shows that what

individuals and institutions may want –and do not want– from psychedelics is something to be molded rather than passively accepted as a simple pharmacological effect.

Psychedelics nonetheless do have intrinsic effects on experiences involving neurological mechanisms illustrated in their ability to induce specific features and forms of mystical experience in controlled clinical studies. Nonetheless, what produces these mystical experiences even in clinical settings is the ever-present context – accompaniment by therapists in a safe clinical setting with internal focus of attention inspired with spiritual music lists developed over decades. However, the widely malleable state that psychedelics produce does not guarantee mystical experiences as outcomes, even when that is one's intention.

Past psychedelic use illustrates many different psychedelic experiences can be engendered, illustrating variable adaptations for future psychedelic Christianity. Santo Daime entheogenic experiences mold a collective consciousness expressing an ethos of love, but the dark side of entheogenic religiosity has manifested repeatedly in other contexts. Rather than used to produce mystical experiences, psychedelics could involve indoctrination and social bonding rituals directed to achieve adherence to common group views and goals. Use of psychedelics in adolescent enculturation in many cultures of the pre-modern world illustrate their extremely powerful influences. This social power of psychedelics to mold people in diverse ways was the subject of a recent special issue of *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (see Roseman, Winkelman, Preller, & Fotiou, 2022).

Such powerful shapers of group socialization should give us both reasons for hope and fear. How diverse psychedelic Christianities unfold can be shaped by church hierarchies and their power to control set and setting of use. But what develops is easily beyond their ultimate control if a Psychedelic Reformation (Roberts, 2020) unfolds. Ultimately, Christians themselves determine the future of Psychedelic Christianity through their choices as they examine the psychedelic spiritual landscape and broader societal influences and how they are integrated into the diverse dynamics of the many Christian sects today. Psychedelic Christianity's future is an intellectually and culturally driven experiment in self transformation that has taken on societal and institutional implications. How might this personal, social and cultural transformation unfold?

While a cultural recovery is not essential for a re-emergent Psychedelic Christianity, knowledge of how to manage such powerful experiences is important. Growing multidisciplinary knowledge about these substances and ethnographic studies of extant indigenous origins entheogen use provide guidelines for best-practices. World-wide shamanic traditions of the pre-modern world reveal substantially similar ritual healing practices, a universality that attests to its biogenetic bases in adaptations for ritual enhancement of personal and social well-being (Winkelman, 2007; n.d.) that can also be applied to Psychedelic Christianity.

Psychedelics can contribute to enhancing Christian healing. Lessons across cultures, history, and the present reveal that healing goes beyond individuals, with potentials

<sup>1</sup>Michael J. Winkelman (M.P.H., Ph.D.) is an anthropologist retired from the School of Human Evolution and Social Change at Arizona State University. His research and publications have focused on the roles of shamanism and psychedelics in human evolution and the development of religion and spiritual healing. Winkelman served as an expert witness for the defense in the US government case versus Santo Daime. His publications include *Shamanism A Biopsychosocial Paradigm of Consciousness and Healing* (2010, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition) and *Supernatural as Natural* (2015) and co-edited books *Psychedelic Medicine* (2007), *Advances in Psychedelic Medicine* (2019), and *The Supernatural after the Neuroturn* (2019). He edited a special edition of the *Journal of Psychedelic Studies* on *Psychedelics in History and World Religions* (2019).



for healing families, generations, groups, institutions, cultures, and even societies. Such grandiose pretensions were captured by both the 1960's call to "Turn on, Tune in, and Drop Out" and the 1970's counter-call to a "War on Drugs." Both sides correctly perceived a powerful potential for massive social changes, although their evaluation of their specific nature and significance were obviously divergent.

As Psychedelic Christianity explores these powerful spiritual tools, both factors will be at play, a centrifugal force that ecclesiastical religions always fear, "the new saint in the parish" inspired by mystical experience; and a centripetal force toward community integration so clearly displayed in the psychedelic Christianity of contemporary Santo Daime. The ayahuasca-based Santo Daime illustrates a contemporary post-modern psychedelic Christianity that is a model for others to learn from (see review in this issue by [Glass-Coffin \[2024\]](#)).

Evidence of the ancient roles of entheogens in major world religions— Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and even Mormonism— (i.e., see [Winkelman 2019a](#)) indicate the default hypothesis about the role of psychedelics in Christianity and any other religion of the past ought to be "present". These worldwide entheogenic practices provide evidence that we must understand the effects of psychedelics as an ancient core of the religious impulse, that psychedelic experiences engaged the origins of religions from primordial shamanism to current principal world religions ([Winkelman, 2015; 2019b](#)). These perspectives on psychedelics have profound implications for understanding human nature, our physical as well as spiritual evolution, and the very nature of our spirituality as an intrinsic property of our nervous system and revealed by special classes of neurotransmitter analogues. Consequently, psychedelics should be part of our development of spiritual experiences. The similar cross-cultural patterns of entheogenic religions reveals a psychobiological core of human nature engaging our innate spiritual dispositions through specific enhancements of our neurochemistry.

The biological effects that produce entheogenic experiences show psychedelics were necessarily part of our past ([Arce & Winkelman, 2021](#)) and are inevitably part of our future. But how? Religion paradoxically both unites groups and provides irreconcilable differences with others, a universal intrinsic foundation of religions that simultaneously both unites groups and separates them from most of the rest of humanity. Is this the end of what religion has to offer? Or do entheogens and their intrinsic effects offer a possibility of a different future where their engagement provides a spirituality that can heal individual, collective, religious and species wounds, the divisions between us and others and nature?

Contemporary humanity has yet to embrace the possibilities offered by entheogenic spirituality or explore the possibilities of reconciliation that might be provided by these ancient and powerful spiritual tools. There is no more important time than now to listen to the call of these ancient spiritual substances. Christianity could be a world force in bringing these changes if leadership were to understand,

embrace, and implement their paradigm changing potentials in constructive ways. The following commentaries illustrate the broader context of psychedelic Christianity, with attention to its broader cultural and historical roots, its implications for healing and mystical consciousness, the theological implications of these entheogenic experiences, and the broader social issues in this unfolding psychedelic renaissance in Christianity.

## COMMENTARY BY G. WILLIAM BARNARD<sup>2</sup>

This fascinating and thoughtful article, in which we are given three vivid (and quite varied) examples of how the Christian beliefs of different individuals either impacted their psychedelic experiences, or how their psychedelic experiences impacted their Christian beliefs, sparked a multitude of responses within me.

To begin with, even though the article is primarily historical in nature, my attention kept moving towards possible future scenarios. It seems to me that we are currently occupying a time in history that is analogous, in certain respects, to a few years after Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone – a time when people were sensing that this invention would lead to dramatic social and cultural changes, even if they were not exactly sure what was about to unfold.

Up until now, the indigenous/syncretistic use of psychedelics has, understandably, been the focus of most of the theorizing about the religious use of psychedelics. But as the "psychedelic renaissance" begins to touch the wider culture, we are already seeing glimmers of what might happen when these powerful, transformative substances start to interact with more traditional forms of religious belief and practice (e.g., with more mainstream forms of Christianity). Therefore, while this article is primarily focused upon "psychedelic Christians" rather than "psychedelic Christianity," it raised a plethora of questions within me about what might unfold as the interaction between psychedelics and Christianity gradually moves from a marginal, counter-cultural position to a more established and culturally acknowledged position within our society.

The recent scientific research on the potential therapeutic qualities of psychedelics has helped to create increased cultural respectability for psychedelics, but it has had to tread very carefully when it comes to religion. On the one hand, it is clear that psychedelics can, and often do,

<sup>2</sup>G. William Barnard (Ph.D.) is a Professor of Religious Studies and Altshuler University Teaching Professor at Southern Methodist University. His primary areas of research interests are the comparative philosophy of mysticism, contemporary spirituality, and consciousness studies. His new book *Liquid Light: Ayahuasca Spirituality and the Santo Daime Tradition*, published by Columbia University Press, focuses on a syncretistic, entheogenically-based new religious movement that emerged in Brazil in the mid-twentieth century. Barnard is also the author of *Living Consciousness: The Metaphysical Vision of Henri Bergson* and *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism*.



“occasion” a multitude of powerful mystical (and visionary) experiences – and that the therapeutic efficacy of psychedelics is linked to the “revelatory” power of these mystical (and visionary) experiences. (I add the term “visionary” into the mix because I think that much more theorizing is needed on the relationship between mystical and visionary levels of experience – all too often the visionary aspects of psychedelic experience are either ignored or denigrated, or are conflated with the more unitive, mystical dimensions of the experiences.) On the other hand, the scientists and clinicians who have been studying psychedelic substances (via rigorous and carefully designed experiments) have had to bend over backwards to avoid using any religiously specific language in an attempt, as it were, to “naturalize” the mysticism that psychedelics often seems to promote (a “natural” response given the antipathy many scientists seem to have to the putative “supernatural” dimensions of mysticism.)

However, it will be intriguing to see what we discover if/when psychedelics are systematically taken within contexts beyond the (again, understandably) rather constrained research parameters of clinical research. What will happen if, instead, psychedelics begin to be introduced (ideally slowly and thoughtfully – probably beginning with retreats) into traditional Christian settings? In these overtly religious contexts, I would assume that religious/spiritual language, icons, music, and other elements of religious/spiritual life could (should?) be used consciously, with faith, hope, and love, to cultivate a “set and setting” that is as uplifting and spiritually transformative as possible. There would be no need in this context to be nervous about the use of words like “the sacred.” Instead, it would make sense to create a mindset/liturgical structure that would be as conducive as possible to a lived encounter with the Presence of Divinity within.

And, unlike the current scientific/clinical research settings which focus on individuals who are having a limited number (typically only two or three) basically solitary psychedelic experiences, the more overtly religious psychedelic encounters could conceivably take place with others, communally, and in a regular, ongoing way, as part of a disciplined contemplative practice. In these contexts, participants would (again, ideally) not see themselves as taking “drugs,” but rather, would be prompted to open themselves up to the insights and redemptive healing that can come when taking a sacrament. Participants would be immersed in a context that was consciously designed to cultivate the possibility of a transformative communion not only with the sacred Presence that was manifesting in the physical structure of the psychedelic itself, but also with the sacred Presence manifesting within themselves, and within all the others participating in this type of religiously-informed psychedelic encounter.

Nonetheless, as this article so clearly demonstrates, there is no way to predict what will emerge from the interaction between psychedelics and Christianity. Even though set and setting (along with dosage) are clearly extremely important factors in the formation of psychedelic outcomes, psychedelics have this unnerving capacity to “shake up the snow

globe” of our expectations. While there have been numerous accounts of Christians having their faith “lit up” via the powerful mystical/visionary experiences kindled by psychedelics, other Christians have been either disappointed or disturbed, at least initially, by the lack of overt Christian content of their psychedelic experiences. (Don Lattin’s [2023] recent book *God on Psychedelics* contains several examples of both.) Therefore, while it is possible to envision psychedelics offering experiences that could reinvigorate the faith of participants (and perhaps bring about a revitalization of mainstream Christian congregations), it is also possible to see how powerful psychedelic experiences could deeply challenge the previously restrictive theological assumptions of many members, causing enormous inner turmoil and the need for intensive (and hopefully skilled and compassionate) pastoral counsel.

It seems clear that when Christians begin to go on psychedelic retreats, some may come back with their faith renewed. But if so, will they remain content with their previous institutional beliefs/structures/practices? And how will these individuals be received by their community? Will there be a place for them to share what they have experienced? To ask questions? To discuss the implications for their life of faith? Will they be inspired to plunge back into the previous institutional structures with renewed enthusiasm, or will they begin to become all-too-aware of the artificiality, banality, and superficiality of their prior religious world? And if this happens, what then? Will it be possible to create and sustain a sub-community of like-minded psychedelic Christians? Or will these psychedelic Christians find other religious communities to be a better “fit”? Or, will they split off from the original community and create a new, overtly psychedelic Christian church?

And how will the non-psychedelic Christians in positions of power within the communities react to all of this potential turmoil/questioning? (Historically, mystics have often been viewed with suspicion by authority figures within various religious institutions, and given that psychedelics tend to catalyze a type of “democracy of mysticism/visionary insight,” in which individuals often feel as if they are directly and powerfully communing with a divine Source, it would be understandable that those in power in traditional Christian churches might well feel threatened by those who are not limited to second-hand sources of religious knowledge.)

And, given the all-too-frequent tendency of powerful psychedelic experiences to catalyze various degrees of grandiosity, how will Christian communities deal with the “prophets” and messianic figures that will almost inevitably arise when mystical/visionary experiences become so much more reliably “occasioned” than before? And how will these communities provide the resources and pastoral guidance that will be needed to help guide the neophyte mystics/visionaries in their midst to develop the subtle levels of spiritual discernment that are needed to ascertain which qualities of psychedelic insights/visions are to be trusted, and which need to be critically examined and/or viewed with healthy skepticism?





And finally, what sorts of theological and/or institutional changes will take place given the infusion of psychedelic inspiration? Will individuals begin to seek out and integrate the more overtly mystical/visionary/contemplative elements of the Christian tradition into their spiritual lives, and/or will psychedelic Christianity (as in the tradition that I write about in *Liquid Light: Ayahuasca Spirituality and the Santo Daime Tradition*) gradually become increasingly syncretistic and inclusive as they integrate the mystical resources from other religious traditions? Will the powerful inspirations of charismatic psychedelic Christians themselves begin to be seen as “live options” for the dynamic development of the tradition itself?

It will be fascinating to see how all these questions, and many more that remain to be asked, will be answered.

## COMMENTARY BY MARC G. BLAINEY<sup>3</sup>

It is exciting that encounters between Christianity and psychedelics are increasingly attracting public attention, as evidenced in this article from Bryan McCarthy and Hunt Priest. Although I welcome these authors’ contributions, as an anthropologist and multi-faith chaplain who has spent two decades focused on this topic, I am concerned that this article is confined to a few cases of individual Christians having neophyte psychedelic experiences while failing to address well-established traditions of entheogenic Christianity.

From the outset, McCarthy and Priest claim that in recent upsurges of interest in psychedelics among Christians and “in the academic literature”, discussions “of how a Christian psychedelic practice might look” have been “absent”. While this may *feel* true among newcomers to this subject-matter, the only “shortfall” I see is a tendency of some Westerners to overlook non-European traditions of psychedelic Christianity that have been evolving — and thoroughly documented in the scholarly record — for many years. Hence, I have long found it puzzling that so much attention is paid to pseudo-archaeological conjectures about psychedelic Christianity in the past (like that of Muraresku), while ignoring extant, living examples of entheogenic Christianity operating and accessible today. These deeply rooted formats of psychedelic Christianity can be instructive if we can learn to be humble enough to see beyond a myopic Eurocentrism to recognize developments in the postcolonial periphery.

Here I am thinking of several well-known contemporary religious movements: the globalized Brazil-based traditions

of ayahuasca Christianity like *Santo Daime* (founded in 1930, currently active in at least 13 states across the USA and 3 Canadian provinces); the centrality of Christian principles for practitioners of the Native American Church (NAC) who have sacramentally ingested peyote since the late 19th century; and the Christian elements found in the syncretistic Iboga religion of *Bwiti* that emerged in early-20th century Africa. All these traditions of Christianized entheogenic/psychedelic healing are now present in the United States, but none are mentioned in this article. Instead, the article focuses solely on psychedelic-naïve individuals’ haphazard experimentation with psychedelics which, while interesting, seems to presume a breaking of new theological ground apart from (and apparently oblivious to) well-honed Christian cultures like *Santo Daime*, NAC, and *Bwiti*.

It is no doubt pertinent for this article to highlight various instances of individuals informally exploring links between psychedelic experiences and their personal Christian theology. However, the isolated examples these authors draw upon are relatively unripe compared to the glaring omission of sophisticated, full-fledged systems of psychedelic Christianity that have been performing entheogenic rites for almost a century or even more. In addition, it might be fruitful to investigate the new trend (widely reported in the media) of disaffected Mormons who now gather regularly for entheogenic ceremonies, perhaps a rediscovery of what appears to be their own entheogenic past (see [Beckstead, Blankenagel, Noconi, & Winkelmann, 2019](#)).

Accordingly, my recommendation for the authors and readers of this article would be: before rushing headlong into presumptuously reinventing the wheel of “how a Christian psychedelic practice might look”, they instead return to the drawing board by familiarizing themselves with traditions that have already devised mature systems of psychedelic Christianity. Far from “absent”, a search on Google Scholar reveals a vast academic literature that includes Bill Barnard’s new book “*Liquid Light*” on American *Santo Daime* members (Columbia University Press, 2022), James W. Fernandez’s study of Christian elements in his book on “*Bwiti*” (Princeton University Press, 1982), and Weston La Barre’s book on NAC Christianity called “*The Peyote Cult*” (Yale University Press, 1938). Admittedly, it can be difficult for strangers to get invited to NAC or *Bwiti* rituals; understandably, there is wariness about long-term trends of abuses by colonialist outsiders.

Consequently, I would strongly advise anyone wanting to learn about entheogenic Christianity to attend *Santo Daime* rituals, which are open to participant visitors and legal/accessible in many parts of North America and Europe. By attending *Santo Daime* ceremonial “works” and meeting dedicated practitioners of this tradition (called “daimistas”), one can directly witness an embodiment of the very psychedelic Christianity these authors incorrectly portray as “absent”. A similar oversight is apparent in scientific/biomedical approaches to the “psychedelic renaissance”, which proceed without first engaging with the wisdom of veteran entheogenic practitioners. Alas, it appears that just as Christianity first arose in obscurity amidst

<sup>3</sup>Marc G. Blaine (RP, Ph.D.) is a cultural anthropologist, psychotherapist, and multi-faith chaplain who worked as a chaplain at the Homewood Health Centre (Guelph, Ontario) from 2019 to 2023 and is now collaborating in research on psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy with the team at Braxia Science and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research at University Health Network (Toronto). His research and publications bridge the existential anthropology of religion with ethno-psychiatry and spiritual care. Blaine’s book “*Christ Returns from the Jungle: Ayahuasca Religion as Mystical Healing*” (SUNY Press, 2021) is based on fieldwork/interviews with European and North American members of the Brazil-based *Santo Daime* religion.



underprivileged sectors of society before rising to prominence among the ruling classes, psychedelic Christianity has blossomed in the margins of North American society for many years prior to its recent adoption by intellectual and ecclesiastical elites.

Like the biblical Wise Magi who were surprised that the new King was born in the hinterland of Bethlehem rather than the metropole of Jerusalem (Matthew 2:1–12),entheogenic worship of Jesus emerged among disadvantaged folks long before its embrace in ivory tower and capitalist contexts where psychedelia is now thriving. Thus, this article's research intentions might be better served by adjusting the title to refer to "independent/experimental Christian psychonauts (or entheonauts)" rather than "Christianity", as the latter implies a coherent theological system of beliefs and practices lived out among communal groups. For the study of psychedelic/entheogenic "Christianity" within structured community, we need only look to the three examples I mention above (Santo Daime, NAC, and Bwiti) to see that far from being "absent", such activities are conspicuous in both the academic literature and in North American society during the 20th and 21st centuries.

These exemplars show that — given the tendency of psychedelics to dissolve conceptual barriers — tomorrow's entheogenic Christianities are unlikely to remain within mainstream denominational silos and are more likely to incorporate syncretic mixtures of multi-faith perennialism. Moving forward, we have much untapped wisdom to gain by learning from foundational forms of psychedelic Christianity refined over decades in the Amazon rainforest, in Western Africa, and on Indigenous reservations. Rather than ham-handedly grafting psychedelics onto conventional Christian formats that have extremely tenuous or no prior connection to psychedelics, the fact is that at least three organizations have already succeeded at seamlessly integrating Jesus' teachings with entheogenic states of mind/spirit. In closing, I refer those interested in further pursuing this topic to consult a scholarly book I published called *Christ Returns from the Jungle: Ayahuasca Religion as Mystical Healing* (SUNY Press, 2021), which comprehensively details results of my ethnographic fieldwork and interviews among European members of Santo Daime.

