

Entheogens and Religion

Alan Neal Levy, 2003

“God bless you.” “Go with God.” “Make peace with God.” “May God be with you.” These, and many more, are the ways in which people wish one another a better day, a better way, or a better life. The question is, and always has been, how does a person find God? Where does one look? How does one begin? History, however, records not one answer, but many. In the 21st century new world order, every man, woman and child should have the freedom to pursue a multiplicity of diverse religious practices in order to find oneself, to find God, or to find the God within. Any citizen living in a free country should be able to practice the religion of his or her choice free from fears of prosecution or persecution, even those religions deemed pseudo-religions, magico-religions, neo-pagan religions, Wiccan, or New Age practices. Citizens of the 21st century United States of America, however, do not enjoy this freedom – when it comes to the religious use of entheogens.

An entheogen is a plant or chemical substance that generates an experience of god, or spirit, within a person (Forte 1-4). Carl A. P. Ruck¹, R. Gordon Wasson² and others³ created this neologism together, in 1979, to describe the “transcendent and beatific states of communion with deity,” that take place during shamanic and ecstatic possession (Ruck, et al 145). Professor Ruck and his colleagues were looking for a term to use in place of “hallucinogen,” due, in large part, to the fact that most of the mind-altering substances used by indigenous shamans did not induce hallucinations. They also felt that the word “psychedelic” was inappropriate because of its connotations to 1960’s drug culture (Ruck, et al 145-6).

¹ Carl A.P. Ruck is Professor of Classical Studies at Boston University

² R. Gordon Wasson (1898-1986) was an international banker, amateur mycologist (mushroom and fungus specialist), and author. He devoted over fifty years of his life to the lifelong gathering of references to mushrooms and toadstools in the folklore of the world.

³ Danny Staples, Jonathon Ott and Jeremy Bigwood were also involved.

Literally then, an entheogen means “becoming divine within,” from

En = Within, Inner

Theo = Divine, God

Gen = Becoming, Creating (Ott 37)

Throughout the world, examples abound in the shamanic use of entheogens. Today, Siberian shamans still ingest the fly agaric mushroom (*Amanita muscaria*) to travel to the land of departed spirits and seek guidance from those who have gone before. According to R. Gordon Wasson, one of the world’s foremost mycologists (mushroom and fungus specialist), the shamanic use of *Amanita* in Siberia is a remnant of the mushroom’s use in early Hindu practices, where the entheogen was known as Soma, and its use there dates from the second millennium BCE (Wasson). The *Rig-Veda*, the oldest of the four sacred texts (*vedas*) of the Hindu religion, contains numerous hymns, incantations and descriptions of rituals for a god named Soma, and the god’s anthropomorphized plant which was ritualistically ingested.

We have drunk the Soma, we are become Immortals,

We are arrived at the Light, we have found the Gods.

What now can hostility do to us, what the malice of mortal?

O Immortal Soma! (*Rig-Veda*, as quoted in Wasson)

Wasson’s proposition that *Amanita muscaria* (and the liquid pressed from the mushroom) was the long-sought identity of the Hindu entheogen is now generally accepted as the most viable theory of Soma’s identity.

At the time of Columbus’s expedition to the New World, detailed records describe the use of *khobba* powder (snuff from the *Anadenanthera peregrina* tree, a member of the pea family) by “sorcerers” who would inhale the entheogen into their nostrils through a foot-long cane, along with their patients, in order to communicate with spirits and discover the nature and cure of their patients’ illnesses (Furth 24-5). For a similar purpose, *curanderos* (shamanic healers) of the Peruvian Amazon drink an entheogen called *ayahuasca* (or vine of the dead), a boiled beverage containing two

plants – the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi* and the leaves of the shrub *Psychotria viridis*, in order to commune with the world of spirits and perform healings. It is interesting to note that neither of the two plant substances, by themselves, have entheogenic properties, but do so only in combination with one other. (Metzner 1)

Historical evidence also exists of the use of entheogens in ceremonial groups, rituals and celebrations. One such example is the use of ibogaine (an alkaloid derived from the root bark of the shrub iboga (*Taberanthé iboga*) by the Pygmy tribes in Gabon, Africa. As part of their Bwiti religion, ibogaine plays the role of entheogen in at least two important ceremonial rites.

