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Religious Implications of Paranormal Events Occurring During Chemically-Induced ‘Psychedelic’ Experience*

WILLIAM JAMES, America’s first great psychologist and a founder of the American Society for Psychical Research, ingested peyote at the suggestion of his friend, E. Weir Mitchell. Instead of attaining an esthetic or religious experience, James developed a stomachache. When he recovered from nausea, James refused to take peyote again, stating, “I will take the visions on trust.”

The psychologist’s experiments with nitrous oxide (“laughing gas”) were more successful. After inhaling the colorless gas for the first time, James experienced a profound alteration in his usual conscious state. Further work with this substance convinced him that “normal,” everyday awareness is but one type of conscious experience. Noting that other forms of consciousness exist that are worthy of investigation, James¹

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1. W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Longmans, Green, 1902.

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concluded, “No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.”

Psychedelic (“mind-manifesting”) experience has been defined by Masters and Houston² as a state of awareness profoundly different from the usual waking state, from dreams, from intoxication states, and from most pathological states. They have noted, “Sensory experience, thought, emotions—awareness of self and of world—all

2. R.E.L. Masters & J. Houston, *Psychedelic Art*. New York: Grove, 1968.

undergo remarkable changes. Consciousness expands to take in the contents of deep, ordinarily inaccessible regions of the psyche." Masters and Houston have described the use of nonchemical means (e.g., trance, multi-media) for the elicitation of psychedelic experience,³ but note that such chemicals as LSD, mescaline, and psilocybin give special promise of revealing "the vast, intricate, and awesome regions we call *mind*."⁴ The anthropological, clinical, and experimental literature contains several references to paranormal events occurring during chemically-induced psychedelic experiences. Many of these events, moreover, have implications for the field of religion.

Anthropological Data

Since very early times, psychedelic substances have been used to bring about paranormal phenomena such as telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition. Masters and Houston⁵ have suggested that *Solanaceae* derivatives (e.g., thorn apple seeds) were used by priestesses of the Delphic oracle as well as by medieval witches to activate their extrasensory faculties. Primitive tribes have induced psychedelic experiences among their members for centuries, using mushrooms (e.g., *Amanita muscaria*, *Psilocybe mexicana*), derivatives of *Cannabis sativa* (e.g., marijuana, hashish), snuff preparations (e.g., yakee, cohoba), cacti (e.g., peyote), *Apocynaceae* derivatives (e.g., iboga), *Convolvulaceae* derivatives (e.g., morn-

ing glory seeds), and several species of *Banisteriopsis*.⁶

Of special interest is yage, a brew made from *Banisteriopsis caapi* and other "vines of the dead" which grow in the Amazon valley. McGovern⁷ was one of the first anthropologists to investigate the use of yage; after imbibing the beverage in a native ceremony, he noted:

Curiously enough, certain of the Indians fell into a particularly deep state of trance, in which they possessed what appeared to be telepathic powers. Two or three of the men described in great detail what was going on . . . hundreds of miles away. . . . More extraordinary still, on this particular evening, the local medicine-man told me that the chief of a certain tribe on the far-away Pra Pirana had suddenly died. I entered this statement in my diary and many weeks later, when we came to the tribe in question, I found that the witch doctor's statement had been true in every detail.

Naranjo⁸ has discovered that yage's chief active chemical compound is harmaline which brought about psychedelic experiences when given to thirty volunteer subjects who had no knowledge as to the effects of yage. Despite their absence of information regarding the drug's background, many of Naranjo's subjects visualized jaguars, jungles, and dark-skinned men, and imagined that they were flying.