## COMMENTARY BY JERRY B. BROWN<sup>4</sup>

*Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.* – George Orwell

McCarthy and Priest provide us with a reminder that the use of psychedelics in contemporary religions has also made its way into three groups practicing Christianity over the

past 50 years. These practices are notably divorced from Christianity's rich entheogenic past, which these authors do not recognize.

In the "Introduction" to their article, the authors lackadaisically recite Brian Muraresku's claim in *The Immortality Key* that a psychedelic "paleo-Christian" religion with no name was "elided by the later institutional Christianity." Specifically, Muraresku's book argues that this suppression by religious authorities took place systematically from the fourth century on "beneath the jackboots of the Roman Catholic Church" (Muraresku, 2020, p. 11).

This suggested timeline of entheogenic Christianity is misleading on two major fronts. First, as I have elaborated elsewhere (Brown, 2021), this religion has a name ("shamanism"), indeed many names among the diverse cultures that practice shamanism, proving that the entheogenic roots of Christianity are far broader and deeper than Muraresku recognizes. Second, this supposed fourth century suppression did not eliminate entheogenic Christianity.

As I point out in my "Review of *The Immortality Key*": "Here Muraresku completely ignores research by Samorini (1998) and Brown and Brown (2016, 2019), and even by Ruck [and Hoffman] (2012) whom he cites extensively, documenting extensive artistic images of entheogenic mushrooms in chapels and churches, as well as in the high holy places of Christianity such as the cathedrals at Chartres and Canterbury, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance" (Brown, 2021, p. 7).

An oversight of this proportion erases more than a thousand years of evidence of entheogens in Christianity as documented in the historical record! This has significant implications for the potential legalization of the pastoral use of psychedelics in contemporary communities – a use which McCarthy and Priest address in their "Conclusion."

Regarding pastoral praxis, the authors express the hope that their article will inspire work on "how non-clinical psychedelic use might relate to existing culture and habits of Christian communities." One promising approach would see the incorporation of psychedelic substances "into retreats, utilizing the well-established practice of 'time away' from regular patterns of life to join others interested in deepening and expanding their spiritual lives."

According to McCarthy and Priest, the well-known ability of entheogens to facilitate "an encounter with the divine" would draw on Christianity's wealth of "spiritual practices, rituals, story, and communities of caring to support Christians in this work."

Perhaps unbeknownst to McCarthy and Priest, several forms of Christian psychedelic pastoral praxis have been present in America for over half a century – albeit underground. As J. Christian Greer points out in his insightful "Foreword" to Mike Marinacci's book on *Psychedelic Cults and Outlaw Churches: LSD, Cannabis, and Spiritual Sacraments in Underground America*, "Over the past seven decades, hundreds of psychedelic sects have collectively reshaped America's cultural landscape." (Marinacci, 2023, xiii).

<sup>4</sup>Jerry B. Brown (Ph.D.) is a founding professor of anthropology at Florida International University, where he taught a course on "Psychedelics and Culture" since 1975 (retired 2014). He is coauthor of *The Psychedelic Gospels: The Secret History of Hallucinogens in Christianity* (2016), as well as articles on entheogens in religion and on mystical experiences in psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy.



According to Marinacci, “Over the last century, an unusual and controversial religious underground has emerged in North America. Scores of churches, sects, and circles dedicated to using psychoactive substances like peyote, LSD, cannabis, and others as ways to experience the Transcendent and Divine, have appeared across the continent’s spiritual landscape, challenging orthodox conceptions of what ‘religion’ is, and how it can be experienced and communicated” (Marinacci, 2023, 1).

However, with two notable exceptions, the use of psychedelics by religious communities and churches continues to be illegal under the federal Controlled Substance Act (CSA) of 1970 which is administered by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). These exceptions are the Native American Church and several U.S. branches of the Brazilian churches (Santo Daime and União do Vegetal), whose rights to use mescaline in peyote and DMT-containing ayahuasca, respectively, are allowed and protected under the 1993 federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). However, not all such petitions have been respected, for instance the Neo-American Church’s argument that its right to use psychedelics is protected as a constitutional right of the free exercise of religion under RFRA (United States v. Kuch, 288 F. Supp. 439 [D.D.C. 1968]).

It is in the legal context of the RFRA that the growing body of cross-cultural, interdisciplinary research documenting the widespread and ongoing historical presence of psychedelics in Christianity is particularly relevant. A recent contribution to this field is Gosso and Camilla’s *Allucinogeni e Cristianesimo: Evidenze nell’arte sacra* (2019, Vol. 2). I have replied to criticisms of this controversial “mushrooms in Christian art” theory (Brown, 2022).

Specifically, this research “may” meet the “bona fide traditional ceremony purposes” requirement of the RFRA, thereby establishing the factual historical basis for the legalization of the religious use of psychedelics in Christianity as a First Amendment right of religious freedom.

One of the biggest mistakes made by Leary and company during the 1960s was branding psychedelics as a new discovery, as modern miracle drugs, instead of publicly emphasizing their deep historical roots in traditional cultures (Siberian reindeer herders, South American shamanism) and Classical civilizations (early Hinduism, Ancient Greece) and even in the origins of several world religions (Winkelman, 2019b).

If psychedelics are to play a meaningful role in the future of Christianity, it is crucial that we do not overlook their widespread presence in the history of Christianity. This history reveals the presence of psychoactive sacraments from early Christianity of the fourth century up through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance (Ruck & Hoffman, 2012). It documents the presence of entheogenic fungi – both *A. muscaria* and psilocybin varieties – in Christian art: in bronze castings, ceiling paintings, frescoes, illuminated manuscripts, mosaics, sculptures, and stained-glass windows. This compelling evidence has been found in abbeys, chapels, churches, and cathedrals throughout Europe and, in some cases, in the Middle East (Brown & Brown, 2016, 2019).

In time, this historical evidence may provide the rationale for the Catholic Church’s return to its mystical roots and beatific visions, which in some cases were inspired by entheogenic experiences of the divine – by sacred plants that “generate the god within.” For, as Catholic Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast observes, “if we can encounter God through a sunrise seen from a mountain top, why not through a mushroom prayerfully ingested” (Brown & Brown, 2016, p. 219). A “second coming” of psychedelics in Christianity could open the door to the establishment of religious retreat centers, to the “modern Eleusis” that Albert Hofmann envisioned, whereby the contemporary Church would provide the faithful with direct access to safe psychedelic journeys for healing, revelation, and communion with God.

## COMMENTARY BY THOMAS B. ROBERTS<sup>5</sup>

When authors write about the overlap of the broad topics of psychedelics and contemporary Christian spirituality, it’s difficult to decide what to omit and what to hold for possible future efforts. I hope the authors of “Psychedelic Christianity” will understand these comments in that vein, and that they might respond here or elaborate on in future articles.

**The 60s and spirituality:** While the Jesus People were a slice of those times, it’s questionable whether they are a representative sample of Christian using psychedelics at that time. In addition to numerous articles then and since, Robert S. Ellwood’s *The 60s Spiritual Awakening* contains 21 small-print pages of chapter notes plus a bibliography (1994). He asks a question about the 60s that “Psychedelic Christianity” prompts us to re-ask it again today. He writes:

My contention is that the religious and political sides of the Sixties should not be set against each other so much as seen as bands in a single spectrum. Both are spiritual in that they touch on values of ultimate significance .... They can both be understood through categories from out of the phenomenology of religion — mythology, apocalyptic, transcendental symbols of community, and the like. ... I propose that the story of religion, and religious consciousness, in that decade offers an indispensable key to understanding changes wrought by the Sixties in society as whole....

Why? Because in America religion has generally been the most available language for what is of unconditional importance. The ultimate level of significance is especially

<sup>5</sup>Thomas B. Roberts (PhD.) is an Emeritus Professor of Educational Psychology at Northern Illinois University, where starting in 1982, he taught *Psychedelic Studies* in the Honors Program and Educational Psychology. His major interests are in the intellectual/scholarly and religious/spiritual implications of psychedelics and reforming the Liberal Arts and Sciences via a psychedelic-multistate paradigm. He co-founded the Council on Spiritual Practices and edited essays derived from its 1995 conference in *Psychoactive Sacramentals*, 2001 – republished as *Psychedelics & Spirituality* in 2020.





highlighted in moments of transition from one consciousness to another. (pages 9–10)

Updating that question, we might ask, “Does the language of ‘Psychedelic Christianity’ mark a ‘moment of transition from one consciousness to another’ for us today?”

Other early and significant engagements with “Psychedelic Christianity” occurred with *Psychoactive Sacraments*, an invitational conference co-sponsored by Chicago Theological Seminary and the Council on Spiritual Practices in 1995. This conference resulted in Huston Smith’s book *Cleansing the Doors of Perception* (2000) which updated Smith’s earlier writings on the significance of psychedelics for religion and religious experience. Other papers derived from the presentations at the conference are in Roberts (2020) *Psychedelics and Spirituality*.

**Sources of Spiritual Authority:** Are mystical experiences provide genuine sources of spiritual authority alongside the majesty of the church and sacred texts? Do psychedelic experiences qualify as potential sources of spiritual authority? A discussion of this is beyond the scope of “Psychedelic Christianity” but ought to be noted as a topic that needs consideration. The genuineness/legitimacy of mystical experiences of both psychedelic and non-psychedelic origin needs consideration. But the powerful entheogenic nature of psychedelic experiences requires special attention. Who is qualified to decide this?

**Pro-social value shifts:** “The biggest single gain was in the priority given to spirituality.” In *Quantum Change* (2001, p. 131) Miller & deBaca reported this major shift in values from people’s non-psychedelic mystical experiences. They reported how their values changed from before their experiences to afterwards, including Personal Peace, Family, God’s Will, Growth, Self-Esteem and Happiness at the top from a list of 50. Similar shifts from self-centeredness to social values appears in psychedelic induces mystical experiences.

In 2013, Roberts collected research on psychedelics’ influence on prosocial values in a chapter “Raising Values.” They included.

Jim Fadiman reported a newfound dissatisfaction with self-centered “I-ness” and its values of money, power, and prestige (*The Psychedelic Explorer’s Guide* 2011, pp. 299–300). Among other changes his interviewees reported:

85% — A greater understanding of the importance and meaning of human relationships

78% — A sense or greater regard for the welfare and comfort of others

88% — Increased reliance on my own values and judgments, less dependence on others’ opinions.

For “A greater awareness of God, or a Higher Power, or an Ultimate Reality.” The percentage agreeing over 4 various time periods ranged from 60% to 92%, with the 92% for the longest time period, one year.

In a more recent experimental clinical trial at Johns Hopkins, scores on the *Persisting Effects Questionnaire* (2012) Subscale on Altruism showed and half a dozen others:

- You have become more sensitive to the needs of others
- You now feel a greater need for service to others
- Your negative expression of anger (e.g., ridicule, outward expression of hostility toward others) has decreased.

Newer research on psychedelic-based value shifts continues — Ecology: Irvine, Luke, Freya, Gandy, & Watts, 2023. Sociality: Roseman et al., 2022. Clergy burnout: Cole-Turner — and is an open field for new researchers.

**Healing:** I feel that these considerations of “Psychedelic Christianity” would be better by omitting medical/psychotherapeutic healing with psychedelics. As the authors know, there is an immense amount to say on this topic. But unless healing is clearly defined to focus on spiritual healing, concerns with healing are a distraction from the religious/spiritual focus.

**Theological shifts:** A quotation from Grof’s *Realms of the Human Unconscious* (1975) (now *LSD: Doorway to the Numinous*) provokes speculations of interest to the religion/spirituality community (pages 96–7) about using psychedelics to open access to the perinatal level of one’s mind.

In my experience, everyone who has reached these levels develops convincing insights into the utmost relevance of the spiritual and religious dimensions in the universal scheme of things. Even hard-core materialists, positively oriented scientists and cynics, and uncompromising atheists and antireligious crusaders such as Marxist philosophers suddenly become interested in a spiritual search after they confront these levels in themselves. (pp. 96–7)

#### Next steps?

The conversation is only beginning within Christianity about how psychedelic healing and spiritual growth and development may be integrated into Christian communities of faith and practice. The quantitative and qualitative reports of the religious professional’s 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.

How can religious professionals become best informed? Certainly, by reading “emerging literature” as the authors suggest, but this would be only a good starting point. Clearly the best evidence would be from their own experiences. This step of ingesting psychedelics is not for everyone and is not to be taken lightly.

Guidance can be provided by the protocols developed at Johns Hopkins (Johnson, Richards, & Griffiths, 2008) but likely will have to be adjusted for religious professionals and contexts. Who knows enough to do this? What institutions are most appropriate? How can we evaluate the results? There are no easy answers to these, but the necessity of asking these questions and answering them carefully and thoroughly is obvious. A religious order, guild, or theological school might take this on as one of their spiritual responsibilities. Perhaps psychedelic spiritual guidance for clergy can be developed at centers shared in common by several denominations.





In addition to providing advances in medicine and psychotherapy, psychedelics as research variables provide agendas for foundations and/or benefactors. Psychedelic-based research in theology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, anthropology, archeology, and biology would advance both secular and religious knowledge into deeper, largely unplumbed realms. Specialized praxes need to be developed to assist clergy to deepen their spirituality through psychedelic-induced entheogenic experiences.

“Psychedelic Christianity” points to profoundly significant topics and early steps in this effort. I look forward to more thoughtful writings by these authors.

## COMMENTARY BY JOSEPH LORENZ<sup>6</sup>

Joseph Lorenz (SJ) is a Jesuit scholastic currently in theology studies at the Faculté Loyola Paris. Lorenz entered the Jesuits in 2014, after which he earned a Masters in Social Philosophy from Loyola University Chicago and taught high school for several years, both in New York and in Beirut. Lorenz’s 2022 article on psychedelics and Catholic teaching was published in *America Magazine* (online edition).

McCarthy and Priest show that to find “Psychedelic Christianity” we needn’t dig into the recesses of the past or conjure something out of whole cloth: Christians now, and for at least the past 50 years, have had psychedelic experiences, and they have made sense of them in light of their faith, and vice versa. The article is thus well-placed to accomplish its goal of inspiring future work that is unhindered by the presumption that psychedelics and traditional Christianity—at least in practice—rule each other out.

While the article is mostly descriptive, one normative term that emerges is “healing.” Psychedelics have value insofar as they have helped Christians—and others—find healing, relief of psychological and existential suffering through insight into themselves and a love bigger than they previously imagined. This definition points already to the polyvalence of the term “healing”: it is at once psychological and spiritual. As the kind of work McCarthy and Priest call for unfolds, two questions that emerge are: What exactly is the Christian contribution to a holistic understanding of healing, and how does healing make us better Christians?

The thickness of the word “healing” is both an asset and a risk. It is an asset in that it shows the alignment between medical and psychological goals, on the one hand, and Christian goals on the other. Doctors and Christians both want healing. The risk, though, is reduction: the way Christians understand “healing” isn’t necessarily the same as

the way doctors understand it. There’s no reason the two should be opposed to each other. But using the same word to describe two aims that aren’t quite the same risks folding one into the other. Twentieth-century Jungian James Hillman is reported to have said that psychology needed to rescue the soul of the individual and of the world from the dry and doctrinaire clutches of theology (Schrei, 2023). Whatever truth there was in his statement when he made it, the pendulum has swung so far in the other direction, with psychological language saturating contemporary discourse and outstripping traditional perspectives, that theology may now be the one in the position of pushing back against a limiting of our spiritual horizons.

What exactly is lost in a psychologically reductive understanding of healing? The first dimension we might point to is the social or political. Pope Francis (2015) has spoken repeatedly in recent teaching documents about the inherently relational character of human life, such that the pursuit of inner and outer peace is indissociably linked. No Christian account of healing will be complete without attention to our enmeshment in a larger web of life, which of course includes not only relationships with other humans but also with the natural world.

And not only the natural world. In the Christian view, our enmeshment goes beyond what meets the eye and binds us not just to other creatures but to their Creator. This is the second dimension lost in a reductively psychological understanding of healing: transcendence. Clare Boothe Luce’s musings about “idolatry” while on LSD can help us grasp what’s at stake here. The psychedelic animates her surroundings with an aura of personal presence, but she’s dubious: aren’t we vulnerable in this state of absolute wonder to giving the things around us more existential weight than they can bear?

To extend Boothe Luce’s concern about putting a creature in the place of the Creator, we might ask whether the psychedelic experience itself can’t become an idol. How powerful, to take a substance and, in the right set and setting, feel spirit moving all around. But part of the spiritual life—maybe the part Jesus describes as “spiritual poverty”—involves attuning ourselves to grace when it isn’t so easy to find. Through practices like the Examen prayer—one of the “Ignatian exercises” mentioned in the article—we can cultivate gratitude and even wonder in the midst of the all-too ordinary. This is a question for future work on Christianity and psychedelics: how do we balance the desire for more (integration, wonder, healing) with a healthy recognition of the limits of human life? St. Paul laments “a thorn given him in the flesh” and asks God to take it away, to which God responds, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Learning “to trust in the slow work of God,” Teilhard de Chardin (2005) reminds us, at times involves “accepting the anxiety of feeling ourselves in suspense and incomplete.”

Another way to ask the question of how healing makes us better Christians is to ask, how does healing relate to love? Love integrates; love heals trauma; love casts out fear. And yet, as precious as these effects are, they are secondary to the

<sup>6</sup>Joseph Lorenz (SJ) is a Jesuit scholastic currently in theology studies at the Faculté Loyola Paris. Lorenz entered the Jesuits in 2014, after which he earned a Masters in Social Philosophy from Loyola University Chicago and taught high school for several years, both in New York and in Beirut. Lorenz’s 2022 article on psychedelics and Catholic teaching was published in *America Magazine* (online edition).

relationship itself. St. Ignatius (in Fleming's contemporary reading, 1996, p. 27) puts relationship first this way:

In everyday life, then, we must hold ourselves in balance before all created gifts.... We should not fix our desires on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one. For everything has the potential of calling forth in us a more loving response to our life forever with God.

Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God's deepening life in me.

## COMMENTARY BY JAIME CLARK-SOLES<sup>7</sup>

In this admirably clear and provocative essay, the authors investigate the interaction between “a traditional Christian mindset” and psychedelic experiences. They review the experiences of three different groups of Christians (60s evangelicals and Catholics as well as contemporary participants in the Johns Hopkins Religious Professionals study) to lead us to consider what a “contemporary psychedelic Christianity might entail.” They conclude the essay by declaring that further work is needed with respect to theology and pastoral care. Concerning theology, how does the historic Christian tradition inform or interrogate (question) one's psychedelic experience? Where is the coherence and dissonance between the two? The pastoral care implications are immense, from attention to Christians receiving psychedelic-assisted therapies to opportunities for spiritual retreats aimed at healing and spiritual growth. The authors have sparked an important and multi-faceted conversation.

I will pick up on three threads that interest me as a New Testament scholar, ordained minister, and theological educator. The theological work they enjoin us to engage should certainly include attention to the Christian Scriptures. From Genesis to Revelation, we have stories of visions, dreams, trances, ecstatic dance and other altered states of consciousness, some induced by particular practices and rituals. St. Paul, for example, narrates his own mystical journey. Referring to himself, he declares:

I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard

things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat (2 Cor. 12:2–4)

We have a special Sunday in the church year devoted to the story of the Transfiguration, in which disciples witness Jesus transfigured and speaking with Elijah and Moses (Matthew 17:1–8, Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36). And of course, we have a whole book of the Bible that shares the content of the vision of John. It's called Revelation. The Greek word is *apokalypsis*, which means an “unveiling”—we get the English word apocalypse from this. Revelation is full of bizarre imagery, fantastic beasts, intense sounds, all manner of supernatural beings, numerology, and many other features that appear in psychedelic journeys. Recall that the whole book of Revelation narrates a single vision. It's Revelation, NOT Revelations. In her magisterial new commentary on Revelation, renowned scholar Lynn Huber notes that attention to John's religious experience is an important element of understanding the vision (rather than treating it merely as a literary text). In a sidebar titled “Revelation and Mind-Altering Substances,” she writes: “When first encountering Revelation, students sometimes ask whether being “in the spirit” implies that John was under the influence of a mind-altering substance. These questions are often offered in jest, but numerous religious traditions, ancient and modern, use drugs or other practices such as fasting or physical exertion to induce visions or access spiritual knowledge” (2023, p. 19).