The first of these is the *ngoze* (religious service), celebrated over three nights, where all members of the community take a small dose of iboga and then sing and dance until dawn. The second is *tobe si* – the initiation rite...and is celebrated in the Bwiti whenever a new member joins” (Saunders, et al 72).

The most well known example of the ceremonial use of entheogens is the sacramental use of the peyote cactus among the Huichol Indians of Mexico and the indigenous people of the American Southwest.

Veneration of the small spineless cactus called peyote [*Lophophora williamsii*] probably began immediately after the first hunter-gatherers discovered its remarkable effects. The Native American deification of the plant is estimated to be about 10,000 years old. Peyote cactus buttons uncovered in Shumla Cave in southern Texas have been radiocarbon dated to 5,000 [BCE]. The Huichol Indians of northwestern Mexico still use peyote sacramentally. Their peyote pilgrimage may have been in place by 200 [CE]. (Smith and Snake)

Despite the best efforts of the colonial missionaries in the New World to eradicate the use of native entheogens, many of these substances not only survived, but also were assimilated into the Christian practices taught by the missionaries.

In spite of the virulence of early Spanish attempts to stamp out the pagan religion in which peyote figured so prominently, the sacred cactus ritual survived in more or less pure form in the remote deserts and mountains, while elsewhere it came to be intertwined with Christian ritual and belief. So strongly entrenched in [indigenous] thought was this sacred cactus that even certain Christianized Indians of Mexico held that a patron saint – El Santo Niño de Peyotl – used to appear among the plants on the hillside, a belief that still survives in Mexican folklore. (Furst 12-13)

Mycologist R. Gordon Wasson was the first to bring to light the syncretism (assimilation of religious practices) in the sacred mushroom cults of Oaxaca, Mexico. In a *Life* magazine article in 1957, Wasson described his experience of an all-night ceremony, or *velada*, among the Mazatec Indians where “divine mushrooms” were consumed as part of a “holy communion.” “The Indians mingled Christian and pre-Christian elements in their religious practices in a way disconcerting to Christians but natural for them” (Wasson 105)

The contemporary healing practices of shamans in northern Peru are also syncretic in nature, combining numerous Christian elements with older pre-colonial beliefs and the use of the San Pedro cactus as entheogen. (The San Pedro cactus contains mescaline as its active compound, like the peyote cactus.) (Furst 116-7) Eduardo Calderon Palomino, a Peruvian *curandero*, or healer, explains the importance of both religions in the following manner:

I salute the ancients, the powerful ones, men who have lived in antiquity... for their intellectual force, their power, their magnificence, and the saints for their intellect, their personality [and] their great power as philosophers... I always invoke the ancients... who have died [and] who

are alive, calling their spirits... I [also] call on St. Augustine, Moses, Solomon, St. Cyprian, [and] St. Paul (Furst 124).

In 1991, the Brazilian government granted full legal status for the operation of two, relatively new syncretic churches. The União do Vegetal and the Santo Daime Church were both established in the mid 1900's as Christian churches that use *ayahuasca* (vine of the dead) as a psychoactive Eucharist. During these communal sessions (*chamadas*), the Christian doctrine is taught and Bible passages are recited.

It [*ayahuasca*] is considered a sacrament, and like its predecessor soma, a divinity, both "Christ's blood," and a forest spirit. The replacement of the bread and wine Eucharist with *ayahuasca* brings an eco-spiritual force into communion with Christian saints and their prescriptions of love, peace, charity, and fraternity. By unifying the naturalized and the civilized, it appears to work as a bridge over the 500 years of culture clashes wrought by the colonialist enterprise. In this way it births new cultural forms of indigeneity, ways of belonging to the land that reflect the needs of the various peoples brought to it. (Morgan)