The anthropological studies which

3. *Ibid.*

4. R.E.L. Masters & J. Houston, *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966.

5. *Ibid.*

6. R. Schultes, "Hallucinogens of Plant Origin" *Science*, 1969, pp. 245-254.

7. W. McGovern, *Jungle Paths and Inca Ruins*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1927.

8. C. Naranjo, "Psychotropic Properties of the Harmala Alkaloids" in *Ethnopharmacologic Search for Psychoactive Drugs* (D. Efron, ed.) Washington, D. C. Dept. of Health, Education & Welfare, 1967.

have been made of American "hippie" contra-cultures stress the key role played in these communities by psychedelic drug usage.⁹ The use of LSD and marijuana among "hippies" is typically coupled with an interest in mysticism, the *I Ching*, astrology, and other books and practices which center around paranormal experiences.¹⁰ Stafford and Golightly¹¹ have reported several instances of contractual drug users who have had reincarnation-type or mediumistic-type experiences during their sessions.¹²

Clinical Data

In 1938, Albert Hoffman was attempting to synthesize alkaloids which would control hemorrhage and stimulate certain types of muscle action. Among those he synthesized was a compound known as d-lysergic acid diethylamide-25 (LSD-25). In 1943, Hoffman accidentally ingested some of this drug and underwent a startling alteration of consciousness. Upon closing his eyes, he observed a kaleidoscopic play of colors as well as vivid eidetic

imagery of various types. LSD has since been used extensively in psychotherapy; Osmond, Blewett, and Hoffer were among the first psychotherapists to report instances of extrasensory perception among patients undergoing LSD therapy.¹³

Masters and Houston¹⁴ have described the case of a housewife who, in the course of an LSD session, told them that she could "see" her daughter in the kitchen of their home looking for the cookie jar. She further reported "seeing" the child knock a sugar bowl from a shelf, spilling sugar on the floor. When the housewife returned home, following the session with Masters and Houston, she was unable to find the sugar bowl. She was told by her husband that their daughter had knocked the sugar bowl from its shelf, breaking it, while looking for the cookie jar.

Masters and Houston¹⁵ also reported an LSD subject who saw "a ship caught in ice floes, somewhere in the northern seas." The ship was identified as the *France* by the subject who saw the name on its bow. It was soon discovered that the *France* had indeed been trapped in ice near Greenland, at the time of the subject's LSD session.

A number of paranormal events have been reported following ingestion of other psychedelic substances. Krippner,¹⁶ during a psilocybin session in 1962, visualized John F. Kennedy's assassination which took place in 1963. A

9. B. Berger, "Hippie Morality—More Old Than New," *Trans-Action*, 1967, pp. 19-27.
10. S. Krippner & D. Fersh, "Methods for Studying Paranormal Communication among Members of American Contracultural Communities," in *Methods for Inducing and Studying Psi-Favorable States of Consciousness* (R. Cavanna, ed.). New York: Garrett Press, 1969, in preparation.
11. P. Stafford & B. Golightly, *LSD: The Problem-Solving Psychedelic*. New York: Award Books, 1967.
12. Some recent studies have reported chromosomal damage among users of illegal, black market drugs. However, no healthy subject ingesting pharmaceutical LSD in a legal experimental setting has been found to exhibit any type of physiological injury (see Masters & Houston, *Psychedelic Art*, pp. 19-20).

13. In W. Harman, "Some Aspects of the Psychedelic-Drug Controversy," *J. of Human. Psychol.*, 1963, pp. 93-107.
14. Masters & Houston, *Varieties*, . . . , p. 117.
15. *Ibid.*
16. S. Krippner, "The Cycle in Deaths Among U. S. Presidents Elected at Twenty-Year Intervals," *Int. J. of Parapsychol.*, 1967, pp. 145-153.

member of the "Byrds" musical group¹⁷ claims to have had telepathic communication with other members of the group during a mescaline session.

Dr. Paul¹⁸ ingested the *Amanita pantherina* mushroom in a laboratory three hundred miles from an office in which she conducted her psychiatric practice. Her psychedelic experience involved intense visual imagery alternating between the atomic bomb and "the power of love." At the very time at which Dr. Paul was under the effects of the *Amanita pantherina*, a patient of hers unaccountably bought and prepared mushrooms (which he had never cooked before), ate them with hamburger, and had an anxiety attack, feeling that atomic warfare was imminent. Another patient, during the same evening, insisted that a friend drive her to the home of a man with whom the patient was secretly in love. She sat in the car yearning for him for nearly two hours; only her friend's vigilance prevented her from entering the man's house and throwing herself into his arms. Both patients were interested in ESP and both had unusually strong emotional attachments to Dr. Paul, their psychiatrist. Dr. Paul suspects that certain unaccountable moods and impulses stem from telepathic influences but remain unaccountable because psychotherapists have not learned how to search for their source.