We also need to theologize about the cosmology and ontology of psychedelic experiences. The New Testament is rife with angels and demons and the miraculous, elements that also feature in psychedelic experiences. Mainline Christians often dismiss this language (and the realities to which they refer), but Walter Wink (1984, 1986, 1998, 2017) has made a strong case for using it. (See his trilogy: *Naming the Powers*, *Unmasking the Powers*, *Engaging the Powers*, as well as his epitome *The Powers That Be*). Indeed, as Wittgenstein (1922, p. 5.6) famously noted, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” When we lose the language, we lose the ability to articulate the reality.

Among the miracles in the Bible are healing stories. Healing is a leitmotif in this essay; it appears in the examples of each of the three groups presented as well as the authors' vision of the future of psychedelics for Christians: “...using the resources of the Christian tradition and modern psychology to facilitate ongoing healing and spiritual growth.” As a scholar who works in Disability Studies, I contend that we need to give much more thought to what we mean by healing. “Healing” and “cure” are not synonyms, though people have experienced both. What constitutes healing? The medical model focuses on the individual, but from a Christian perspective the communal is always in view and relates to people, nature, the self, and God. Jesus is said to be the Savior/Healer of the Cosmos (Gk *kosmos*, John 4:42). This leads to my next point. How do “healing” and “salvation” relate with respect to these experiences? The Greek word *sōzō* gets translated as save or heal and the noun as salvation or healing. Where is God in the affliction and where is God in the healing? Note that Paul asks God three

<sup>7</sup>Jaime Clark-Soles (M.Div. & Ph.D., Yale University) is an ordained American Baptist minister and Professor of New Testament and Altshuler Distinguished Teaching Professor at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. She has spoken on Christianity and psychedelics at MAPS, the Parliament of the World's Religions, and the American Academy of Religion and serves as a Field Scholar on the leadership team of the Emory Center for Psychedelics and Spirituality. <https://psychedelics.emory.edu/about-us/index.html>. She is the author of *1 Corinthians: Searching the Depths of God* (2021), *Women in the Bible* (2020), and *Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel* (2016).



times to remove his “thorn in the flesh” but God declines. We must address soteriology and theodicy, in other words.

Finally, Christians need to attend to justice issues at every turn, which is an issue both of theology *and* pastoral care. The authors rightly lament “past Christian repudiation of indigenous use” and call for “repairing the relationships broken by that repudiation and other aspects of the church’s colonialism.” I take the latter to include the attention to other minoritized groups as well, such as including queer, female, and black folx. Indeed, it appears that everyone quoted from each of the three groups in the essay may be white. This speaks to who has access to such experiences and can be open about it and who cannot; whose use of these medicines is criminalized and whose is not, or certainly not as severely.

The authors have done us a great service with this stimulating essay and have unequivocally established that Christians need to engage this topic immediately and thoughtfully and, yes, even faithfully.

## COMMENTARY BY WILLIAM A. RICHARDS<sup>8</sup>

As a clinical psychologist/psychedelic researcher also trained in Christian theology and the psychology of religion, I am thankful to have lived long enough to witness the current rebirth of interest in psychedelics. We are now able to investigate these diverse inner realms from medical, educational, and religious perspectives. Finally beginning to awaken from “cultural lag”, both academic scholars of religion and devoted practitioners of different world religions are becoming aware of and attuned to the “psychedelic renaissance”. This reflects much more than interest in diverse psychedelic molecules; it may be seen as renewed inquiry into the study of human consciousness itself and the mysteries of our own being. As Abraham Maslow (1966) stressed in *The Psychology of Science*, it is here that the growing edge of “humanistic science” discovers that it is indeed encountering “the sacred”.

Having encountered several hundred diverse participants in the context of psychotherapy research with a variety of psychedelics between 1963 and 1977, and from 1999 to the present, I am very aware of the different strata of “psychedelic experiences” and of the importance of “interpersonal grounding” in enhancing safety and potential efficacy. I also have come to trust *entelechy* (meaningful skillfully choreographed intuitive content emerging during the action of psychedelics).

Though experiences that focus on the psychological resolution of developmental trauma or conflicts may be

seen by some to have religious relevance in terms of forgiveness and new beginnings, the states of consciousness most noteworthy for religious scholars are: (1) visionary or archetypal experiences in which the everyday self (ego) remains present as observer/participant; and (2) unitive-mystical experiences that entail the transcendence (death and rebirth) of the ego. Both can occur in the same person; both are usually reported to be profoundly revelatory and meaningful. Both are reported by persons deeply committed to a religious tradition and by persons who describe themselves as agnostic.

Karl Jaspers (1954) repetitively reminded his readers that we are more than we know or ever can know of ourselves. Carl Jung (1959a, 1959b) called our attention to the “collective unconscious”, a vast realm of content from diverse cultures and civilizations quite independent of our enculturation in the present lifetime. This rich cache of material, apparently semi-dormant within each of us, is more than images from a museum; it may manifest during the action of psychedelics as powerful forces that may culminate in revelatory knowledge and the healing of psychological conflicts.

Teilhard de Chardin (1961) reflected that we are all “spiritual beings currently having human experiences” and reflected on “the spiritual power of matter”. The three-letter English word, *God* has different meanings for different people and I would suggest that each person can choose his/her own terminology to describe deep voyages into visionary or mystical realms. Typically, however, encounters with archetypes such as the Christ or the dancing Shiva, or the memory of having merged into unitive states of consciousness, are reported to feel intuitively self-validating, “more real” or fundamental than our usual awareness in everyday living. These experiences tend to be reported as “ineffable” and paradoxical, beyond the usual limits of rational human thought and language. Regardless of the words chosen, those who experience something of this dimension bear witness, often in silence, to reality perceived as ultimate, that typically is described as intrinsically sacred, atemporal, creative, beautiful, and often as loving.

The role of *faith*, not necessarily as adherence to a specific religious creed, but as a conscious decision to “choose to trust”, that is, to relinquish usual ego controls, is of fundamental importance in both religious lives and psychedelic-assisted explorations. This may be seen as congruent with Christian conversion experiences in which one chooses to “give one’s life to Christ”. In the language of fundamentalistic Protestantism, one experiences “salvation”; in the language of psychotherapy, one experiences rebirth, healing insights and progress in the resolution of conflicts.

All world religions refer to *eternity*—not as time extended indefinitely into the future, but as an intuitive apprehension of consciousness “outside of time”, beyond past and future in an “eternal Now.” Persons who experience unitive-mystical forms of consciousness during the action of psychedelics, notably terminal cancer patients, often report vivid memory of this noetic state which is correlated not only with decreased anxiety and depression, but also with alleged loss of the fear of death. Many would describe this as

<sup>8</sup>William (Bill) Richards (M.Div, STM, Ph.D) is a theologically-trained clinical psychologist who has contributed to psychedelic research since 1963 at the University of Goettingen, the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, and Sunstone Therapies. With colleagues, he has investigated the promise of psychedelics in medical treatment, notably in palliative care, and also in the training of mental health and religious professionals. He is the author of *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics & Religious Experiences*.





convincing reassurance that somehow, in spite of death, suffering and struggle, all is ultimately well in the universe.

Another intuitive insight in mystical states is manifested in claims of the interconnectedness of all people within the unitive consciousness. Historically in the West we've referred to "the Brotherhood of Man"; today we'd tend to speak of the Family of Humankind; in Hinduism, it is known as "the bejeweled Net of Indra". The implications of this perspective are profound in terms of inter-cultural dialogue and world peace, and perhaps even in relation to how we share our planet with other life forms.

*Revelation*, a word usually restricted to religious scholarship and practice, clearly is occurring in the present in the fields of consciousness of some people who have ingested psychedelic substances. Maslow called our attention to such "peak experiences" during meditative practices, creative performance, natural childbirth, heights of athletic activity and sensory isolation or flooding. When these profoundly meaningful experiences occur, whether sought or encountered by surprise, experiential learning has taken place and changes in self-concept and one's understanding of others and the world may have shifted. As Huston Smith (2000) emphasized, *religious experiences* still need to be gradually integrated into *religious lives*. Institutional churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples could potentially be supportive of this process.

With the psychedelic substances and fundamental knowledge of how to ingest them in ways that are safe and effective for those who desire to explore their own minds, we stand on an awesome threshold. Like their mental health colleagues, religious scholars now can design and implement their own projects of research in collaboration with social scientists. Onward!

## COMMENTARY BY HARRY T. HUNT<sup>9</sup>

In the larger context perhaps of a Weberian disenchantment and secularization of a Christian tradition originally inspired by more direct early Gospel experiences of numinous healing, McCarthy and Priest address how a Christian framework for psychedelic sessions might support their needed integration and channeling. In turn, an intense numinous impact will, inevitably, interact with and challenge aspects of that same religious tradition. As potential examples they review: the early hippie psychedelic Jesus movement, where psychedelic experiences of "conversion of the heart" eventually led to abandonment of the drug experience; the philosopher Gerald Heard's psychedelic guidance of several Catholic intellectuals to experiences of personal healing, wherein encounters with a primary animism in nature came

to challenge those same beliefs; and finally their own contemporary involvement with the psychedelic training of Christian clerics (along with Rabbis and Imams) both as subjects and guides for psychedelic spiritual retreats.

Here a Christian, small group, set and setting would go beyond the more standard individualized transpersonal use of eyeshades and earphones – with communal group experiences similarly central to many Indigenous shamanic practices – and so adding values of communality, social cohesion, and mutual charity to individual healing. That potential is already well supported by research on the effects of spontaneous secular experiences of awe in an increasing altruism and humility (Piff, Dietze, Feinberg, Stancato, & Keltner, 2015) – which would then become more fully explicit in a Christian framework.

In turn, the sheer physicality and intensity of psychedelics – although certainly resonant with early Gospel speaking in tongues, visionary ecstasies, and hands on healing – may also push back against both a later religious rejection of the body and the more individualized "feel good" giant churches. In this regard a psychedelically infused Christianity could both challenge and encourage its own foundational renewal.

What might be its limitations and challenges? Here an earlier anxiety over a claimed artificiality of psychedelic numinous states, in contrast to more slowly developing conversion experiences, going back to Zaehner's (1957) critique of Heard's friend Aldous Huxley, is perhaps mitigated by the effects of our more recent culturally enforced narcissism and historically unprecedented hyper-individualism, which if anything will have created newly intensified barriers to the kenosis - ego death and self surrender – intrinsic to spiritual awakening. Thus, the pre-emptory impact of psychedelics may now have become more essential for these genuine openings. Research with questionnaires for spontaneous mystical experience (Sleight, Lynn, Mattson, & McDonald, 2023), finds their "ego dissolution" component associated with greater levels of conflict, trauma, and narcissism – perhaps attesting to these struggles with ego fixation as barriers to the healing potential of numinous states. Doctrines of Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection can have the virtue of helping to sanction the intense suffering that can be entailed.

A more serious challenge for a Christian setting and guidance for the emerging promise of psychedelic healing comes with its potential collision, alluded to by McCarthy and Priest, with an "animistic" re-sacralization of nature and ecological values seemingly intrinsic to both psychedelics (Carhart-Harris, Erritzoe, Haijen, Kaelen, & Watts, 2017) and secular awe (Keltner & Haidt, 2003) – and also so central to Indigenous traditions. With Armstrong (2022), the Western "Religions of the Book" teach an intrinsic subjugation of nature and environment to the purposes of humanity. Meanwhile it has been widely argued that unless current society can come to regard human caused climate change as the equivalent of religious sin, not much can be done in time on a collective level (Hunt, 2021). Here a Christian psychedelics might seem the most challenged in terms of doctrinal tradition. Nonetheless there is the promise of Pope Francis

<sup>9</sup>Harry T. Hunt (Ph.D., Brandeis 1971) is Professor Emeritus in Psychology at Brock University, Ontario, Canada (hhunt@brocku.ca). He is the author of *On the Nature of Consciousness* (1995) and *Lives in Spirit* (2003) and has published studies on lucid dreaming, meditation, synesthesia, creativity and metaphor, and theoretical papers on the cognitive psychology of mystical states and spirituality.





in his Encyclical, *Our Common Good* (2015), where, in addition to sounding his own alarm over climate crisis, he endorses Indigenous understandings of Creation and their “universal fraternity” of “wind, sun, and clouds” (p. 148), with “God in all things” and “all things are God” (p. 151).

Meanwhile, concerns were expressed in several sessions on religion and psychedelics at the recent MAPS sponsored *Psychedelic Science 2023* over any risk of cultural appropriation in invoking support from the Indigenous shamanic traditions. Such concerns, however, may also risk their own sort of collective “spiritual bypass” in avoiding this needed doctrinal challenge to the Religions of the Book in their traditional avoidance of the natural order of Creation as already containing the deepest, and now endangered, physiognomic mirrors of Soul and Spirit (Emerson, 1836/1963). Such hesitation misses the syncretic nature of all religion – no Christianity without its back and forth “appropriation” with Roman Platonism, not to mention the Christian assimilations central to Ghost Dance, Peyote Cult, and contemporary Santo Daime.

The communal and societal side of psychedelic numinous states, especially prominent in small group settings (Roseman & Karkabi, 2021), are indeed fully consistent with the socially transformative Religions of the Book – and so would in turn support their broader set and setting. Yet these same states intrinsically evoke nature metaphors that go to the shamanic roots of all religion (Weber, 1922/1963), and so transcending any specific ethnicity. Perhaps a futural development of religious frameworks for psychedelic healing, in addition to compensating its current primarily individualized orientation, could be both specific to each religious world view, while also helping to create their own emerging ecumenical confluence precisely around this shared re-sacralization of the natural order – and a thus inspired collective response to the climate crisis (Hunt, 2021).

The convergence of a revolutionary science of psychedelic healing and a parallel religious en-framing suggests a conjoined engagement – rational and intuitive – with what does appear to be a contemporary crisis of individual meaning, communal solidarity, and environmental salvation – only tragic if entirely in hindsight.

## COMMENTARY BY TIMOTHY R. GABRIELLI<sup>10</sup>

I am very grateful for the opportunity to respond to Bryan McCarthy and Hunt Priest’s article on “Psychedelic Christianity” in the United States. As the authors note, there is divide in the conversation about psychedelic use and religion. Exploiting that divide, I’ve occasionally imagined writing a satirical piece entitled, “Benedictine Monks Busted for Performance-Enhancing Psychedelics.” That title would

trade on the perception that psychedelic use is somehow a shortcut for the hard work of ascetic religious practice, ‘shortcut’ because both aim at something like “mysticism.” From the other side, this hypothetical piece might give pause to those who think that religious practice and psychedelic use are in two different universes because one point of the former is precisely to dissuade the latter.

I applaud McCarthy and Priest for, first, challenging the dichotomy between “religion” and psychedelics, but even further for challenging the nineteenth-century tendency to shear off “mystical” from the religious. I am reminded of an insight from Michel de Certeau, SJ (Society of Jesus, Jesuits). De Certeau (1995) demonstrates how, in the late seventeenth century, “mystics” (like physics or optics) became a discrete field of investigation in the West, a forerunner to the current idea that “mysticism” transcends religious context. Mystical practice, from which “mystics” abstracted, was religiously generated and reform-minded, chafing against an over-rationalization of the human condition. The discipline of “mystics” wanted to systematize it. “This problematic gave rise,” de Certeau (1995, p. 110–12) explains “among the mystics, to the invention of a different body, born of and for the discourse intending to produce reform—an alien body against which the institution of medicine would eventually win out in imposing a scientific body.” From that historical angle, then, the idea of a common, unmoored “mystical experience” is an overweening effort at *control*, even as it wants to set aside religious structures. Rather than unshackling the human body from hyper-medicalization and opening to reform, claims of the generally “mystical” do the opposite. McCarthy and Priest are right not to settle for exploring “whether these substances might facilitate a ‘perennial’ religiosity or universally acceptable mysticism.”

Instead, McCarthy and Priest want to take religious formation and practice seriously, which opens space for some useful unwieldiness among the stories that they tell. These figures do not fit neatly into categories but serve as “sites” for exploring the intersection of Christianity and psychedelics. For instance, “One plausible way,” they conclude, “of construing the relationship between the Christianity of Ted 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.” And yet, as we see, the hard work of the practice of repentance remains for them complex, as it does for Rick Sacks, who gives up psychedelic use because it interferes with his mission from God.

While McCarthy and Priest turn to Rahner here for theological help in exegeting these experiences, it’s likely that Wise and others were more shaped by the evolving mid-twentieth charismatic strains of Christian evangelical theology, culminating, say, in *Explo ’72* (an evangelical conference held near Dallas, Texas in June 1972, which was sponsored by Campus Crusade for Christ). The Methodist and Calvinist theological emphases underlying the Jesus Movement place a stronger emphasis than does Rahner on that singular moment of conversion in which I see my previous self as lost and then found. Thus, it may be that there was a theological framework

<sup>10</sup>Timothy R. Gabrielli (Ph.D.) is the Gudorf Chair in Catholic Intellectual Traditions at the University of Dayton Ohio. Gabrielli works at the intersection of U.S. Catholic history and sacramental theology. He is author of *Confirmation* (Liturgical Press, 2013) and *One in Christ* (Liturgical Press, 2017).



ready-to-hand for discovering the “rat in basement” where one expected “the prince on the throne.”

As a theologian with a focus on twentieth century U.S. Catholicism, I found the archival material on Clare Booth Luce’s psychedelic use to be a remarkable contribution of the article. There has been chatter for some time about the Luce’s interest in psychedelics and Fr. John Courtney Murray’s connection to their experiments. This is the first place in print that I have seen an analysis of Ms. Luce’s “trip notes.” Like Wise and Doop, Luce is an interesting case. She also figures herself as an animal before God; not a rat this time, but as her dog. Luce moves circumspectly from questions about connecting with non-human creation, with caveats about idolatry, to something like an enchanted world. Luce is arguably after what Pope Francis calls “integral ecology” in *Laudato Si’* (Pope Francis, 2015), that is, a deep grasp that “everything is connected” and a “a recognition that the world is God’s loving gift” (no. 220), a gateway to conversion and repentance (no. 218). Luce’s reflections are arguably more whimsical but lead also—as McCarthy and Priest point out—to the process of healing amid her suicidal ideation and troubled marriage.

As I read McCarthy and Priest’s analysis, a theme emerges among their subjects: it is not merely about the experience, but about the move from that experience to a set of practices with spiritual, emotional, and physical considerations. That is the larger picture of “healing.” As Luce puts it, “I feel *almost* ready to accept my own face, with all its sadness and imperfections.” And, as we see, that is hard work. St. Ignatius of Loyola termed his retreat handbook for Jesuits *Exercitia Spiritualia*, surely because the religious development the program brings about comes as the result of *exercitia*: exercises, discipline, training. With that point, we’re brought back to where I opened: the question of whether psychedelics circumvent, bypass, or substitute for religious practice. McCarthy and Priest demonstrate that, at least for those they’ve studied, they do not; rather religious categories, practices, and communities stand before and beyond their psychedelic experiences.