In the United States and most of Europe, however, branches of the two churches have failed to receive legal status, and *ayahuasca* use in their services constitutes the prohibited use of a controlled substance (i.e. it is deemed an illegal drug and not a religious sacrament). The lone exception is in Denmark, where, on May 21, 2001, a Dutch court acquitted the Santo Daime church under its constitutional right to freedom of religion. (Morgan)

What, then, constitutes the difference between an illegal drug and an entheogenic sacrament? The União do Vegetal (UDV) web page condemns the current classification of its *Hoasca* tea (another name for *ayahuasca*) as a hallucinogen because "it does not, as the term implies, bring about the loss of contact with reality. On the contrary, *Hoasca* brings an amplified degree of perception that permits the comprehension of reality with greater clarity and transcendence."

In this sense, researchers in the area of ethnobotany have proposed the classification of the *Vegetal* [*Hoasca*] as an “entheogen,” a substance that generates an experience of contact with the divine causing a general sensation of coming closer to the Sacred and facilitating self-knowledge and the betterment of the human being. (União)

At the same time the UDV Church condemns the use of drugs by its congregants. On a subsequent web page on the UDV site, the church states that:

The UDV orients its disciples to live their lives in accord with defined moral principles, working for spiritual evolution in a balanced manner. The Laws of the Center teach that the constitution of the family is a sublime mission and condemn the use of drugs and all forms of vice incompatible with balanced states of personal conduct. (União)

Therefore, it is in the way a substance is used or the purpose for which it is taken that determines a substance’s classification. By definition, the shamanic use of a plant substance by an indigenous healer is entheogenic. Similarly, a plant or chemical substance ingested as a sacrament in a religious setting, as part of a religious ceremony, ritual or lesson, or conducted under the auspices of a legitimate church is also, an entheogen and not a drug.

The United States, in fact, has established a legal precedent concerning this very issue, with regard to the use of peyote. On October 6, 1994, the House of Representatives passed an amendment to the 1976 American Indian Religious Freedom Act “to provide for the traditional use of peyote by Indians for religious purposes” (American Indian). With the passage of this law, the United States government has acknowledged that there is a distinction between the entheogenic use of peyote and its illegal use as an otherwise Class I controlled substance, or drug. The Act goes on to state that “the use, possession, or transportation of peyote by an Indian for bona fide traditional ceremonial purposes in connection with the practice of a traditional Indian religion is lawful,” and that any American Indian doing so is exempt from prosecution (American Indian).

To refuse to extend this distinction and legal exemption to other *bona fide* religions would seem to be a violation of the first amendment's guarantee of religious freedom. The question, therefore, is how to establish the legitimacy of a particular religion. Fortunately, there already exists a mechanism for doing so. The United States grants tax exempt status to any religious organization that satisfies the rigorous standards of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

To refuse to extend the exemptions guaranteed by the 1994 Act to non-Indians would also seem to be a violation of a US citizen's religious freedom. The State of Arizona has enacted legislation that acknowledges just this. Arizona Revised Statutes sec.13-3402 states:

- A. A person who knowingly possesses, sells, transfers or offers to sell or transfer peyote is guilty of a class 6 felony.
 - B. In a prosecution for violation of this section, it is a defense that the peyote is being used or is intended for use:
 - 1. In connection with the bona fide practice of a religious belief, and
 - 2. As an integral part of a religious exercise, and
 - 3. In a manner not dangerous to public health, safety or morals.
- (Arizona)

By refusing to limit the entheogenic use of peyote to Native Americans, the state of Arizona has acknowledged the freedom of all of its residents to join the Native American Church, or create a similar church that uses peyote as an entheogen. In fact, the Peyote Way Church, in Klondike, AZ is operating in just this legally sanctioned manner. Not only does the church accept membership from people of all nations, races and creeds (it bills itself as a "non-denominational All Race Peyotist Religion"); it legally conducts entheogen-based "Spirit Walks" for non-members.