Experimental Data

The principal vehicle for testing ESP

during the last thirty-five years has been the special card deck associated with the Duke University Parapsychology Laboratory. These materials consist of twenty-five cards per deck; each card contains a geometric form: a star, circle, cross, square, or wavy lines. When experimental subjects have attempted to guess the identity of these cards during psychedelic sessions, their attempts have usually been unsuccessful. Masters and Houston¹⁹ attempted such a project with LSD subjects, obtaining non-significant results. Non-significant results were also obtained by Whittlesey²⁰ who tested ESP ability with LSD subjects; Whittlesey, however, did obtain a statistically significant reduction in variance—the tendency for subjects, as a group, to make fewer high scores and fewer low scores. Van Asperen de Boer, Berkenna, and Kappers²¹ initiated a card-guessing ESP experiment with psilocybin subjects; once again the overall results of the experiment were non-significant.

An attempt to use emotionally-loaded materials, rather than decks of cards, was made by Cavanna and Servadio.²² Photographic color prints of incongruous pictures were prepared for the subjects. Although the overall results were non-significant, one male did remarkably well. During a psilocybin session, he concentrated on an envelope

17. D. Crosby, "In Tune with Positives," in *The Ecstatic Adventure* (R. Metzner, ed.). New York: Macmillan, 1968.
18. M. Paul. "Two Cases of Altered Consciousness with Amnesia Apparently Telepathically Induced," *Psychedelic Rev.*, 1966, pp. 4-8.

19. Masters & Houston, *Varieties . . .*, pp. 118-119.
20. J. Whittlesey, "Some Curious ESP Results in Terms of Variance," *J. of Parapsychol.*, 1960, pp. 220-222.
21. S. Van Asperen de Boer, P. Berkenna, & J. Kappers, "Is It Possible to Induce ESP with Psilocybin?" *Int. J. of Neuropsychiat.*, 1966, pp. 447-473.
22. R. Cavanna & E. Servadio, "ESP Experiments with LSD-25 and Psilocybin: A Methodological Approach," *Parapsychological Monographs*, 1964, No. 5.

containing a picture of a key combined with female breasts; his guess as to the picture's identity was "a woman with bosoms and ornaments." During an LSD session, he concentrated on an envelope containing a picture of two hands, one large and one small; he guessed that it was "a hand; the five points of the huge hand come out."

Osiris²³ administered LSD to a number of "mediums" who were given objects and asked to describe the owners. One medium was described as doing exceptionally well, but most of the subjects were so interested in the "esthetic pleasure" and "philosophic knowledge" resulting from their LSD sessions that they had difficulty maintaining an interest in external tasks.

Successful ESP studies with such diverse substances as mescaline,^{24, 25} muscarine,²⁶ and the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom²⁷ have been reported. However, the most provocative data emerged from a pilot study designed by Masters and Houston²⁸ whose LSD subjects attempted to identify emotionally-charged images that had been written down previously by the experimenters. Masters and Houston usually attempted the experiment toward the end of the subject's LSD session when he was fairly amenable to performing a struc-

tured task. Of the sixty-two individuals tested, forty-eight approximated the experimental image at least two times out of ten, while five subjects' verbal reports resembled the image at least seven times out of ten. For example, one subject visualized "tossed seas" when the correct image was a Viking ship tossed in a storm. The same subject visualized "lush vegetation" when the image was a rain forest in the Amazon, "a camel" when the image was an Arab on a camel, "the Alps" when the image was the Himalayas, and "a Negro picking cotton in a field" when the image was a plantation in the Old South.