## COMMENTARY BY DAVID M. ODORISIO<sup>11</sup>

As the authors of “Psychedelic Christianity” note, current conversations on psychedelics and religion often fall under several categories: there are the “historical origins” approaches, whereby scholars, often from ethnobotanical, philological, historical, or archaeological perspectives argue for the uses of psychotropic plants, fungi, and medicines as constituting or catalyzing the “origins of religion(s).” Often, these approaches dovetail with “perennialist” or

“essentialist” claims and debates in the psychedelics-religion conversation, whereby all religions share a “common core,” often “mystical,” which is again imagined as the origination point of religious traditions themselves. Proponents and practitioners of today’s “medical model” approach to psychedelics often implicitly participate in or practice such “psychedelic comparativism” (Kripal, 2014, p. 170), and can, often uncritically, promote such positions. The authors here go beyond such positionality, however, in their emphasis not on theoretical claims, but on a phenomenological approach to the lived experiences of certain “psychedelic Christians,” and ask what a practiced “psychedelic Christianity” might look like (and has looked like) through three historical and contemporary “case studies.”

What I would like to offer here in response is more of a brief theological reflection on the psychedelics and Christianity discourse, drawing on the theological origins of Christian doctrine and dogma itself, particularly the codification that occurred in the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) and its implications for a fully incarnational “psychedelic Christology.” As the authors note, for many of their Christian case studies, psychedelics occasioned experiences that were *both* deeply “incarnational,” with very real embodied healing, *as well as* ineffably profound, “spiritual,” or otherwise deemed as “sacred.” In other words, psychedelics served, for many of the practitioners included here, as further affirmation and integration of the human-divine “problem” that Chalcedon sought to codify and longitudinally correct through its affirmation that Christ was *both* “fully human and fully divine.”

The “Chalcedonian formulation” reflects, therefore, the promise of what for many “psychedelic Christians” becomes a lived, embodied reality: an affirmation of the early Church teachings on “deification” or *theosis*. Following 2 Peter 1:4 that those in Christ become “partakers of the divine nature,” the Church Fathers pondered, and ultimately postulated via Irenaeus (125–203) and echoed by Athanasius of Alexandria (296–373) that “God became man that man might become god.” Of course, the early tradition did not literally mean that human beings can (or should) “become god(s),” but, following 2 Peter, humanity “partakes” or “participates” in the reality of God, becoming, in turn, something of or like God in the process. In other words, humans become “deified” through their participation in the Father through the Son – the process of *theosis* (see Christensen & Wittung, 2008; Russell, 2006).

This process depended upon the Nicene Christology (precursor to Chalcedon) of which Gregory of Nazianzus (383[3]/2022) was both proponent and defender. As Gregory famously penned in his late letter to Cledonius (382 or 383 CE), “That which is not assumed is not healed” (Storin, 2022, 392). What he meant by this was that if God did not, or does not, become human – fully incarnate – then humans are “not healed,” “saved,” or, by extension, “deified.” As the authors make clear here, soteriological issues – issues of salvation – were of immediate import to their case studies’ psychedelic experimentation. Can one be “saved” or experience “salvation” through psychedelics (even “in Christ”)? The first-person narratives depicted here seem to offer a resounding “Yes.”

<sup>11</sup>David M. Odorisio (Ph.D.) is Associate Core Faculty at Pacifica Graduate Institute, Santa Barbara, CA, where he serves as Chair of the Psychology, Religion, and Consciousness MA/PhD program. David is editor of four volumes, including: *Thomas Merton in California: The Redwoods Conferences and Letters* and *Depth Psychology and Mysticism*. He currently serves as Co-Chair of the Mysticism Unit for the American Academy of Religion.



The intersection of *theosis* or divinization, and a fully Incarnational Christology, therefore, seem to have tremendous implications and theological resonance for an emerging “psychedelic Christology,” potentially providing an “orthodox” theological underpinning for contemporary practitioners that is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. Such would seem to be the possibility and promise of any contemporary psychedelic Christianity. Assuming that psychedelics can “occasion” a mystical, not to mention “sacramental,” experience that is both deeply embodied (i.e., fully human) and fully divine, then a psychedelic Christianity has the potential to further “incarnate” God – or, as for Jung, “continue” the Incarnation of God – only here through “divine” molecules that somehow “divinize” the organisms who ingest them, thus bringing about a possible “Christification of many” (Jung, 2010, para. 758). Spirit and matter, humanity and divinity, integrated and made incarnate again. Or, what Eckhart (c. 1260–1328) refers to in his Christmas sermon cycle as “the birth of the Word in the soul” (see, e.g., Sermon 101 in McGinn, 2006, 412–20). That which *is* assumed *is* healed.

“Psychedelic Christianity” might just participate in the “revival of religion” that Aldous Huxley (1977) predicted when he proclaimed that “biochemical [i.e., psychedelic] discoveries...will make it possible for large numbers of...[people] to achieve a radical self-transcendence and a deeper understanding of the nature of things” (156). Such psychedelic Christians might just find themselves as partakers in the divine “nature of things,” and, as so many have claimed, discover for themselves that “full divinity” is not so distant – nor distinct – from full humanity; re-encountered as an energetic, pulsing, “hypostatic union” of embodied spirit and deified flesh.

## COMMENTARY BY TRACY J. TROTHEN<sup>12</sup>

In this article, Bryan McCarthy and Hunt Priest diverge from the much debated question of should we or shouldn’t we to consider what a Christian psychedelic practice might look like. The authors uncover some of the recent history of Christians engaging their faith through psychedelics and, reciprocally, psychedelics through their faith. They relate stories of psychedelic experiences that have led people toward and/or away from their faith, as well as faith experiences that have led people toward or away from psychedelics.

This article has prompted several questions that I hope might assist readers in moving forward with psychedelic medicine in relation to Christianity. First, I found myself

thinking more about what counts as an authentically Christian spiritual or mystical experience. What makes a psychedelic practice a Christian practice? How do we foster spiritual discernment regarding psychedelic experiences?

If psychedelics help induce mystical experiences that are related to theological issues (Cole-Turner, 2022; Johnstad, 2023), then, as with other human enhancement technologies (Mercer & Trothen, 2021), do we run the risk of further entrenching internalized oppressive biases? For example, Wise’s vision of God as a male reaching down from heaven to stir a cloud—“displaying His power and majesty” (p. 10)—may well not be divinely inspired. Instead, this vision may reflect normative male and anthropocentric God imagery, which has since been strongly critiqued by feminist and other Christian theologians as reinforcing systemic power-over dynamics. [This example also suggests the value of spiritual care professionals in psychedelic assisted therapy (Peacock et al., 2024)].

However, psychedelic mystical experiences may not only be shaped by earthly, human-shaped context. McCarthy and Priest helped me to consider that these experiences may also involve paying deeper attention to divinely inspired revelation. As Claire’s experience suggests, psychedelics may help some people access a more prayerful, attentive state that allows for enhanced discernment of God’s presence and messages.

The authors’ choice of Catholic Jesuit priest and theologian Karl Rahner as dialogue partner helps us reflect on aspects of psychedelic mystical experiences, and may help to support the authors’ contention 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” (p. 3). However, I’m not sure how we should define “traditional theology” and if “traditional theology” is more important to the psychedelic conversation than theologies that have emerged from the social margins. For example, the writings of Johannes B. Metz (a student of Rahner’s and influencer of liberation theology) or feminist/womanist/mujerista/intersectional theologians, may be more helpful in making connections between the liberatory potential of forgotten memories, lived experiences, theology, and psychedelics.

As McCarthy and Priest point out, we have much to learn from Indigenous traditions that have long used entheogenic plants as part of sacred ceremonies. Indigenous spiritualities are definitely traditional, holding centuries of wisdom about how to engage with psychedelics. A Christian psychedelic practice must deeply engage Indigenous Christian theologies and theologians as dialogue partners. Although this is not the focus of McCarthy’s and Priest’s article, it is also important to state that the work of truth and reconciliation is key to this conversation and the development of a framework of what a Christian psychedelic practice would look like. White settler Christians, in particular, must turn to Indigenous knowledge keepers for permission, insight, and leadership. To do less would be to devalue the wisdom of people with much more experience than the white Christian community has, to ignore the cultural harm that has been done by forbidding

<sup>12</sup>Tracy J. Trothen (Th.D., certified spiritual care supervisor emeritus with Canadian Association of Spiritual Care) is professor of ethics at Queen’s University (Kingston, Ontario) jointly appointed to the School of Religion and the School of Rehabilitation Therapy. Trothen engages in research related to religion, Christian theology, artificial intelligence, and technology. Trothen is the author or editor of ten books including her co-authored 2021 book, *Religion and the Technological Future: An Introduction to Biohacking, A.I., and Transhumanism*, which won a book award from the International Society for Science and Religion.



entheogenic use within Indigenous communities, and could also result in spiritual appropriation.

McCarthy and Priest step into theological understandings of healing, asking how healing may be part of a psychedelic Christianity. Acknowledging the complexities in defining healing, the authors touch on some important theological concepts such as repentance and salvation that emerge in their narrative snapshots. These theological concepts seem to be understood more as individualistic than communal concepts. While salvation can be about an individual's confession and "conversion of the heart," as in the case of Wise's and Doop's "rat in the basement" conversions, it would be interesting to relate this more individualistic theological experience more explicitly to the Johns Hopkins study in which at least two participants describe healing (and salvation or conversion?) in terms of a deeply connecting love. Similarly, sociologist Petter Johnstad's recent survey found that spiritually motivated users of psychedelics "were more likely to report mystical experiences involving ego dissolution and contact or unity experiences" (2023, p. 380; see also Cole-Turner, 2022).

I agree with McCarthy and Priest that it is important to talk about people whose psychedelic experiences move them away from their Christian faith, and this stimulated one last question for me. How would a Christian psychedelic practice support people who move away from the religion as a result of their experience?

Psychedelics have an ongoing history of use by some Christian followers. These psychedelic experiences have stimulated meaningful and healing mystical experiences and insights. McCarthy and Priest's re-telling of these narratives hold potential liberatory power (Metz, 1981) by opening up a possible place for psychedelic medicine in more Christian faith communities. This article is a valuable beginning step to considering what a Christian psychedelic practice might look like. Articles such as this one are exactly what we need right now if we are to further the healing possibilities offered through the intersection of Christianity and psychedelics. Priest has also founded Ligare—A Christian Psychedelic Society—which is furthering this open conversation.

## COMMENTARY BY BRAD STODDARD<sup>13</sup>

In "Psychedelic Christianity" the authors seek to forge a connection between psychedelics and Christianity. To their credit, they avoid the wildly speculative and inherently sensationalistic theories about allegedly ancient connections

between psychedelics and Christianity (see Allegro, 1970; Muraresku, 2020). Instead, they examine three case studies from the United States. Based on this analysis, McCarthy and Priest conclude, first, that the issue of "healing" is a common aspect of Christians' use of psychedelics, and second, that "healing" is an important aspect of Christianity itself. McCarthy and Priest then seemingly contend that despite potential and even expected objections, psychedelics and Christianity are compatible with "a traditional Christian faith and practice" and with a "Christian point of view". This argument will invite various responses, particularly from Christians who will either agree or disagree with McCarthy and Priest. It also invites scholarly responses and opportunities to reflect on the boundaries between theology and scholarship—a murky, but important distinction. In the process, I offer a different answer to the question that underlies McCarthy and Priest's essay—are Christianity and psychedelics compatible?

The compatibility between Christianity and psychedelics seems important to McCarthy and Priest, who appear to have personal stakes in both. McCarthy's interest is evident in his academic work, particularly in an article he wrote titled "Christianity and psychedelic medicine: A pastoral approach" (2023). This compatibility is also important to Priest, who participated in the psilocybin study at Johns Hopkins. After consuming psilocybin, Priest (personal communication) claimed to have a "Pentecostal experience" of God and subsequently started Ligare, the world's first Christian psychedelic society. Healing functions to bridge psychedelics and Christianity because Christians (and people more broadly) who consume psychedelics experience spiritual, emotional, and psychological healing, and because healing is an important theme in what McCarthy and Priest call traditional Christianity. Methodologically, this would amount to a strong argument were it not for the facts, first, that Christianity, like all social groups, has no inherent tradition; and second, that even if Christianity did have an inherent tradition, "healing," as understood by McCarthy and Priest, would not be a perennial element of that tradition.

To understand my argument, consider that historians of religion have long attempted to distinguish themselves from theologians, or from people concerned with truth claims related either to particular religions, or even to religiosity more broadly (see McCutcheon, 2024). In juxtaposition to the theologian, religious studies scholar Bruce Lincoln described the historian of religion's perspective when he wrote, "History, in the sharpest possible contrast [to theology], is that discourse which speaks of things temporal and terrestrial in a human and fallible voice, while staking its claim to authority on rigorous critical practice" (Lincoln, 2005, 8). In other words, theologians make truth claims about religiosity. Historians of religion, however, historicize these claims, paying particular attention to the people who make these claims, to the voices they silent, to the people for whom they speak (and intend to speak), and to the human-all-too-human factors at stake in theological arguments. Where theologians speak of uniformity and

<sup>13</sup>Brad Stoddard (Ph.D.) is associate professor of American religious history at McDaniel College. He is the author of *Spiritual Entrepreneurs: Florida's Faith-Based Prisons and the American Carceral State* (UNC Press) and the forthcoming *The Production of Entheogenic Communities in the United States* (Cambridge UP). He is currently working on a ten-episode podcast on entheogens in the U.S. and beyond, titled *High for a Higher Power*, and recently participated as a panelist in the Psychedelic Intersections: Cross-cultural Manifestations of the Sacred Conference at the Harvard Divinity School.





tradition, historians identify competing voices with often incompatible agendas who ignore said diversity to generalize about an imagined “whole.” Religious studies scholar Aaron Hughes addressed this when he wrote, “We must accordingly be wary of postulating that religions possess essences that move—Hegelian-like—throughout history, manifesting themselves in various times and places. Such a phenomenological model...potentially ignores the conflict and creativity that goes on as various actors and groups seek to define and legitimate themselves by appealing to concepts that they understand as ‘authentic religious teachings.’ The issue, of course, is not that they are ‘authentic,’ but the ways in which they are imagined to be” (2012, 7). From this perspective, McCarthy and Priest employ the rhetoric of “tradition” (and its allusion to “authenticity”) to justify the alleged compatibility of psychedelics and Christianity. As their own paper suggests, however, this rhetorical move has its limits.

McCarthy and Priest identify “healing” as a ubiquitous element of *the* Christian tradition. They appeal, for example, to orthodox theologian Alkiviadis Calivas, who quite recently wrote, “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). This theological claim potentially supports McCarthy and Priest’s attempt to bridge psychedelics with Christianity premised on the shared emphasis on healing; however, this citation invites historical counterexamples that problematize their argument.

To understand my point, consider the Council of Constance in 1415, where the Catholic Church literally tried and convicted theologian John Huss of heresy before turning him over to the “secular court,” which subsequently burned him to death. This trial undermines McCarthy’s and Priest’s argument in at least two ways. First, the Catholic Church literally tried and convicted a man, something that McCarthy and Priest identify as outside *the* Christian tradition. When confronted with this, McCarthy and Priest might attempt to salvage their argument by arguing that the church is *no longer* a court (even though today churches may act as theojudicial bodies. That argument, were they to make it, would itself prove my point—that Christianity evolves and that evolution undermines the idea of religious authenticity or of a single “tradition” within any particular religion.

The Council of Constance is also important because the pope justified the Church’s actions on the grounds that the Council helped “heal its wounds” (<https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum16.htm>). This is an important phrase because, while it does support the idea that Christians have often discussed healing, it also demonstrates that Christians have understood this term in profoundly different ways. For example, the Catholic Church’s notion of healing in the early 1400s was substantively different from notions of healing understood by contemporary Christian psychoanalysts. The former was premised on maintaining unity in the

Catholic Church based on silencing (with potentially lethal force) the church’s critics. The latter pertains to individual healing seemingly premised on psychologically informed models of the self. This example demonstrates diversity within a single alleged tradition.

What, then, are we to make of McCarthy and Hunt’s important question: Is Christianity compatible with psychedelics? The answer, in my estimation, is a resounding yes and an unqualified no; or, an unqualified yes and a resounding no. Paraphrasing Hughes, “Christianity” and “healing” are rhetorical canopies under which multiple and conflicting definitions and possibilities cohabit (2012, 10). From this perspective, psychedelics are just as compatible with Christianity as they aren’t. They are or are not compatible with Christianity because there is no single authoritative, authentic, or traditional essence that underlies or unifies discourses of Christianity. Instead, as people attempt to link psychedelics with Christianity, we will encounter essays like McCarthy and Priest’s which argue in the affirmative, and we’ll also encounter oppositional arguments. Academically, the goal is to recognize these theological arguments as primary sources, much like historical documents produced in the wake of the Council of Constance. That is, these are historically situated and contingent pieces designed to advanced specific discourses of Christianity as they seek to discount or discredit others.

Let me state in the clearest language possible that I am not condemning McCarthy and Priest for making theological arguments. Inspired largely by the work of the late scholar of religion Smith (1982), I am, however, calling scholars, first, to engage in critically informed historical analyses of said data, and second, to be self-aware of their positionality vis-à-vis what will most likely be an abundance of primary sources related to the issue of psychedelics and religion, an issue near and dear to many of the scholars who analyze said data. Given that many scholars researching psychedelics are themselves psychonauts with vested interests in the topic, this self-reflexivity is as important as ever.

## COMMENTARY BY PAUL JONATHAN UNGERLAND<sup>14</sup>

McCarthy and Priest facilitate an insightful introductory and experimental ‘trip’ into the topic of psychedelic substances and psychedelically induced experiences in the context of the

<sup>14</sup>Paul Jonathan Ungerland II (MAR), affectionately dubbed ‘The Bourbon Theologian,’ studied philosophy and religion at University of Colorado (Denver), philosophical theology at Yale Divinity School, and completed a M.A.R. in Philosophical Theology/Philosophy of Religion. Ungerland currently serves as CIO at DaLand LLC after decades serving the not-for-profit financial services sector (credit unions), devoted to their principles of ‘people helping people,’ financial literacy, locally controlled capital, and community governed wealth. Ungerland focuses on topics at the intersection of individual liberty and flourishing in an approaching post-institutional world and post-Christianity West; and access to natural medicines like psilocybin as alternatives to for-profit, politicized, and corporatized intellectual property compounds.



Christian religion. One can hope this sort of convenient, accessible, and intentionally circumscribed discourse will serve as an invitation to clergy, laypeople, and scholars alike to further collaborate and constructively examine this re-emerging and re-energized phenomenon; especially in our present era when it seems the topic is likely to become more commonplace (and contentious) in the dialectical development of our religious, social, and political institutions.

Imagining (hoping!) many readers of this article might be recent initiates into this complex (and perhaps uncomfortable) conversation concerning the intertwining of psychedelic substances and Christian life, readers would do well to explore current trends and recent spikes in local, state, and federal legislative proceedings around psychedelics, their therapeutic and medicinal qualities, and alleged/potential pharmaceutical applications. A cursory search of the internet will yield a wealth of information regarding decriminalization and other legal proceedings at all levels of government in the United States (i.e., [Psychedelic Alpha \[2023, November 29\]](#)). Further, those prone to curious perusal of the internet might consider [peering into the rapidly expanding environmental flush](#) of parachurch organizations offering retreat experiences, therapy, counseling, as well as other individual and collective ‘church’ or ‘Christian’ experiences incorporating psychedelic substances.

Such readily accessible datapoints clearly suggest the topics of “psychedelic Christianity” and “psychedelic religious experiences” are not merely a contrived curiosity of McCarthy and Priest; rather, the issues are of increasingly frequent import into individually lived and institutional forms of faith, and we can reasonably anticipate a sustained dialogue around this issue as psychedelic substances become pharmaceutically commercialized and commonplace in various institutions and communities. One is reminded of the analogous trends and similar events of the early 2000s, during which time cultural moorings (which had existed for over a century) suddenly moved with the surging tide of cannabis legalization and its commercialization and incorporation into many facets of American life. Thus, this piece seems a prudent conversation starter for clergy, counselors, medical practitioners, parish leaders, theologians, etc. Indeed, readers might see in these succinct examples provided by the authors obvious parallels to personal experimentation and alternative therapy experiences everyday parishioners and neighbors are likely already exploring! Pastors and priests especially ought to consider whether the blind man cured by mud and spit (in his personal encounter with Christ) was scoffed at by his religious leaders (especially considering how mushrooms are grown!).