The Spirit Walk is a time of introspection and examination of conscience. It gives the individual a chance to re-evaluate their priorities. Through the

Holy Sacrament Peyote, the communicant experiences a loss of selfishness and becomes aware of the god within. (Peyote Way)

The U.S. Department of Justice's Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has established a system of categorization (called schedules) for psychoactive substances. There are five schedules, with Schedule I being the most rigorously controlled and Schedule V the least rigorously controlled. According to the DEA, "Schedule I is reserved for the most dangerous drugs that have no recognized medical use, while Schedule V is the classification used for the least dangerous drugs" (DEA). The group of substances called hallucinogens (which includes the potential entheogens peyote, psilocybin and ibogaine), have been placed in Schedule I, along with such substances as heroin and GHB (the so-called date rape drug). The placement of a substance in a particular schedule is "based upon the substance's medicinal value, harmfulness, and potential for abuse or addiction" (DEA). Therefore, in the United States, we have the clearly defined situation, where a Schedule I drug (peyote) may be exempted from federal restrictions when it is used as an entheogen.

This lone example, however, has not been enough to alter public perception regarding the use of entheogens. In this respect, and to most of the population, a drug is still a drug, even if it is used for religious purposes and intents. This is quite ironic, in a country full of people that regularly dose themselves with legal, psychoactive compounds, such as caffeine, nicotine and alcohol.

Perhaps part of the bias against entheogens can be attributed to the drug culture of the so-called Psychedelic Sixties. To suggest that psilocybin mushrooms or LSD¹ might be capable of performing a positive role in the spiritual development of an individual would be, to many, the equivalent of advocating the same rampant recreational (non-entheogenic) use that people associate with those infamous times. Those entheogens with ties to the 1960's (primarily mushrooms and LSD, but also, by association, DMT-containing substances like *ayahuasca*) also suffer from the longstanding rumors that in

¹ Lysergic acid diethylamide, an alkaloid derived from ergot, a fungus that grows on grain

some cases were created by the government to dissuade young people from using them. Persistent misinformation such as LSD causing chromosome damage and birth defects continues to affect the beliefs of many people, despite those claims being refuted in scientific journals (Presti and Beck 130-1)

The bias against entheogens, however, lies much deeper. At its very core, this bias is revealed in people's perception of the effects of the substances involved. According to noted psychologist Stanislav Grof, the former Chief of Psychiatric Research at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, there are four possible views regarding the religious or spiritual nature of entheogens.

- All religion and mystical phenomena (including the use of entheogens) can be reduced to brain physiology and biochemistry
- Entheogens are substances that can induce genuine mystical experiences
- Mystical experiences induced by entheogens are genuine religious experiences but they do not necessarily result in a spiritual way of being.
- Mystical experiences occasioned by entheogens are not really genuine religious experiences (Grof 41-2).

The first position reduces the experience of God to a purely materialistic plane. Therefore, it does not, in itself, dismiss the ability of entheogens to generate this experience. The second and third views clearly define the entheogenic experience as being no different than other religious experiences. According to those who accept the fourth opinion, however, an entheogenic experience does not, in some way, measure up to those experiences that “come as a result of rigorous spiritual discipline, like prayer, meditation [or] various ascetic practices, or that come as divine grace” (Grof 42).

Dr. Grof, who has conducted over 4,000 psychiatric sessions using psychedelics like LSD, states that his views fall in line with the third opinion. He believes that unless entheogens are taken in “the right context and are followed by systematic spiritual

practice, they are not in the same category as those experiences we read about in the spiritual literature” (Grof 42)

How could a new American syncretism of entheogens and religion be established? One possibility is to find established Judeo-Christian churches willing to incorporate the use of entheogens by its congregants into their existing ceremonies, rituals and/or teachings. The likelihood of this scenario seems remote, however, given the Judeo-Christian preference for a mediated contact with the divine over direct experience of the divine. A more likely possibility is the creation of a new syncretic church, one that is based on an updated mythology and uses entheogens along with other existing spiritual practices, like yoga and meditation, to help its members in their quest. According to chemist and pharmacologist Alexander Shulgin, who has devoted more than fifty years to the creation and study of psychoactive substances:

It is just this quest, the search for understanding of oneself that defines, to my eyes, a religion. It is an inward quest, one that asks questions and seeks answers. As I continue my own personal search for God, I am becoming increasingly convinced that He lies within me somewhere. Perhaps each person’s own God lies within him; this is the meaning of the word entheogen. And if that internal God is the same God for all people, then we are all, in a sense, the same person. Perhaps the role of a sacrament in any religious practice has been, and is, to let a moment’s light be shed on that part of reality. (Shulgin 118)

Dr. Shulgin may or may not be correct that there is but one God. And God may be within us, or without – or merely a metabolic aberration of the brain. That is not the issue. The issue is that no government has the right to deprive an individual of a legitimate means to embark on his/her personal quest for spiritual understanding, even if the chosen means is through the use of entheogens.

In conclusion, the legitimate use of entheogens has existed for centuries, and the practice of indigenous shamanic use of plant substances has been successfully assimilated into many modern syncretic religions. The United States, however, threatens to prosecute any of its citizens who use entheogens as part of a private spiritual quest or who try and develop a new American syncretism of entheogens and religion. By taking this position, the American government effectively places the user of entheogens on a par with the heroin junkie. This indiscriminate persecution of religious beliefs and practices must stop.

Works Cited

- American Indian Religious Freedom Act Amendments of 1994. Public Law 103-344 (H.R. 4230). October 6, 1994.
- Arizona State Legislature. ALIS Online. (2003): Title 13 Revised Statutes. <<http://www.azleg.state.az.us/ars/13/03402.htm>>
- Brent, Morgan. "Ayahuasca, Religion, and Nature." Santo Daime: The Rainforest Doctrine (2000): Archives. < <http://www.santodaime.org/archives/morgan.htm>>
- DEA. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Agency. (2003): Controlled Substances Act. < <http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/pubs/csa.html>>
- Erowid.org. The Vaults of Erowid. (2003): Description of Federal Controlled Substances. < http://www.erowid.org/psychoactives/law/law_fed_sched.shtml>
- Forte, Robert. Entheogens and the Future of Religion. San Francisco: Council on Spiritual Practices, 1997.
- Grof, Stanislav. "Entheogens as Catalysts of Spiritual Development." Psychoactive Sacramentals. (Thomas B. Roberts, ed.). San Francisco: Council on Spiritual Practices, 2001.
- Metzner, Ralph (Ed). Ayahuasca: Human Consciousness and the Spirits of Nature. New York: Thunder Mouth's Press, 1999
- Ott, Jonathan. The Age of Entheogens & the Angel's Dictionary. San Francisco: Natural Products Co, 1995.
- Peyote Way Church, The. (2003) <<http://www.peyoteway.org/peyoteway/index.html>>
- Presti, David E. and Beck, Jerome E. "Strychnine and Other Enduring Myths: Expert and User Folklore Surrounding LSD." Psychoactive Sacramentals. (Thomas B. Roberts, ed.). San Francisco: Council on Spiritual Practices, 2001.
- Roberts, Thomas B. (ed). Psychoactive Sacramentals. San Francisco: Council on Spiritual Practices, 2001.
- Ruck, Carl A.P.; Bigwood, Jeremy; Staples, Danny; Ott, Jonathan and Wasson, R. Gordon. "Entheogens." Journal of Psychedelic Drugs, Vol 11(1-2) Jan-Jun 1979: 145-6.

Shulgin, Alexander. "A Scientist's Views of Miracles and Magic." Psychoactive Sacramentals. (Thomas B. Roberts, ed.). San Francisco: Council on Spiritual Practices, 2001.

Smith, Huston and Snake, Ruben (ed). One Nation Under God: The Triumph of the Native American Church. Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 1998.

"União do Vegetal." The Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal.
< <http://www.udv.org.br/english.html>>

Wasson, R. Gordon. Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971.

Wasson, R. Gordon. "Secret of 'Divine Mushrooms.'" Life Magazine. May 13, 1957: 100-120

Arthur, James. Mushrooms and Mankind: The Impact of Mushrooms on Human Consciousness and Religion. Escondido, CA: The Book Tree. 2000.