The difficulty of constructing experimental studies involving ESP and psychedelic experience has been posed by Blewett²⁹ who noted that eidetic imagery will not stand still; even as a subject seeks to identify a feeling or an image, the experience races on and the event he wishes to assess may be compounded and confused with a number of other events. Nevertheless, the challenge is an intriguing one; Sidney Cohen,³⁰ a pioneer LSD investigator, has stated his conviction that "intuition, creativity, telepathic experience, prophecy—all can be understood as superior activities of brain-mind function."

Implications for Religion

If psychedelic chemicals can induce or enhance a paranormal experience, it follows that paranormal events can accompany religious-type phenomena during a psychedelic session. What

23. K. Osiris, "A Pharmacological Experimentation," in *Proceedings of Two Conferences on Parapsychology and Pharmacology* (M. Ebon, ed.). Clinton, Mass: Colonial Press, 1961.

24. F. Marti-Ibanez, "The Gates to Paradise," *MD Medical News-magazine*, June, 1965.

25. L. Vasiliev, *Mysterious Phenomena of the Human Psyche*. New Hyde Park, N.Y.: University Books, 1965.

26. A. Puharich, *Beyond Telepathy*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1964.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Masters & Houston, *Varieties . . .*, pp. 199-122.

29. D. Blewett, "Psychedelic Drugs in Parapsychological Research," *Int. J. of Parapsychol.*, 1963, pp. 47-74.

30. S. Cohen, *The Beyond Within*. New York: Atheneum, 1964.

Clark³¹ wrote about chemically-induced religious experience probably holds equally true for chemically-induced telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition: "... it seems hardly to be doubted that these substances at least *release* mystical experience, though it is not clear that we can say that they *produce* it."

The individual who believes that a paranormal event has transpired during his psychedelic session often is predisposed to extend his belief to other areas in which he may have harbored skepticism. Having been convinced that one area of the "unknown" (i.e., ESP) has been explored and proved valid, he may enlarge his constellation of beliefs to other areas (e.g., God, the "soul," life after death).

This extension of belief often takes form in ways somewhat alien to orthodox Western religious dogma. A person who believes he has experienced telepathy during a mescaline or LSD session often conceptualizes that the paranormal episode occurred because he is united with his fellow man through a "common energy" or "psychic force." God is often seen as the "Universal flow of love" which unites all living things. This notion is not unlike the pantheistic belief that everybody and everything join communally to comprise God. Thus, the frequently cited³² surge of interest in Eastern religions and in pantheistic philosophy among people who have taken LSD or marijuana may be, in part, attributed to their attempts to come to grips with ESP-type phe-

nomena occurring during their sessions.

Chemically-induced paranormal occurrences involve a profound alteration of consciousness—an alteration not unlike the states many people equate with spiritual insight or mystical experience.³³ Once man leaves his usual waking conscious state and enters an altered state, he often reports contact with "God," "the Ground of Being," or "the Holiest of Holies." Buber³⁴ describes a similar phenomenon—the I-Thou relationship, where a person relates to something (i.e., God) outside the realm of space and time. This phenomenon is typified by a relationship in which the person and God share the same components while, paradoxically, each retains his identity.*

ESP-type experiences which occur in altered conscious states often include the subjective impression of making contact with something "beyond the self." In this way, paranormal episodes contribute to the I-Thou phenomenon and may change or reinforce the individual's religious outlook. One LSD subject³⁵ presented the following written description of her experience:

I felt I was there with God on the day of the Creation. Everything was so fresh and new. Every plant and tree and fern and bush had its own particular holiness. As I walked along the

31. W. H. Clark, "William James: Contributions to the Psychology of Religious Conversion," *Pastoral Psychology*, Sept., 1965, pp. 29-36.

32. W. Braden, *The Private Sea: LSD and the Search for God*. Chicago: Quadrangle, 1967.

33. W. Pahnke, "The Psychedelic Mystical Experience in Terminal Cancer Patients and its Possible Implications for Psi Research," in *Psi and Altered States of Consciousness* (R. Cavanna & M. Ullman, eds.), New York: Garrett Press, 1968.