Now, to *briefly* model what it might look like to continue the conversation, I submit the following humble contemplations.

Where the authors here explored questions and problems of ‘psychedelic Christian *religious* experiences,’ I would be inclined to consider whether psychedelics might rather represent organic and chemical catalysts – possible prescriptions – to assist individuals and communities in healing their collective and individual psychological, spiritual, neurological, and religious ailments resulting from decades

of exposure (subjection) to “ghetto faith” of mere religions/religiosity. Of course, if this is the case, this could explain the above noted contemporary spikes in individuals identifying as Christians and those in communities of Christian-being exploring these substances as useful to the life of faith.

Since our authors appealed to [Rahner \(1963\)](#) in their own explorations and analyses, it seems appropriate to examine his words elsewhere, when he says, “where in a given historical situation the most apt form of faith would be an open one, exposing itself to this situation, accepting its challenges and acting as a leaven in the midst, it can through fear turn out to be a ghetto-faith of timid conservatism, of sullen resentment, of arrogant self-satisfaction, of bigotry, of parochial narrow-mindedness, and so on.” (Rahner, p. 51) Further, Rahner asserts the “real content of Christianity” (as a lived, personal faith and not simply as a religious tradition or institution) is, “the ineffability of the absolute mystery that bestows itself in forgiveness and in drawing us into its own divine nature. Moreover, it bestows itself in such a way that we can sustain it, accept it, and once more really receive the capacity to accept it, from itself.” If psychedelic substances and experiences lead to individual encounter with the ineffable, aid the individual in receiving and accepting divine mystery, etc., we ought to consider the risks of parochial narrow-mindedness rooted in fear of certain chemicals.

Looking elsewhere for insight into how the Christian life of faith might correspond to the common language of psychedelic experiences, Carl Jung notes, “Christianity holds at its core a symbol which has for its content the individual way of life of a man, the Son of Man, and that it even regards this individuation process as the incarnation and revelation of God himself. Hence, the development of the self acquires a significance whose full implications have hardly begun to be appreciated, because too much attention to externals blocks the way to immediate inner experience.” ([Jung, 1959a, 1959b](#), p. 49)

Through such lenses we might begin to gain clearer focus on whether psychedelics are manifesting in institutional conversations and being incorporated into the lives of Christian individuals *not* because they are appropriate to external religious ideas or systems, but because they are one effective conduit to the individual encountering the eternal from within temporality, of transcending the self and entering into a the presence of holy mystery, of experiencing the essential immediacy and ineffability of that which is truly Divine.

As Lao Tzu (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laozi>) infamously remarked, “When the student is ready the teacher will appear.” If we’re going to be a genuinely faithful as Christians, we must at least not fear such examinations of psychedelics, even better would be an open disposition to the dialogues of the moment as Christians. However, we must also remember the second half of Lao Tzu’s famous statement, lest we risk supplanting the eternal, life-giving truths of Christian revelation and faith with fleeting individual experiences of that revelation (even those seemingly incomparable, ineffable, and profound ones gained via individual



psychedelic experiences): “when the student is truly ready... The teacher will Disappear.”

## COMMENTARY BY GEORGE G. LAKE<sup>15</sup>

As an entheogen-based attorney and religious practitioner, I would like to first state how honored I am and pleased to see psychedelic studies and practices entering, seemingly, into the realm of established religions such as Christianity. As a matter of initial disclosure, I would like to state that while I am an entheogen-based religious practitioner, I am not a particular follower or practitioner of Christianity. However, I am always pleased to see others in the wider religious culture adopting entheogens into their existing religious ontologies and practices.

As an attorney, I have assisted in establishing over sixty (60) entheogen-based religious organizations/churches over the last several years, including an increasing litigation load, which has allowed me to help advance the rights of all types of entheogen-based religious groups in courts across the United States. It has been an honor to be called to and supported in my work. However, since very few of my existing Church clients have adopted Christian belief sets or engage in any overtly Christian practices, I have been wondering how long it would be before I would see Christians getting involved in the wider psychedelic-religious movement happening all throughout the United States and the world. I am hoping this article is a signal of such a move.

I feel the authors of this article have done a good job at identifying and discussing relevant experiential texts in assessing current adoptions of psychedelics/entheogens into the existing Christian paradigm. There are two further solid instances of psychedelics and Christianity co-existing that have earned their right to practice with entheogens inside the United States; to wit, the União do Vegetal and Santo Daime religions. Both of these organizations have incorporated Christian beliefs and practices with those of South American Ayahuasca shamanism and have done so in a very beautiful and meaningful ways that could help provide even further direction and guidance for psychedelic-based Christianity in the future.

Both the União do Vegetal (UDV, see *Gonzales v. O Centro Espirita Beneficiente Uniao do Vegetal*, 546 U.S. 418 [2006]) and Santo Daime (*Church of Holy Light of Queen v. Mukasey*, 615 F.S Supp. 2d 1210 [D. Or. 2009]), have been granted overt exemptions, from the purview of the Federal

Controlled Substances Act, by the federal courts. In both instances, the question of the religiosity or sincerity of these group’s consumption of N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT), via the Sacred Ayahuasca brew, was never even questioned by the federal government. These two groups ended up in federal court fighting over the safety and diversion aspects of ayahuasca. Both times, the federal government was unable, by a long shot, to prove a “compelling governmental interest” in completely banning the UDV’s and/or Santo Daime’s importation and use, for religious purposes, ayahuasca; which contains the controlled substance DMT. Moreover, the government was unable to show that a complete ban on these group’s importation and religious use of ayahuasca was the “least restrictive means” of furthering any stated interest in enforcing the Controlled Substances Act against either group. As such, each were awarded an overt exemption from the federal Controlled Substances Act and the government was ordered to work, in good faith, with each group in order to safely and effectively import their sacrament into the U.S. where it could then be distributed to the groups’ members via its religious leaders.

Most legal practitioners believe that the government’s failure to object to these religious practices as such, is because of their ties to Christianity. In fact, the U.S. District Court of Wyoming has suggested, in *U.S. v. Meyers*, 906 F.Supp. 1494, 1508 (D. Wyo. 1995), that any mention or relation of entheogen-based practices to Christianity would probably warrant that a court hold these practices to be religious in nature.

As the above analysis suggests, any link between entheogen/psychedelic-based religious practices and Christianity probably warrants an immediate finding that those practices are religious in nature, which is a significant part of the wider analysis of protection under federal law per the Federal Religious Freedom and Restoration Act of 1993. As defining religion under the law has been my specialty within the larger entheogen-based religious space over the last several years, I feel confident to say with some authority that all Christian denominations should not have much, if any legal troubles, in adopting entheogens/psychedelics into their already existing beliefs and practices. Since arguably the United States was founded upon Christianity and it has remained its predominant religion for centuries, it is no secret that most state and the federal legislature are dominated by Christian-leaning politicians, most of whom would presumably provide material assistance needed to assist the wider Christian paradigm in adopting entheogens/psychedelics into their existing practices.

My belief in Christianity’s ease of “legally” adopting entheogens/psychedelics into its existing beliefs and practices is a textbook example of why the free exercise clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution exists in the first place, to predominantly protect minority religious practitioners from laws which incidentally burden their religious practice. Since Christianity dominates most interpretations of statutes across the United States, there is not much likelihood that Christians would ever need to use or justify their use of psychedelics “legally” via the First

<sup>15</sup>George G. Lake (Esq) is an author, researcher, trial and appellate attorney, and entheogen-based religious practitioner whose primary practice involves consulting and litigating on behalf of entheogen-based religious practitioners across the United States, helping them to “enshrine” their rights under both state and federal law. George has published three books concerning both the research and legal landscape surrounding entheogens/psychedelics: *Psychedelics in Mental Health Series: Psilocybin* (2020), *The Law of Entheogenic Churches in the United States* (2021), and *The Law of Entheogenic Churches (Vol. II): The Definition of Religion under the First Amendment* (2022).





Amendment or changes to state or federal law. More likely, is the scenario where the legislatures move to pass legislation at the behest and to the benefit of Christians, incidentally also benefiting, under principles of equal protection as guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the wider entheogen-based religious space which is growing and evolving in the United States and across the globe.

As opposed to Christianity, non-Christian entheogen-based religions in the United States will likely face opposition regarding the religiosity of their beliefs, and resulting practices, if the government chooses to call the validity of their religion into question. As medical science continues to further prove up safety claims, which in turn alleviate concerns over diversion, the government's only last point of attack is on sincerity and/or religious grounds (See Religious Freedom and Restoration Act of 1993, 42 U.S.C. 2000 bb et seq). Most of the time, these two sub-analyses track so closely it's hard to distinguish the two. However, for the most part, sets of religious beliefs and resulting practices need to contain at least four elements to square with what seems to be the predominant definition of religion in courts across the United States- ultimate ideas, metaphysical beliefs, moral or ethical system, and comprehensive belief statements (See *U.S. v. Meyers*, 906 F.Supp. 1494, 1502 (D. Wyo. [1995])). The level on inclusion/exclusion of any given element will vary from group to group, and the courts have both recognized and accepted this variance as a reality (See *Id.*).

In addition to the inclusion of the aforementioned factors, these non-Christian entheogen-based religious groups must also learn how to properly evidence such beliefs, and resulting practices, using highly admissible and probative forms of evidentiary records. By way of example, using a religious non-profit's corporate record to include all relevant documents and/or discussions of such matters is a good way to "enshrine" these beliefs and practices. However, the last and most important element for all these groups will be to act in a safe and responsible manner, always keeping up an appearance of sincerity in both belief and practice. The quickest and most surefire way to come under government scrutiny is being unsafe and/or insincere in religious practice; this cannot be stressed enough!

In closing, I would like to reiterate my support for Christianity's wider adoption for entheogens/psychedelics into its existing beliefs and practices. I support this as a matter of principle, as I believe that access to psychedelics/entheogens should be accessible to all, particularly those who approach them with respect and reverence. Also, I support this move because laws supporting Christianity's adoption of entheogens/psychedelics would also have to support, to the same degree, other minority religions' adoption of the same. As someone who has witnessed first-hand the adoption of psychedelics/entheogens by many in the United States with Christian beliefs and practices, I believe it fair to say that Christianity should move towards adoption of psychedelics/entheogens sooner rather than later, as those leaving Christianity in favor of entheogen/psychedelic based beliefs

and practices is increasing by the day. As such, if Christianity fails to move with the masses in a timely manner, this can change the legal landscape for the religion moving forward.

## COMMENTARY BY J. KALEB GRAVES<sup>16</sup>

Many Christians have an unfortunate habit of conflating orthodoxy with familiarity and heterodoxy with foreignness. In a religion characterized by God's protection of apostolic tradition or scripture, an individual's own practice of faith is often unconsciously made into a standard by which all others are judged. For entheogens to be included in the religious life of orthodox Christians, this tendency must be overcome. This challenge must be faced before widespread psychedelic theological reflection or spiritual care will take root within Christian tradition.

The evangelical theologian John E. Sanders has compared the confusion of strangeness with heresies to Heffalumps (Sanders, 2002). In the classic Disney movie, Winnie-the-Pooh knows that he is terrified of Heffalumps, but he cannot describe one. Without a clear description, he fears Heffalumps solely because they are exotic. A similar tendency can be observed among some Christians. In a quickly changing world where theological analysis cannot keep pace, contemporary challenges which diverge from standard experience are treated with extreme suspicion or condemned as heresy.

Psychedelics are particularly susceptible to rejection on these grounds. Media portrayal and online psychedelic influencers describe psychedelics in millenarian language that emphasize their novelty. Psychedelics are ushering in a "new era," "revolution," "renaissance," or perhaps even a "second coming." Insider language also exoticizes psychedelics. Terms like "ego death" or "entheogen" do not possess meaning readily available to those outside the psychedelic community. These terms and others like them function as semantic shibboleths which distinguish between the knowing and the uninitiated.

How can advocates overcome this conflation of familiar and orthodoxy to foster exploratory psychedelic use and healing care within Christian communities? One strategy is respectability politics. If the barrier to acceptance is peculiarity, advocates must convince the typical Christian public that psychedelics will not upend the status quo. From my perspective, this approach would almost immediately be doomed to failure. Psychedelics are closely associated with counterculture and the outer limits of acceptable thought and belief, even social deviance. The Psychedelic Evangelicals mentioned by Priest and McCarthy are one example of

<sup>16</sup>J. Kaleb Graves (MDiv, Duke Divinity School) is a Baptist preacher working as Justice Coordinator at Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. Graves' research focuses on political theology and alternative states of consciousness in religion. Graves provides contextualized entheogen education through Psychedelic Theology, a resource he created to prepare Christians for psychedelic use in their local communities.





this failure. Despite the clear success of their Living Room ministry and initial positive publicity, their outsider lifestyle meant that it only took one piece of negative press to destroy the movement (Eskridge, 2013, 40–45).

In addition to reducing the use of insider language, a hereto underutilized alternative strategy is the comparison of psychedelics with the abnormality within specific Christian sects. Although Christianity is mainstream within modern society, its denominations and subsects harbor practices and beliefs that are alien and suspicious even to other Christian groups.

Dreams are taken quite seriously as divine experiences within some Christian traditions. *Lectio Divina* or the Ignatian exercises seek to foster powerful internal imagery through imaginative prayer. Eastern Orthodoxy is drenched in mystical practices, particularly the mantric chanting of hesychasm described in the *Philokalia*. The ecstatic experience of glossolalia has also made a resurgence, practiced not only by Pentecostals, but also among Charismatic Anglicans and Catholics.

These and other practices and spontaneous experiences are affirmed and normalized within some Christian sects or subsects, but they appear foreign, even frightening, to non-Christians and other Christians sects. Hesychasm was and continues to be mocked as literal “navel gazing.” Dream interpretation continues to be disregarded as meaningless nightly hallucinations on par with horoscopes. Glossolalia is parodied negatively both in Christian and secular media.

Ministers, theologians, and lay people sympathetic to the cause of psychedelic therapy and exploration may find fertile ground for progress by making culturally appropriate comparisons to elements of their own denominations which are unusual. By embracing familiar strangeness within their own tradition, the faithful may discern a strange familiarity within the world of psychedelics. Engaging a defense of sacred abnormality among Christians may soften the theological hermeneutic of suspicion toward that which is unfamiliar.

One may object to the idea that the psychedelic experience could be compared to phenomena like active imagination or dreams on the grounds that the former is radically different than the latter. However, it may be that this difference is one of *intensity*, not *quality*. In our disenchanted modern framework, dreams or contemplative imagination are not often taken very seriously compared to waking visions. Yet in the premodern world, this was not the case. Dreams and other “lesser” theophanies were considered to be the same substance as waking visions (Hanson, 1980).

The thoughtful observer can realize that rigid demarcation between the psychedelic state and other non-ordinary states of consciousness may be a result of cultural or theological norms, not careful phenomenological taxonomy or scientific investigation. Indeed, there are known similarities between the vivid dream states and psychedelic states (Kraehenmann, 2017).

As McCarthy and Priest rightly conclude in their presently considered article, Christianity possesses a “wealth of existing spiritual practices, rituals, story, and communities

of caring to support Christians in this work.” The problem facing psychedelic Christians today is not identifying sources to support psychedelic care and use, nor is it to decide “should we or shouldn’t we?” The resources already exist, and Christians are already partaking. The Christian church must learn to effectively utilize these resources to make psychedelic care accessible and relatable for Christians of any affiliation and background. Overcoming the tendency to conflate the familiar with the orthodox is one facet of that project.

## REPLY BY BRYAN MCCARTHY<sup>17</sup> AND HUNT PRIEST<sup>18</sup>

This is an exciting forum. Many excellent questions and challenges were raised to our article and we are grateful to those who participated for taking it seriously and responding thoughtfully to the issues it broached. We would also like to thank our impresario, Michael Winkelman, for convening this panel and affirming the value of our work. At every juncture in the somewhat lengthy process, he has been patient, sagacious, and magnanimous. While it would be difficult to address every high-quality point from our commenters in this response, we would like to highlight those we found especially redolent, hoping that, in so doing, we address at least the main thrusts of our commenters’ offerings.

### “Traditional” Christianity

Several raised questions about the polyvalence of one or another phenomenon we discussed. We say, for example, 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” and that “very little has been said about

<sup>17</sup>Bryan McCarthy (D.Phil.) teaches Post-Kantian Philosophy, Eastern Thought, Philosophy of Religion, and Business Ethics at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg. In his scholarship, he focuses on how material things augment or hinder authentic religiosity and spirituality. Specifically, he is interested in the extent to which clothing and psychedelics shape our self-experience and how this impacts religious and spiritual pursuits. McCarthy recently published “Christianity and Psychedelic Medicine: A Pastoral Approach” and is working on several multidisciplinary studies at this intersection.

<sup>18</sup>Hunt Priest is an ordained priest in The Episcopal Church and the founding Executive Director of Ligare: A Christian Psychedelic Society, a non-profit network of Christian leaders educating themselves and those they lead about the intersection of open-hearted Christianity and the Psychedelic renaissance. A participant in the Johns Hopkins/NYU Religious Professionals Study in early 2016, he had two life-changing mystical experiences under the care of the research team. His encounters with psilocybin opened him to the healing and consciousness-raising power of psychedelics and changed the landscape of his work. In April 2021 Hunt took an extended break from full-time parish ministry to expand his priesthood out into the emerging intersection of psychedelics and religion, specifically Christianity.



how a traditional Christian mindset might shape the psychedelic experience and, conversely, how the latter might interact with a traditional Christian faith and practice.” Just what do we mean by words like “traditional” and “Christian?”

In connection with this, Tracy J. Trothen muses, “I’m not sure how we should define ‘traditional theology’ and if ‘traditional theology’ is more important to the psychedelic conversation than theologies that have emerged from the social margins.” In particular, she observes that we cite Rick Sacks’ recollection of an LSD experience, in which he uses a masculine—and, indeed, capitalized—pronoun for God. Should we really treat this as “divinely-inspired,” she challenges, or, rather, as Sacks’ all-too-human and all-too-patriarchal conditioning? We share Trothen’s concern here. In addition, we would add that, while we do believe God speaks regularly and that a psychedelic experience may help some hear that speech, it is still mediated via the set and setting, which includes social, religious, political, and cultural frameworks. Thus, treating the content of psychedelic visions as “divinely-inspired” or even true is a mixed bag at best. Although this insight-imparting or “noetic” feature outlined by William James (2002 [1902], 294–5) as a mark of “mystical” experiences is increasingly thought to play a role in the healing psychedelics effect, it also presents a number of challenges and risks of the kind Trothen raises, and more (Timmermann et al., 2022). Hence, Brian Pace and Neşe Devenot draw on insights from Stan Grof (2008, 102; 2009) and Eric Lonergan (2021) to suggest that psychedelics are “politically pluripotent, non-specific amplifiers of the political set and setting” (Pace and Devenot, 2021).

On the more fundamental question of “how we should define ‘traditional theology’ [‘traditional Christianity’ was our actual phrase],” we were—and are—not lobbying for a particular answer, which is part of the reason our examples come from such different flavors of traditional Christianity. Indeed, we think it fair to speak of “traditional Christianities,” just as others in this issue of the journal have spoken of “Christianities” generally. We had something like “Nicene” in mind and will stick to this definition herein, but we recognize that such creedal commitment does not occur in a vacuum but is instead had by a host of communities, with the traditions, beliefs, practices, and cultures they inhabit. Many of these diverge not only from what we would endorse but also from each other. Nor do we think traditional Christianity “is more important to the psychedelic conversation than theologies that have emerged from the social margins.” Our statements should be read with an “even” in them: “The therapeutic and spiritual outcomes suggested by the literature of the psychedelic renaissance are at least potentially compatible with the faith and practice of *even* traditional Christianity.”

The reason this is non-trivial is that, as Brad Stoddard noted in his comment, many people will—or more accurately already do—think the two are *not* compatible. The essential point for us is that even if “traditional Christianity” is defined to include the most objectionable beliefs and behaviors the heading is used to justify, we still want the

person with those beliefs and behaviors to be healed. And if we might hazard some hope, to the extent that these beliefs and behaviors are the product of hatred and the wounds that produce it, such healing—whether wrought psychedelically or not—may even help correct the problem.

Misgivings along these lines were also offered by Jerry B. Brown and Marc G. Blainey, who thought we should have included in our discussion more established psychedelic groups who incorporate Christian elements into their religious practice. Brown, for example, speculated that, “Perhaps unbeknownst to McCarthy and Priest, several forms of Christian psychedelic pastoral praxis have been present in America for over half a century—albeit underground” and referred to Mike Marinacci’s new monograph, *Psychedelic Cults and Outlaw Churches: LSD, Cannabis, and Spiritual Sacraments in Underground America* (2023). In fact, we knew of some of these communities. However, the title of Marinacci’s volume (“outlaw churches”) shows why they are largely outside the parameters of our article, as does Brown’s quote from its introduction: “Scores of churches, sects, and circles dedicated to using psychoactive substances like peyote, LSD, cannabis, and others as ways to experience the Transcendent and Divine, have appeared across the continent’s spiritual landscape, challenging orthodox conceptions of what ‘religion’ is, and how it can be experienced and communicated.” We say “largely” here because, for example, one of Marinacci’s “outlaw churches” is Anne Armstrong’s The Healing Church, which she saw “not as a distinct sect” but as a “cannabis-friendly Catholicism” since she “maintains that nowhere in canonical Catholic teachings is cannabis specifically condemned” (2023, 294–5). So, this may be an instance on par with our own examples. On the other hand, Armstrong also maintains that her church is an “apostolate” of Rome so further research would be required to discern how well it fits our aims. In any case, Marinacci’s primary focus is psychedelic “outlaw” churches that, as he says, challenge orthodox Christian understanding. That is an important and enlightening project that can help Christians of any stripe interested in psychedelics by keeping them honest. We think it is also important, however, to work out how Christians who are not challenging orthodoxy might allow psychedelics to augment their faith and practice and we do not think that is obviously the same as the work Marinacci has done or that Brown seems to be advocating.

Similarly, Blainey suggested that “instead of rushing headlong into presumptuously reinventing the wheel of ‘how a Christian psychedelic practice might look,’” we should “familiarize [our]selves with traditions that have already devised mature systems of psychedelic Christianity” offering as examples what he refers to as “syncretic” groups: Santo Daime, the Native American Churches, and Bwiti. Our answer here is the same. While Blainey and Brown’s shared intuition is correct that such groups, though known to us, are not our area of expertise, we are happy to trust Blainey’s scholarly estimation that these groups are syncretic. What this means, though, is that the psychedelic Christian practice of such communities would not help us show what it might look like for non-syncretic Christians to incorporate



psychedelic usage into their practice, which is part of what we set out to do. Blainey says the above three “exemplars show that—given the tendency of psychedelics to dissolve conceptual barriers—tomorrow’s entheogenic Christianities are unlikely to remain within mainstream denominational silos and are more likely to incorporate syncretic mixtures of multi-faith perennialism.” This is an empirical claim, and it may well turn out to be correct. We will see. But what it demonstrates is that the project Blainey commends is different from ours. If, as he says, the mere presence of these groups shows that psychedelic Christianity is bound to “incorporate syncretic mixtures of multi-faith perennialism,” then they only allow us to investigate syncretic, perennialist Christianity’s use of psychedelics. We have no problem with that line inquiry; it is just not the one our article adopted. As a point of common ground, we wholeheartedly agree that Christians can learn from the groups Blainey adduces, and appreciate his suggestion. Moreover, while the focus of our article is the psychedelic healing and spiritual growth of Christians, including the traditional ones, to the extent that a lack of such healing and growth contributes to problems between the latter and everyone else, psychedelics may even assist in preventing further tensions.

Brad Stoddard also queried our interest in “traditional Christianity.” Here, we would like to clarify a few points. Stoddard contends that we “identify ‘healing’ as a ubiquitous element of *the* Christian tradition [italics Stoddard’s],” that “the Catholic Church literally tried and convicted a man, something that McCarthy and Priest identify as outside *the* Christian tradition [italics Stoddard’s],” and even that we “employ the rhetoric of ‘tradition’ (and its allusion to ‘authenticity’) to justify the alleged compatibility of psychedelics and Christianity.” These statements misread our analysis. First, we employed the language of “tradition/al” only a handful of times, in two places, each with a different usage and purpose. The first is the line we have twice quoted here about the compatibility of psychedelic usage and “traditional Christianity.” This appears in our introduction to describe what we tried to demonstrate in *previous* work and to contrast that objective with Brian C. Muraresku’s thesis arguing for the existence of a proto-Christian “religion with no name.” We were pointing out, in other words, that regardless of whether one accepts Muraresku’s thesis that the Catholic Church snuffed out its psychedelic roots, we have hitherto argued that psychedelic use is at least potentially compatible with Christianity in such a traditional form. Our article did not rehearse these arguments but sought to show what it could look like to pursue that compatibility. Then, in the “psychedelic clergy” section, we spoke of “Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian traditions,” of the “Orthodox tradition,” and of “how Christian communities, institutions, and individuals might respond while maintaining faithfulness to the inherited tradition.” Here, where a “tradition” of Christianity is adduced, it is in the context of acknowledging that while Christianity is, yes, heterogenous, its “communities, institutions, and individuals” draw on resources commending devotion to Christ, as distinct from the traditions of Judaism, Islam,

Buddhism, and other religions. That does not mean we believe there is a “the” monolithic or homogenous Christianity, as our use of the expression “Orthodox tradition” should indicate, since it distinguishes the tradition of the Eastern churches from that of Roman Catholicism and various strains of Protestantism.

Second, concerning the claim that the trials and convictions administered by the Catholic Church are “something that McCarthy and Priest identify as outside *the* Christian tradition [italics Stoddard’s],” this actually refers to a claim made by the Orthodox theologian Alkiviadis Kalivas. True, we did quote the entirety of Kalivas’ sentence and did not specifically denounce the first part of it that contains what Stoddard is contesting, but it was the second part that interested us and that we discussed: “the church is [...] a hospital that offers healing.” We think Kalivas would probably object to having the actions of the Roman Catholic Church cited as evidence that he’s wrong about the Orthodox church not being a “court in which men are tried” and we regard the most charitable interpretation of Kalivas to conclude that he meant the church *should* not be a court, even if it sometimes fails to live up to this ideal. Regardless, Stoddard’s beef here is with Kalivas, not us.

Finally, as we hope is clear by now, we do not “employ the rhetoric of ‘tradition’ (and its allusion to ‘authenticity’) to justify the alleged compatibility of psychedelics and Christianity.” What we did in previous work is *argue* that psychedelics are at least potentially compatible with Christian faith and practice, *even if* the “rhetoric of tradition (and its allusion to ‘authenticity’)” might suggest otherwise. In other words, we are not saying that some notion of “tradition” we hold dear will “justify” the compatibility. We are saying that the compatibility is arguably there, even if we grant accounts of “traditional Christianity” held by most of those who identify as a “traditional Christian.” Now, we could turn out to be wrong about that. After all, it is still very early in this conversation. Stoddard again: “as people attempt to link psychedelics with Christianity, we will encounter essays like this one which argue in the affirmative, and we’ll also encounter oppositional arguments.” Indeed, our previous work did argue affirmatively with respect to whether psychedelics and Christianity are potentially compatible. We understand others will argue otherwise. In fact, we imagine we are in the minority here and our writing on this topic is intended, *inter alia*, to invite such counter-argument and see what comes of the debate.

### Drawing psychedelic Christianity’s contours

Another challenge raised by some commenters is that our examples might paint too individualistic, too insufficiently communal a picture of psychedelic Christianity. Trothen, for example, noted that “theological concepts such as repentance and salvation [...] seem to be understood more as individualistic than communal concepts,” as in Wise’s and Doop’s “rat in the basement” conversions. She wondered if we might think of the love experienced in our examples from psychedelic clergy as a more communal



kind of salvation. Similarly, Blainey regarded our examples as indicative of “independent/experimental Christian psychonauts (or entheonauts)” rather than a “psychedelic/entheogenic ‘Christianity’ within structured community.” These commenters are raising important points. Actually, we would not circumscribe psychedelic Christianity to solitary experiences of the kind we provide in our article, nor do we have any interest in, as Harry T. Hunt’s comment put it, the “hyper-individualism” permeating much of not only American Christianity but also American—or perhaps Western—culture generally. Part of the problem is that, given our methodology of using extant examples to show how it might look for traditional Christians to adopt a psychedelic practice, we are necessarily limited to the “experimental” because we are still on the frontier of this intersection. To our knowledge, there are no traditional Christian communities employing psychedelics as a group. Furthermore, we opted not to clean up or correct the theology of the people in the examples we chose—whatever that might mean—even where we fleshed out some phenomenological possibilities for interpretation, e.g. with Rahner and Calivas.

The idea was to present different flavors of traditional Christianity employing psychedelics to show some contours of the phenomenon we are examining and of the inquiry we hope to invite about it. Judging by the variegation of the comments, this has, thus far, been a success. Nevertheless, we do recognize the problem that a highly individualistic society and its concomitant Christianity is teed up to produce a highly individualistic psychedelic version thereof. Consequently, we also recognize the importance of, as resources become available, presenting options in the opposite spirit. At the same time, we do not believe there is anything wrong with individual recourse to these substances. If the future of psychedelic Christianity involves circles of practitioners building healthy psychedelic community in Christ together, we welcome it. But, from our point of view, it is equally welcome for the psychedelic Christians of the future to pursue psychedelic substances and experiences insofar as, to use the language of P. Jonathan Ungerland’s comment, they “lead to individual encounter with the ineffable, aid the individual in receiving and accepting divine mystery.”

In addition to asking many prescient questions about the future of Christianity’s engagement with psychedelics, G. William Barnard’s comment offered some constructive remarks on this issue of the individual vs. the communal. Early on, he says, “Up until now, the indigenous/syncretistic use of psychedelics has, understandably, been the focus of most of the theorizing about the religious use of psychedelics. But as the ‘psychedelic renaissance’ begins to touch the wider culture, we are already seeing glimmers of what might happen when these powerful, transformative substances start to interact with more traditional forms of religious belief and practice (e.g., with more mainstream forms of Christianity).” He then sketches some implications of incorporating psychedelics into Christian retreats and similar settings: “In these overtly religious contexts, I would assume that religious/spiritual language, icons, music, and

other elements of religious/spiritual life could (should?) be used consciously, with faith, hope, and love, to cultivate a ‘set and setting’ that is as uplifting and spiritually transformative as possible.” These “more overtly religious psychedelic encounters,” he says, “could conceivably take place with others, communally, and in a regular, ongoing way, as part of a disciplined contemplative practice.” Indeed, our society may be receiving a second chance to interact with these substances more carefully and wholistically than it did in the period when Wise and co. and Luce and her circle were active. *Inter alia*, this would entail bringing more rigorous mental health research to a culture experiencing a “mental health crisis,” as found by a recent White House report (OSTP, 2023), in tandem with what Surgeon General Vivek Murthy called an “epidemic of loneliness” (OASH, 2023) and a hunger for more meaningful religious and spiritual experiences.

In ways as different as their respective disciplines, George G. Lake’s and William A. Richards’ comments also contemplate the future of psychedelic Christianity. Lake discusses the intersection of psychedelic practices with Christianity from his perspective as an attorney who has “assisted in establishing over sixty entheogen-based religious organizations/churches.” As he expresses support for the incorporation of psychedelics into Christianity, he cites União do Vegetal’s (UDV’s) and Santo Daime’s success in integrating psychedelics into their practices with legal exemptions. One of the more interesting and counterintuitive points this analysis countenances is that

Most legal practitioners believe that the government’s failure to object to these religious practices [in UDV and Santo Daime] as such, is because of their ties to Christianity. In fact, the U.S. District Court of Wyoming has suggested, in *U.S. v. Meyers*, 906 F. Supp. 1494, 1508 (D. Wyo. 1995), that any mention or relation of entheogen-based practices to Christianity would probably warrant that a court hold these practices to be religious in nature.

The relevant portion of the decision reads thus:

Had Meyers asserted that the Church of Marijuana was a Christian sect, and that his beliefs were related to Christianity, this Court probably would have been compelled to conclude that his beliefs were religious. Under these hypothetical circumstances, Meyers would have been able to fit his beliefs into a tradition that is indisputably religious. If Meyers had linked his beliefs to Christianity, the Court could not have inquired into the orthodoxy or propriety of his beliefs, no matter how foreign they might be to the Christian tradition. [*United States v. Meyers*, 1995, 1508]

Earlier, the decision lists over two dozen “sets of beliefs” that would qualify as “religious,” including all the largest religions as well as Scientology and, “more likely than not,” “Paganism, Zoroastrianism, Pantheism, Animism, Wicca, Druidism, Satanism, and Santeria” (*United States v. Meyers*, 1995, 1503–4). Glossing this list, the decision reads, “All of this probable inclusion leads to an obvious question: Is anything excluded? Purely personal, political, ideological, or secular beliefs probably would not satisfy enough criteria





for inclusion.” Examples of such belief, the decision says, include “nihilism, anarchism, pacifism, utopianism, socialism, libertarianism, Marxism, vegetism, and humanism” (*United States v. Meyers*, 1995, 1504). Taking all this into account, it seems fair to agree with Lake’s contention that, given Christianity’s prevalence in the United States, if a sizable contingency of its practitioners advocated for psychedelic usage as part of living out their faith, “no matter how foreign [it] might be to the Christian tradition,” it could play a decisive role in the legal adjudication of religious usage. However, the fact that the court did not name Christianity alone here as relevant but, instead, cast a broad net for its interpretation of the word “religious” suggests potential cooperation between adherents of various religions in working toward a more legally flexible future for recourse to these substances.

Regarding the role Christianity could take in this process, Lake says, “it is no secret that most state and the federal legislature are dominated by Christian-leaning politicians, most of whom would presumably provide material assistance needed to assist the wider Christian paradigm in adopting entheogens/psychedelics into their existing practices.” Thus, “there is not much likelihood that Christians would ever need to use or justify their use of psychedelics ‘legally’ via the First Amendment or changes to state or federal law. More likely, is the scenario where the legislatures move to pass legislation at the behest and to the benefit of Christians.” We would like to agree with Lake here and are open to being proven wrong. We are not, however, quite so optimistic as to say that “most” of the “Christian-leaning politicians [...] would presumably provide material assistance needed to assist the wider Christian paradigm in adopting entheogens/psychedelics into their existing practices.” It is hard to predict the future regarding how many “Christian-leaning politicians” would help pave the legal way for what we have called “psychedelic Christianity” (mutually informative and, ideally, mutually supportive Christian practice and psychedelic experience), as opposed to treating it as a threat to Christian orthodoxy. But the resistance to loosening restrictions on even cannabis from some prominent Christian politicians is not a promising sign. For example, fourteen lawmakers recently wrote a letter to the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), requesting that it ignore the recommendation from the department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to reschedule cannabis as Schedule III rather than Schedule I (*United States Congressman Pete Sessions*, 2023). Many of these legislators, including Sens. Ted Budd (*United States Senator Ted Budd*, n.d.), James Lankford (Ross, 2017), Mike Rounds (*EWTN News Nightly*, 2020), and Rep. Chuck Edwards (*Chuck Edwards for Congress*, n.d.) have been public about their Christian faith and its role in their politics. And current Speaker of the House Mike Johnson along with Reps. Bob Good and Andy Harris as well as Sen. Pete Ricketts have all opposed cannabis reform (Jaeger, 2023; Representative Bob Good, 2021; Congressman Andy Harris, 2024; Cummings, 2021, respectively) and are on record speaking about their Christian faith (Karni, Graham, & Eder, 2023; Bob Good for

Congress, n.d.; Gaudiano, 2015; Grace, 2015, respectively). While we cannot know for sure, it is difficult to imagine there not being a similar wave of Christian politicians in opposition to psychedelic legal reform. There may, however, be a countervailing trend in Christian politicians who, like former Gov. Rick Perry (Gillespie, 2023) and Rep. Dan Crenshaw (*Congressman Dan Crenshaw*, 2023), support such reform on therapeutic grounds, even though this would not be strictly religious in the sense of being advocated solely to “assist the wider Christian paradigm in adopting entheogens/psychedelics into their existing practices.”

Lake concludes by advocating for Christianity’s timely adoption of psychedelics to align with evolving societal trends and to maintain its relevance or, put differently, as a way of living out its ministry and mission in the twenty-first century: “Christianity should move towards adoption of psychedelics/entheogens sooner rather than later, as those leaving Christianity in favor of entheogen/psychedelic based beliefs and practices is increasing by the day.” The point here seems to be that people currently see Christianity and a psychedelic practice as mutually incompatible approaches to spirituality. The upshot of this, for Lake, is that they are “leaving Christianity in favor of entheogen/psychedelic based beliefs [...] by the day” and, therefore, that “adoption of psychedelics/entheogens sooner rather than later” would prevent this from happening. Demonstrating either of these claims—that Christians are rapidly replacing Christianity with “entheogen/psychedelic based beliefs” and that Christianity’s adoption of psychedelics will prevent this—or their negations would require a study in and of itself. At very least, however, Bill Barnard’s related claim that psychedelic experiences, “could [alongside more challenging possibilities] reinvigorate the faith of participants (and perhaps bring about a revitalization of mainstream Christian congregations)” seems plausible enough to warrant thinking through its implications. After all, a recent Pew poll found not only that 28% of the U.S. are religiously unaffiliated and that 90% of those “Seldom/Never” attend religious services, but also that only 41% of the religiously affiliated “go to religious services at least monthly” (*Pew Research Center*, 2024). One of the implications of Bill Barnard’s point that psychedelics could improve this situation is that, as Jon Ungerland’s comment put it, “we ought to consider the risks of parochial narrow-mindedness rooted in fear of certain chemicals.”

William A. Richards’ comment reflects on the intersection of psychedelic experiences and spirituality and their potential significance for deep experiences and meaning-making within the context of the world’s religions. As he notes, the current resurgence of interest and use of psychedelics represents more than mere curiosity about psychedelic substances; it signifies a profound inquiry into human consciousness and the mysteries of existence, which the world’s religious traditions, including Christianity, extensively probe, and, at their best, freely illuminate. Richards stresses that the wide range of meaningful, intuitive content that emerges during psychedelic sessions underscores the importance of what he calls “interpersonal grounding” and a supportive and safe environment for such



explorations. As the legal situation in relation to these substances develops, Christian communities collaborating with well-trained facilitators and therapists and open to traditions with long histories using plant medicines stand to provide this kind of environment for their members.

But Richards refrains from treating such elements of “set and setting” as fully controllable or uniquely decisive, for, in his telling, something else is operative besides our conscious agency, as it is typically construed: “I also have come to trust entelechy (meaningful skillfully-choreographed intuitive content emerging during the action of psychedelics).” With “entelechy,” Richards appeals to a notoriously difficult-to-interpret term of Aristotle’s coinage that one scholar calls “a three-ring circus of a word” (Sachs, 2004, 189), so it is not clear how much we can say about it in relation to psychedelics. But Richards’ volume, *Sacred Knowledge* puts it this way:

The philosophical term “entelechy” refers to a purposive, meaningful process of unfolding content within awareness. In visionary states, quite in contrast to the fleeting visual phenomena typically encountered when psychedelics are ingested in relatively low dosage, the images and thematic progressions that lead one toward and into mystical consciousness and that appear as the ego subsequently begins to become reconstituted are often experienced not as random, but as creatively choreographed. [2016, 54]

The tendency of the “entelechy” in psychedelic experiences to “effect personal teachings, redemption, or transformation,” Richards further explains, has earned both ayahuasca and peyote the appellative “The Teacher,” and similarly for the variety of *Psilocybe cubensis* known as “Golden Teacher” (2016, 54). So, somehow, *something* is “choreographing” the “intuitive content emerging during the action of psychedelics.” This raises Tracy Trothen’s question anew. Who is doing the “purposive” choreography—the “golden teaching”—in these experiences? Is it God? Is it the person who took the substance? Is it the substance itself, i.e. the psychedelic plant, fungi, or—especially germane to clinical studies—chemical compound?

Richards does not address the issue, but, in discussing the role of religion in psychedelics, he does suggest a comportment for those taking psychedelics to adopt toward the purposive choreography: “The role of *faith* [emphasis original], not necessarily as adherence to a specific religious creed, but as a conscious decision to ‘choose to trust’, that is, to relinquish usual ego controls, is of fundamental importance in both religious lives and psychedelic-assisted explorations.” So, whoever or whatever is doing the teaching in the psychedelic experience, Richards is recommending that the one having it take a leaf out of the religious—or maybe Christian—playbook and exercise faith, which he understands as “trust” and “relinquish[ing] usual ego controls.” The point, it seems, is to trust and surrender to the purposive choreography.

Richards also outlines what he takes to be the most important effects of such trust and surrender. While some will emphasize the relevance of psychedelic healing for such

religious phenomena as “forgiveness and new beginnings,” his comment says, “the states of consciousness most noteworthy for religious scholars are: (1) visionary or archetypal experiences in which the everyday self (ego) remains present as observer/participant; and (2) unitive-mystical experiences that entail the transcendence (death and rebirth) of the ego.” Richards notes that both experiences transcend religious boundaries, resonating with individuals across various belief systems, from committed practitioners to self-described agnostics. Interestingly, he exalts neither type of experience over against the other. Both are offered by psychedelics, “both can occur in the same person,” and “both are usually reported to be profoundly revelatory and meaningful.” This democratic approach to the two types of experience is made more explicit in the comment by Bill Barnard, who also wrote the forward to *Sacred Knowledge*, where Richards fleshes out the distinction further (2016, 37–98, especially 78–9): “much more theorizing is needed on the relationship between mystical and visionary levels of experience—all too often the visionary aspects of psychedelic experience are either ignored or denigrated, or are conflated with the more unitive, mystical dimensions of the experiences.”

The purposive choreography, then, happens both in the busy spectacle of visionary experiences and in the diffuse and time/space-transcendent unitive-mystical experiences. These often overlap and/or occur in sequence, Richards tell us, but, in either case, the golden teaching is present for those with, as Jesus put it on several occasions, ears to hear. There is, though, a real discussion to be had about how much of this teaching emanates from the true, the good, and the beautiful, and how much originates from a more shadowy place. Perhaps part of the reason “the visionary aspects of psychedelic experience are either ignored or denigrated” is that they sometimes conflict with metaphysical and ethical principles held by the one having the experience or with society at large, as in Trothen’s concern that Rick Sacks’ vision “may reflect normative male and anthropocentric God imagery, [...] reinforcing systemic power-over dynamics.” What else might a psychedelic experience have to “teach” us that we would find objectionable?

J. Kaleb Graves’ light-hearted and thought-provoking comment draws on John Sanders’ endearing comparison of heresy with the Heffalumps that Pooh and Piglet know nothing about but try to trap in the children’s classic *Winnie the Pooh*, by A. A. Milne (Sanders, 2002, 25; cf. Milne, 1926, 56ff.). Heffalumps are weird and we do not really understand them. So, too, are psychedelics, Graves reminds us—as are, from the normie, Pooh-and-Piglet perspective, the people who are drawn to them. Thus, he warns, the strategy that psychedelic “advocates must convince the typical Christian public that psychedelics will not upend the status quo” “would almost immediately be doomed to failure. Psychedelics are closely associated with counterculture and the outer limits of acceptable thought and belief, even social deviance.” After all, “it only took one piece of negative press to destroy the movement” Wise and his friends started in the Haight-Ashbury. The better solution, then, Graves says, is “making culturally appropriate comparisons to elements of

their own denominations which are unusual,” e.g. Orthodoxy’s *hesychasm* and the glossolalia of Pentecostals and Charismatic Anglicans and Catholics. In other words, psychedelic Christians can make the renewed interest in these compounds more palatable to their Pooh-and-Piglet co-religionists by pointing out that Christians do weird things too.

We very much appreciated and smiled at this counter-proposal of “sacred abnormality.” At the same time, we do think there are grounds for (genuinely) friendly debate here. Is it really so clear, for example, that the “typical Christian public” cannot be convinced “that psychedelics will not upend the status quo?” And this is to say nothing of the even less substantiated claim that underlies this public prejudice—which, to his credit, Graves does not propose and which we have already treated above—i.e. that psychedelics *must* upend the status quo. We understand that “Psychedelics are closely associated with counterculture and the outer limits of acceptable thought and belief, even social deviance” and that “it only took one piece of negative press to destroy the movement,” but a lot has changed since sixties. We have far more research demonstrating the salutary impact of psychedelics than we had then, and the public, including the “typical Christian public,” appear to be open to this research (which may be why Graves can assert, “Christians are already partaking”). We also have more information about the lack of understanding and, sometimes, ill motives of the government in outlawing these substances, e.g. Nixon aid John Ehrlichman’s infamous confession that their administration sought to criminalize psychedelics and cannabis to neutralize the political cachet of hippies and black Americans, respectively (Baum, 2016, 22). Moreover, public trust not only in the government but also in the media is much lower now than it was then (Jones, 2022) so it is far from obvious that it would still “only [take] one piece of negative press to destroy the movement.” In fact, our article cited negative press from more than one Christian media outlet, yet the “movement,” though nascent, seems to be growing. We love both Heffalumps and Piglets, partly because—honestly—both of us *are* both Heffalumps and Piglets, and we see no good reason why these two groups of people cannot love each other, particularly if a critical mass of the latter receive what the study clergy we discussed received: an experience of love and a renewed sense of its importance. Such a rapprochement between Heffalump psychedelia and Pooh-and-Piglet Christianity is, in fact, the point of our work.

## Theological issues

Several commenters addressed our emphasis on healing, taking a variety of stances on the phenomenon in the context of psychedelic Christianity. Thomas B. Roberts, who offered many fine suggestions for us to take up in further research, thought it might be best to table the issue entirely: “I feel that these considerations of ‘Psychedelic Christianity’ would be better by omitting medical/psychotherapeutic healing with psychedelics. As the authors know, there is an immense amount to say on this topic. But unless healing is

clearly defined to focus on spiritual healing, concerns with healing are a distraction from the religious/spiritual focus.” We are indeed aware of how thorny the subject of healing can be and, consequently, how much there is to say and has been said about it, which makes it difficult to address even close to adequately, given the rest of what the piece needs to do. It is therefore understandable to think it might be better or at least easier just to put it aside. But there are at least two reasons we think that, thorny though it is, we would have been remiss not to carve out at least some space for healing as an emphasis.

First, it is not clear what a “medical/psychotherapeutic healing” entirely divorced from “spiritual healing” or a “spiritual focus” would even constitute. In another issue of this journal, Anna Lutkajtis surveyed a number of papers to conclude that “mystical experiences” in general can lead to “trait-level increases in prosocial attitudes and behaviours” and “positive treatment outcomes for conditions including treatment-resistant depression [...] and anxiety and depression related to advanced stage cancer” (2020, 172). Furthermore, she argued that “encounters with God or ‘the Divine’” or “angels or other celestial beings” particularly can produce wonder and awe, which, in turn, “can have beneficial effects on wellbeing” and “self-concept,” according to the literature (Lutkajtis, 2020, 174). Thus, she glosses, “the clinical and therapeutic effects of psychedelics are related to their ability to induce a mystical-type experience” (2020, 171). Now, Roberts is correct that we could have simply left out the notion that spirituality is therapeutically significant, but it would not have been due to assessing psychotherapy as a “distraction from the religious/spiritual focus.” Indeed, we would have been more inclined to think we had failed to note something important about the latter. In any case, defining “spiritual/ity” well enough to separate it from “medical/psychotherapeutic healing” would be at least as competitive for space in the article as an adequate treatment of healing. Our essay is imperfect, perhaps, but our goal was only to proffer, as Jon Ungerland’s comment put it, a “conversation starter.”

Even if the religious and spiritual dimension of psychedelic Christianity were separable from healing, a separate reason we do not believe we can table discussion of the latter to focus on the former is that healing has been a visible part of the religion since its inception. This is signaled by the comment of Jaime Clark-Soles, who brought a much-appreciated biblical approach to the discussion: “Among the miracles in the Bible are healing stories.” The Gospel of Mark, for example, has Jesus interacting with a Garasene man who spends his nights wandering the tombs and hills, crying out and cutting himself with stones. In response to the man’s cries, Jesus summons the demons possessing him and, at their request, sends them into a herd of nearby pigs (Mk. 5:1–20). Similarly, when St. Peter and St. John went to the temple, they encountered a man whom others carried in daily to beg for alms. St. Peter told the man to look at them and when he did, St. Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk” (Ac. 3:1–10, NRSVUE). These





are just two of the many examples of healing available in the New Testament and Andrew Dauntton-Fear catalogs the continuing witness to this kind of activity over the next five hundred years of the Christian church (2009).

In her comment, Clark-Soles—who, incidentally, takes the restorative encounter between Christ and St. Peter after the latter denied knowing him to be a healing (2016, 149–50)—asks us to consider the essence of the phenomenon: “I contend that we need to give much more thought to what we mean by healing. ‘Healing’ and ‘cure’ are not synonyms, though people have experienced both. What constitutes healing? The medical model focuses on the individual, but from a Christian perspective, the communal is always in view and relates to people, nature, the self, and God.” In a way that might build on Trothen’s reading of love as communal salvation, Clark-Soles continues, “Jesus is said to be the Savior/Healer of the Cosmos (Gk. *kosmos*, Jn. 4:42). [...] The Greek word *sōzō* gets translated as ‘save’ or ‘heal’ and the noun as ‘salvation’ or ‘healing.’ Where is God in the affliction and where is God in the healing? Note that Paul asks God three times to remove his ‘thorn in the flesh,’ but God declines. We must address soteriology and theodicy, in other words.”

In the passage to which Clark-Soles here refers, St. Paul begins by narrating a supernatural experience he underwent (if we are to interpret the anonymity as modesty) that would be equally at home in a psychedelic headspace: “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell” (2 Cor. 12:2–4, NRSV). Then, St. Paul discusses his unnamed “thorn in the flesh” that God refuses to remove. The reason? “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor. 12:9, NRSVUE). So, God does not heal the thorn-wound and, yet, what God has done is not *nothing*. If it means anything at all for grace to be sufficient, it must mean that the sense of restoration and wholeness sought from an instance of physical healing is already present in relationship with God, the *raison d’être* and *telos* of “paradise” and “inexpressible things,” as St. Paul apparently discovered. He was somehow healed, despite not being healed in the sense he requested. Or, as Clark-Soles puts it, drawing on the language of disability studies, he was “healed” despite not being “cured.”

Something like this must be true with psychedelics also. As far as we know, we will all die, and no research exploring the therapeutic applications of these substances claims to be able to save us permanently from this fate. In fact, two high-profile studies—noted in the Lutkajtis quote above—investigated the ability of psilocybin to help those with life-threatening cancer precisely to accept their potentially immanent mortality. One of these concluded that a single, moderate dose of psilocybin “produced rapid and sustained anxiolytic and anti-depressant effects (for at least 7 weeks but potentially as long as 8 months), decreased cancer-related existential distress, increased spiritual wellbeing and

quality of life, and was associated with improved attitudes towards death” (Ross et al., 2016, 1177). The other similarly showed “that psilocybin produced large and significant decreases in clinician-rated and self-rated measures of depression, anxiety or mood disturbance, and increases in measures of quality of life, life meaning, death acceptance, and optimism” (Griffiths et al., 2016, 1194–5). The psilocybin did not heal the cancer itself but, to take just one result, occasioned some degree of healing in depressive symptoms. In this case too, then, there was healing despite the lack of a cure. The “thorn in the flesh” was not removed, but grace is nevertheless sufficient. Or, as a participant from the former study put it, “I know I won’t be alive forever, and I don’t know what happens after I die, but I think there’s something heavenly about the experience. [...] It’s the closest thing to an exalted experience that I’ve ever had... and a very heightened sense of gratitude that despite, let’s say, despite the cancer and the diagnosis and the surgery, I’m alive right now” (Swift et al., 2017, 504).

Joseph Lorenz’ comment also highlights St. Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” and asks questions about the notion of healing in relation to psychedelics and Christian faith. He shares Clark-Soles’ distinction between the “medical model” and the “Christian perspective” and cautions against what he calls a “psychologically reductive understanding of healing”: “[T]he way Christians understand ‘healing’ isn’t necessarily the same as the way doctors understand it. There’s no reason the two should be opposed to each other. But using the same word to describe two aims that aren’t quite the same risks folding one into the other.” Lorenz asks us to contemplate what such a conflation might cost us. Echoing Trothen, his own answer is that we stand to lose, on the one hand, the “social or political”—the communal—dimension of healing and, on the other hand, “enmeshment” in the ultimate goal of our sociality: “the Creator.” Thus, Lorenz calls attention to Clare Booth Luce’s ambivalence about what she terms “animism” and what he terms “idolatry”: “The psychedelic animates her surroundings with an aura of personal presence, but she’s dubious: aren’t we vulnerable in this state of absolute wonder to giving the things around us more existential weight than they can bear?”

If this interpretation is felicitous, then Clare’s ambivalence at holding a coronation for the Saguaro cacti in her garden is rooted in a sense of having subjected other creatures to human designs. But Lorenz presses further, suggesting we investigate, “whether the psychedelic experience itself can’t become an idol.” This is not an inconsequential question. The psychedelic experience offers a lot: “integration, wonder, healing” and even an experience of love. And not just any love—like a love for hamburgers or even the most sublime romantic love—but as the life coach and energy healer Karin Sokel recounted to Michael Pollan, an “absolute, pure, divine love and I was merging with it [...] The core of our being, I now knew, is love. At the peak of the experience, I was literally holding the face of Osama bin Laden, looking into his eyes, feeling pure love from him and giving it to him. The core is not evil, it is love. I had the same experience with Hitler, and then someone from North



Korea” (Pollan, 2018, 71). But what we must understand, Lorenz says, is that, “Love integrates; love heals trauma; love casts out fear. And yet, as precious as these effects are, they are secondary to the relationship [with the Creator] itself.”

In response, we will say a few things. First, we are in complete agreement with Lorenz’ order of importance here. If we thought psychedelics were inimical to relationship with God, we would be championing the latter against the former, and we do acknowledge that anything can become an idol in the sense of taking the place in our hearts only God can justly occupy. That includes psychedelics. However, the kind of love under discussion in Lorenz’ comment, the love that integrates, heals, and casts out fear, is love in the highest sense: not hamburger love or even the oft healing romantic love but the kind of love Sokel experienced in, with, and for Osama bin Laden and Adolf Hitler, the love for another human so universal it even applies to enemies. This kind of love has always been central to, if sometimes underemphasized in, Christianity, as evident in Jesus’ injunction to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt. 5:43–8, NRSVUE). Lorenz’ assertion that “love casts out fear” is an allusion to a discussion of this highest kind of love in the First Epistle of John. Earlier in the discussion, the epistle says, “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 Jn. 4:8). Just how ontologically we should interpret the “is” in the last half of this assertion is a notoriously difficult hermeneutical question, but if God “is” *somehow* love in the highest sense, is it actually possible to idolize this kind of love? What would it mean to reverse Lorenz’ order of priority by making relationship with God secondary to the love that God is? While we agree that giving psychedelics too exalted a place is a danger, we also believe it is possible to be too cautious about avoiding this danger. If psychedelic Christians—individually or collectively—get unduly zealous about these substances, they will need to take a step back, but the bigger problem at the moment appears to be an insufficient number of traditional Christians even willing to acknowledge the hope these compounds bring, when healing is needed in their ranks. Such a problem makes this a time for thoughtful boldness. As we interpret Lorenz, he would not disagree with this point, but we think it important to emphasize.

Harry T. Hunt’s and Timothy R. Gabrielli’s respective comments similarly raise the issue of Clare’s “loving animism, playful animism” (Heard, 1961, 6). Hunt regards “‘animistic’ re-sacralization of nature and ecological values seemingly intrinsic to both psychedelics and secular awe—and also so central to indigenous traditions” as a potentially “serious challenge for a Christian setting and guidance for the emerging promise of psychedelic healing.” For, he tells us, “the Western ‘Religions of the Book’ teach an intrinsic subjugation of nature and environment to the purposes of humanity.” Hunt’s source for the latter claim is Karen Armstrong’s recent volume, *Sacred Nature*. He does not provide a page number, but this appears to be the decisive passage:

At the very beginning of the Hebrew Bible, in the first chapter of Genesis, God issues a command to the first human beings, giving them total dominion over the natural world: “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on earth.” Unlike the other scriptures we shall consider, the Hebrew Bible does not focus on the sanctity of nature, because the people of Israel experienced the divine in human events rather than in the natural world. [2022, 12]

Armstrong is not the first to distinguish ancient Hebrew religiosity from other perspectives in terms of the former’s commitment to divine action over what she calls the “sanctity of nature.” Paul Tillich argued for something like this distinction as “the struggle for the God of time against the gods of space” (1959, 39; cf. 30–9 for the full discussion).

And the excerpt from Genesis—verse 1:28—too, is not a new vexation for interpreters. Indeed, Armstrong’s point is fair in the sense that many exegetes in Christian history have read Gen. 1:28 in terms “strongly influenced by Greek philosophical (mainly Stoic but also Aristotelian) ideas about human uniqueness and superiority over the rest of nature” (Bauckham, 2011, 20). But in view of the environmental devastation wrought by modern industrialism and contemporary capitalist life, a growing literature has arisen arguing that this pericope is aligned with ecological concerns when properly understood (e.g. Bauckham, 2006; 2010, 16ff.; 2011, 2–7 and 14ff.; Fretheim, 2012; Hall, 1986; Harrison, 2006). The following assertion from one such account by Terence E. Fretheim gives a sense of the kind of conclusions this literature draws: “God of the creation accounts is imaged more as one who chooses to share creative activity. Hence, the way in which the human as image of God is to exercise dominion is to be shaped by that relational model, with significant implications for further reflection regarding creatures, their interrelationships, and their environmental responsibilities” (2012, 686). The point here is not that this ecologically-aligned “stewardship model” (Bauckham, 2010, 1ff.) of interpreting the “dominion” pericope in Genesis is unassailable. Rather, it is simply that what Genesis—let alone Judeo-Christianity or, as Hunt says, “the Western ‘Religions of the Book’”—can be declared to “teach” about the proper human relationship to “nature and environment” is by no means obvious from a *prima facie* reading of the text adduced by Armstrong.

Fortunately, Hunt notes that Christianity is not as univocal on the question as Armstrong’s words might lead us to believe: “Nonetheless there is the promise of Pope Francis in his Encyclical, *Our Common Good* (2015), where, in addition to sounding his own alarm over climate crisis, he endorses Indigenous understandings of Creation and their ‘universal fraternity’ of ‘wind, sun, and clouds’ (p. 148), with ‘God in all things’ and ‘all things are God’ (p. 151).” To be exact, Francis puts the last of these points thus: “Saint John of the Cross taught that all the goodness present in the realities and experiences of this world ‘is present in God eminently and infinitely, or more properly, in each of these sublime realities is God.’ This is not because the finite things of this world are really divine, but because the mystic



experiences the intimate connection between God and all beings, and thus feels that ‘all things are God’” (2015, no. 234). While this would suggest a different interpretation of “all things are God” than Hunt provides, it also supports his sense of Francis as a sign of hope in the face of those who glibly or gleefully interpret Gen. 1:28 as sanctioning or even commanding human domination and exploitation of the earth. In fact, *Laudato Si’* explicitly rejects the interpretation, adopting the aforementioned ecologically-aligned reading:

The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man “dominion” over the earth, has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church. [...] Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations. [2015, no. 67]

And, later: “our ‘dominion’ over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship” (2015, no. 116). Crucially, however, the Pope’s view here is neither his private opinion nor an outlier in Christian teaching, but, as Francis indicates, the “correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the [Catholic] Church.” Hence, the Catholic Catechism tells us,

Use of the mineral, vegetable, and animal resources of the universe cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives. Man’s dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbor, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation. [USCC, 1997, no. 2415]

And similarly,

In God’s plan man and woman have the vocation of “subduing” the earth [Gen. 1:28] as stewards of God. This sovereignty is not to be an arbitrary and destructive domination. God calls man and woman, made in the image of the Creator “who loves everything that exists” [Wis. 11:24], to share in his providence toward other creatures; hence their responsibility for the world God has entrusted to them. [USCC, 1997, no. 373]

The *Catechism* does say that humans may use the providence of the earth to meet their needs (USCC, 1997, nos. 2402, 2417, and 2457)—and it would be impossible for it to deny this without countenancing human extinction. But there are limits to what count as human “needs.” Thus, as these paragraphs from the *Catechism* make clear, not only the emphasis of the current Pope but the official position of a church representing half the world’s Christians—over a billion people, as of 2010 (Pew Research Center, 2013)—is decidedly in opposition to those whom Hunt, following Armstrong, identifies as “teach[ing] an intrinsic subjugation of nature and environment to the purposes of humanity.”

Tim Gabrielli likewise cites Francis in addressing Clare’s “loving animism, playful animism” and his comment serves as a further affirmation of Hunt’s intuition: “[Clare Boothe] Luce moves circumspectly from questions about connecting with non-human creation, with caveats about idolatry, to something like an enchanted world. Luce is arguably after what Pope Francis calls ‘integral ecology’ in *Laudato Si’* (Pope Francis, 2015), that is, a deep grasp that ‘everything is connected’ and ‘a recognition that the world is God’s loving gift’ (no. 220), a gateway to conversion and repentance (no. 218).” Hunt appeals to the pontiff as an antidote to a Christianity that subjugates “nature and environment to the purposes of humanity” and therefore “comes with its potential collision [...] with an ‘animistic’ re-sacralization of nature and ecological values seemingly intrinsic to both psychedelics [hence, present in Clare’s LSD experiences] and secular awe—and also so central to indigenous traditions.” Gabrielli’s analysis seems to be saying, “yes” to the essential kernel in Hunt’s comment: Through her psychedelic comportment, Clare is circling around a point, however clumsily and however littered “with caveats about idolatry,” that Francis is also making: “Everything is connected,” so much so that, as the passage from Francis that Hunt adduces says, anyone who “experiences the intimate connection between God and all beings”—a “mystic”—“thus feels that ‘all things are God’” (2015, no. 234).

Gabrielli’s reference to the Pope’s claim that an “integral ecology” is, as Gabrielli puts it, “a gateway to conversion and repentance” is especially suggestive, and overlaps with the analysis of repentance we provided in our article. Gabrielli refers to that analysis thus:

While McCarthy and Priest turn to Rahner here for theological help in exegesis of these experiences, it’s likely that Wise and others were more shaped by the evolving mid-twentieth charismatic strains of Christian evangelical theology, culminating, say, in Explo ’72 (an evangelistic conference held near Dallas, Texas in June 1972, which was sponsored by Campus Crusade for Christ). The Methodist and Calvinist theological emphases underlying the Jesus Movement place a stronger emphasis than does Rahner on that singular moment of conversion in which I see my previous self as lost and then found. Thus, it may be that there was a theological framework ready-to-hand for discovering the “rat in the basement” where one expected “the prince on the throne.”

This is a helpful nuance. To be clear, we chose Rahner not for his theology—narrowly construed—but for his phenomenological perspective, i.e. for his analysis of the relationship between the theological notion of “repentance” and the corporeal and emotional phenomena that attend the comportment thereof. Rahner posits that repentance involves the resistance of the body (of “nature,” in his terminology) to wrong-doing, 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). If this is true, we argued, psychedelics sometimes functioned as catalysts for repentance in Wise and his friends, e.g. in encouraging two of



them to experience themselves as a “rat in the basement” worthy of the kind of guilt and/or shame that produces “blushes” or in encouraging Wise to experience “trembling” at his “nightmare of a ride back across the Bay Bridge [...] ‘going straight up’” and “Hearing demonic voices urging him to ‘Flee!’” (Eskridge, 2013, 15).

As Gabrielli points out, Rahner would have been less given to the kind of “lost and then found” theology of conversion “ready-to-hand” in Jesus Movement guitar circles, and it is that theology, along with LSD, that powered these moments. The same is true of Pope Francis. And yet the same Rahnerian phenomenological lens we applied to the psychedelic conversions of Wise and company can bring a similar phenomenological perspicuity to Clare’s psychedelically-infused “loving animism, playful animism,” conceptualized as the conversion to “integral ecology” discussed by Francis. Here is the relevant portion of *Laudato Si’*:

a healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall personal conversion, which entails the recognition of our errors, sins, faults and failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change. The Australian bishops spoke of the importance of such conversion for achieving reconciliation with creation: “To achieve such reconciliation, we must examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God’s creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a conversion, or change of heart. [2015, no. 218]

As we discussed in the article, Clare compares her LSD trips to experiences she had as a child. In both, she found admiring what both she and the Australian bishops here term “God’s creation” irresistible. She lived in a *zeitgeist* that was not yet emphasizing questions of climate change and environmental degradation and, so, some of what the Pope cites here about “acknowledge[ing] the ways in which we have harmed God’s creation through our actions and our failure to act” does not figure into Clare’s thinking on the subject. Nevertheless, in a contemplative headspace facilitated by LSD, she senses that “To give a thing your attention is so important” (Heard, 1959, 6–7), as when she laid supine at the edge of a lake as a child, staring at a tadpole, and as when she is now looking at a petunia while on LSD as an adult and saying, “eternity in a flower” (Heard, 1959, 19). We might see these experiences as moments of conversion to “a healthy relationship with creation,” to an “integral ecology.” While Clare is not repenting of harming God’s creation, she does acquire, to use the Pope’s language, a “recognition of [her] errors, sins, faults and failures” with respect to her newfound intuition that “things” in the thick sense imparted by sacramentality bristle with significance when lovingly attended. In these experiences, she converts to a kind of “a healthy relationship with creation” that allows her to see the “eternity in a flower.”

For Clare, this healthy relationship involves attempting to steer a course between what she calls “idol worship” on the one hand and a total lack of what Gabrielli calls “something like an enchanted world” on the other. At first,

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). Later in the experience comes the statement about animism we have been discussing: “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). She does not explicitly identify her emotions in these moments, but, rather than being emotion-less, these are the kind of statements that would emanate from, in the first case, an underlying contentment as she lovingly attends things turned any number of possible negative feelings: anxiety and/or guilt or shame (if she thought of herself as having engaged in “idol worship”) or disgust or contempt (if she thought of the “idol worship” as purely in others). And, in the second case, the statements are the kind that would emanate from a calm joy turned anxiety and/or guilt or shame at the prospect that her intuition is a kind of animism and therefore potentially incompatible with her Catholicism. Thus, her defense: It is a “loving animism, playful animism.” Such emotions come with the kind of physical sensations that Rahner identifies as nature’s resistance to wrong decisions, specifically those that sometimes accompany anxiety (“trembling”) and guilt or shame (“blushes”).

David M. Odorisio’s comment reflects on the implications of psychedelic use in Christianity, noting that, for many of the examples in our article, the psychedelic experience was “*both* deeply ‘incarnational,’ with very real embodied healing, *as well as* ineffably profound, ‘spiritual,’ or otherwise deemed as ‘sacred’” (emphases original). He relates this observation to the “Chalcedonian formulation” that “Christ was *both* ‘fully human and fully divine’” (emphasis original) and the ancient Christian teaching of “deification” or *theosis*, i.e. the proclamation that “God became man that man might become god.” Elaborating, Odorisio says, “Of course, the early tradition did not literally mean that human beings can (or should) ‘become god(s),’ but, following 2 Peter [1:4], humanity ‘partakes’ or ‘participates’ in the reality of God, becoming, in turn, something of or like God in the process. In other words, humans become ‘deified’ through their participation in the Father through the Son—the process of *theosis*.”

To sharpen the connection to psychedelics, Odorisio quotes St. Gregory of Nazianzus, who was influential in the Nicene Christianity that prefaced Chalcedon: “Gregory famously penned in his late letter to Cledonius (382 or 383 CE), ‘That which is not assumed is not healed’ (Storin, 2022, 388). What he meant by this was that if God did not, or does not, become human—fully incarnate—then humans are ‘not healed,’ ‘saved,’ or, by extension, ‘deified.’” Odorisio then asks, “Can one be ‘saved’ or experience ‘salvation’ through psychedelics (even ‘in Christ’)? The first-person narratives depicted here [in McCarthy and Priest’s “Psychedelic Christianity”] seem to offer a resounding ‘Yes.’”





This analysis opens several theological avenues: For one, it acknowledges the body-awareness and body-affirmation that so many report experiencing on psychedelics and grounds them in Christianity's ancient, creedal commitments. It also offers psychedelic Christians a way to think about experiences of merging with God or everything or of becoming God that does not entail opting for syncretism or pantheism. And, finally, it further develops our use of Calivas' Orthodox theology of the church as hospital and salvation as healing, addressed so well by Jamie Clark-Soles' comment suggesting that if psychedelics are healing people, then something at the theological core of Christianity is taking place in this "psychedelic renaissance," something to be ignored at the risk of losing our way.

But one of the less obvious avenues is that it suggests using psychedelics might be warranted by the very roots of Christianity, without speculating that such use obtained in the religion at the time. Both Jerry Brown's and Marc Blainey's comments expressed dissatisfaction with our reference to Brian C. Muraresku's *The Immortal Key*. Brown said we "lackadaisically recite" its central claim; Blainey said, "I have long found it puzzling that so much attention is paid to pseudo-archaeological conjectures about psychedelic Christianity in the past (like that of Muraresku) [...]." As we discussed above, both scholars would have preferred we looked at syncretistic Christian groups as evidence that, in a way, psychedelic Christianity never stopped and therefore does not need to "start." This task was outside our scope for reasons we have here provided at length. Regarding Muraresku specifically, however, enough people are reading his book that it makes sense, as we did, to cite it as part of the broader conversation about what we are calling "psychedelic Christianity." Nevertheless, we see no cause for petulance on our end. The volume is interesting, provocative, compelling at points, less so at others, and only intermittently fair to its opponents. But whether its thesis holds water—or *kukeon*, as the case may be—is not strictly germane to our case. If there are theologically solid reasons for even the most traditionally Nicene of Christians to embrace a psychedelic iteration of their religion, especially if those reasons are grounded in the understanding of the early church, then the validity of psychedelic Christianity *now* neither rises nor falls on the idea that the religion started as a psychedelic *ekklēsia* "with no name." By putting psychedelic Christianity in constructive dialogue with Chalcedon and Nicaea, Odorisio appeals to early forms of the religion without making the justification of twenty-first century Christian use dependent upon establishing that early Christians had entheogenic experiences.

Last is P. Jonathan Ungerland, who concludes his comment with a saying sometimes attributed to the Daoist sage, Laozi: "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear," but "when the student is truly ready, the teacher will Disappear." He tells us the first part of this aphorism should encourage us to be open to discussing psychedelics as "one effective conduit to the individual encountering the eternal from within temporality, of transcending the self and entering into the presence of holy mystery, of experiencing

the essential immediacy and ineffability of that which is truly Divine." But, he cautions, the second part of the aphorism should encourage us not to "risk supplanting the eternal, life-giving truths of Christian revelation and faith with fleeting individual experiences of that revelation (even those seemingly incomparable, ineffable, and profound ones gained via individual psychedelic experiences)." This two-pronged approach mirrors Lorenz' call to "balance the desire for more (integration, wonder, healing) with a healthy recognition of the limits of human life," specifically in recognizing that, "Love integrates; love heals trauma; love casts out fear. And yet, as precious as these effects are, they are secondary to the relationship [with the Creator] itself." In other words, we should ensure that "the psychedelic experience itself [does not] become an idol." Also aligned here is Gabrielli's discussion of Clare's attempt to recover "something like an enchanted world" without veering into idolatry.

Ungerland's contribution to the discussion of this "balance," as Lorenz puts it, lies in suggesting that the "risk [of] supplanting the eternal, life-giving truths of Christian revelation and faith with fleeting individual experiences of that revelation" might be avoided by heeding the second part of the aforementioned aphorism: "when the student is truly ready, the teacher will Disappear." As with most proverbial wisdom, there are several layers to this proclamation and therefore several places to go in discussing it. But Ungerland's contextualization lends the aphorism especially well to comparison with a famous point made by Alan Watts, frequently adduced in psychedelic reflection (e.g. Smith et al., 2004; Bache, 2019, 40):

psychedelic experience is only a glimpse of genuine mystical insight, but a glimpse which can be matured and deepened by the various ways of meditation in which drugs are no longer necessary or useful. When you get the message, hang up the phone. For psychedelic drugs are simply instruments, like microscopes, telescopes, and telephones. The biologist does not sit with eye permanently glued to the microscope; he goes away and works on what he has seen. [1962, 25–6]

This comes from the prologue to the first edition of Watts' *A Joyous Cosmology*; for whatever reason, it was omitted from the second, posthumous edition (cf. 2013, 18). In his autobiography, Watts admits following his own advice here:

My retrospective attitude to LSD is that when one has received the message, one hangs up the phone. I think I have learned from it as much as I can, and, for my own sake, would not be sorry if I could never use it again. But it is not, I believe, generally known that very many of those who had constructive experiences with LSD, or other psychedelics, have turned from drugs to spiritual disciplines—abandoning their water-wings and learning to swim. Without the catalytic experience of the drug, they might never have come to this point, and thus my feeling about psychedelic chemicals, as about most other drugs (despite the vague sense of the word), is that they should serve as medicine rather than diet. [1972, 327]





Charitably enough, he also says the same about his own teaching: “I make it very clear to those who attend [my seminars, or informal conferences] that my role is more that of physician than of minister, for the former works to get rid of his clients and the latter to keep them in a permanent following. I insist that, after a certain time, they will have heard all the important things I have to say, and that having received the message they should hang up the phone” (1972, 263). So neither Watts’ teachings nor psychedelics are of permanent significance. For him, psychedelics impart a “polar vision of the universe,” according to which “the basic pairs of opposites, the positive and the negative, are seen as the different poles of a single magnet or circuit” (1972, 325) and “a single energy manifests itself through two mutually arising poles, the yang (+) and the yin (–)” (1972, 136 n. 2). Once we get this “message,” we no longer need psychedelics. In other words, “when the student is truly ready, the teacher will Disappear.”

Still, a return to Watts’ excerpts signals another potential layer to this latter half of the aphorism. After hanging up the phone of psychedelics, the one who is now able to “swim” without “water-wings” “goes away and works on what he has seen.” Watts says psychedelics taught him polar vision and perhaps it takes a lifetime to come to the end of working on what has been seen in that regard. But psychedelics teach and show all sorts of things. While some of those lessons and visions may require long periods of time to work on what has been seen, those long periods of time may also nevertheless end, at which point it is not obvious that picking up the phone again would be a waste of time. We might thus imagine the aphorism anew, in line with this insight: “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear, but when the student is truly ready, the teacher will disappear; and when the student is ready again, the teacher will reappear, but when the student is truly ready again, the teacher will disappear again.”

Emotions are teachers in just this way, as Marshall Rosenberg made a whole career out of demonstrating. For example, the purpose of anger is to “help us to get at the needs that are not being fulfilled” and encourage us to set about fulfilling them (Rosenberg, 2005, 3). “When the student is ready,” i.e. when the student is capable of hearing what anger has to teach rather than dispensing it onto others, then anger precisely as “the teacher will appear.” But “when the student is truly ready,” i.e. when the student has learned what the anger had to teach, the anger as “the teacher will Disappear.” This does not mean the student is finished with the teacher, for anger will return with something new to teach and subsequently disappear once it has been learned.

Emotions thus serve as both an effective analogy for and a partial description of how psychedelics as teachers work. One of the benefits studies attribute to psychedelics is that they help those who have taken them better perceive, process, manage, and express emotions (Lindegaard, 2023; Roseman et al., 2019), though more research is needed (Solaja, 2024). In psychedelic experiences that have this kind of impact, it is at least partially a skill being taught rather

than a “message” or conceptual truth being phoned in. That skill really can be learned well enough for some to be comfortable hanging up the phone. Moreover, as Watts says, there are other tools for developing this skill of emotional intelligence and fortitude, such that “very many of those who had constructive experiences with LSD, or other psychedelics, have turned from drugs to spiritual disciplines—abandoning their water-wings and learning to swim.” However, it is also true that new stages of life bring new challenges and, with those, new emotions. There may, therefore, be cause to pick up the phone at some crossroads after we think we have gotten the message.

Regardless, as Ungerland suggests, we must take care not to miss the moment that “when the student is truly ready, the teacher will Disappear” obtains, whether it is once and for all or “again.” Otherwise, as he says, we “risk supplanting the eternal, life-giving truths of Christian revelation and faith with fleeting individual experiences of that revelation.” In other words, in Lorenz’ language, we are “putting a creature in the place of the Creator.” But we must also be open to the teacher appearing or reappearing, i.e., as Ungerland says, to psychedelics as “one effective conduit to the individual encountering the eternal from within temporality.” To do both is to adopt the “integral ecology” of Pope Francis, which, Gabrielli reminds us, involves “a deep grasp that ‘everything is connected’ and ‘a recognition that the world is God’s loving gift,’ a gateway to conversion and repentance.”

## CONCLUSION

It has been a privilege to have so many accomplished thinkers and scholars respond to our work and an even greater privilege to mull those comments systematically enough to respond to them. Doing so has surfaced a host of the most important issues facing psychedelic Christianity today, some of which we knew were lurking in the background, some of which we could not have anticipated: the theological status of ethically questionable psychedelic insights; the matter of tradition’s/orthodoxy’s importance in psychedelic Christianity; the question of what can be learned from existing syncretic Christian groups with a psychedelic practice; the debate about whether traditional Christians *en masse* will really embrace psychedelics; the question of whether psychedelic Christianity should be individual, communal, or both; the claim that psychedelics may rejuvenate the church and increase church attendance; the plea that psychedelic Christianity stop trying to be normal; the suggestion that psychedelic Christianity distance itself from talk of medical and psychotherapeutic healing; the question of what healing means in the absence of cures; the warning about maintaining the priority of God and relationship with God over psychedelics and their gifts; the potential for psychedelics and the church to cooperate in matters of deep ecology; the importance of encountering an enchanted world as God’s gift and an agent of transformation; the suggestion that psychedelics epitomize the body-affirmative yet spiritual



definition of Chalcedon, whereby Jesus is fully human and fully God and so we too, as *imago Dei*, can be deified in our vessels; the reminder that psychedelics are a way, though not the only way, to encounter eternity in temporality and, therefore, that we should be open to engaging them but also open to stopping that engagement. We have only gestured toward the conversations that could be had on these issues, and legion others both addressed and unaddressed herein. So many of our commenters inspired us to go back to the drawing board on a plethora of key questions. We look forward to further debate and mutual edification with our commentators here and with the colleagues who are reading.

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