34. M. Buber, *I and Thou*. New York: Scribner's, 1937.

35. Masters & Houston, *Varieties . . .*, p. 261.

* As Buber expressed it, I-Thou necessarily implies both an I and a Thou; I is not Thou and Thou is not I, but I and Thou are united in love—hence the significance of the hyphen.

ground the smells of nature rose to greet me—sweeter and more sacred than any incense. Around me bees hummed and birds sang and crickets chirped a ravishing hymn to Creation. . . .

The LSD subject had been an agnostic before her chemically-induced religious experience. Her experience in the forest awakened within her dimensions to which she had previously been indifferent. Following the LSD session, she wrote, "I saw there and I knew then that there were dimensions to life and harmonies and deeps which had been for me unseen, unheard, and untapped."

Masters and Houston³⁶ have differentiated between the chemically-induced religious experience (in which one encounters God) and the chemically-induced mystical experience (in which one "dissolves" into the energy field of the universe). Paranormal episodes may mark either of these experiences; in the case of mystical experience, it is very easy for an individual to combine the subjective impression of paranormal communication with the concept of "transcending the ego" and becoming "as one" with a "group mind" or "collective unconscious." One LSD subject³⁷ recalled:

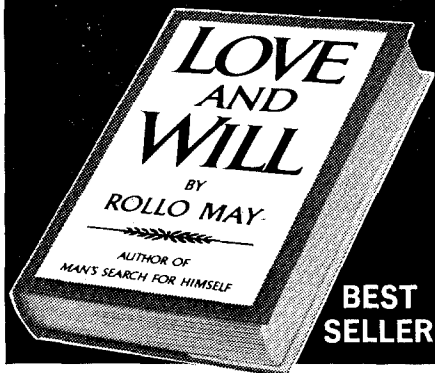
My body became the body of bliss, diaphanous to the rhythms of the universe. All around and passing through me was the Light, a trillion atomized crystals shimmering in blinding incandescence. I was carried by the Light to an Ecstasy beyond ecstasy and suddenly I was no longer I but a part of the Divine Workings. . . .

This state of mind resembles certain

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 247-313.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 307-308.

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Zen and Yoga states which practitioners of Eastern religious disciplines attempt to attain. A person trained in Yoga learns that, "There is no feeling of I, and yet the mind works, desireless, free from restlessness, objectless, bodiless."³⁸ Students of Zen Buddhism attempt to reach a level of consciousness in which an impression of "oneness" prevails.³⁹ In both Yoga and Zen, paranormal occurrences reported do take place; the students are advised to ignore these events as they are felt to be inconsequential distractions from the main goal of the discipline.

A scientific study of religion can not

38. R. Y. Vivekananda, cited in James, *op. cit.*

39. A. Ben-Avi, "Zen Buddhism," in *American Handbook of Psychiatry* (S. Arieti, ed.). New York: Basic Books, 1959.



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help but become involved in the investigation of paranormal events occurring during psychedelic experience. Whether one accepts or rejects the experimental evidence for ESP is inconsequential; the critical fact exists that subjective impressions and anecdotal reports of telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition are associated with religious experience, mystical experience, "faith healing," "conversion," "speaking in tongues," and primitive religious rituals.

James⁴⁰ described the altered conscious states which serve as a milieu for many paranormal occurrences and religious phenomena—a milieu which can be experimentally produced by psychedelic substances. To James it was apparent that "the world of our present consciousness is only one of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for

our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points and higher energies filter in."

James' description of altered conscious states indicates why these types of consciousness are often associated with religious and paranormal events: the "higher energies" that "filter in" may be glimpses of the future, communications with other people, perceptions of distant happenings, or even links with "God," "the Ground of Being," or the energy field of the universe. When man's usual consciousness and his states of altered consciousness "become continuous" and he reacts to experiences which he subjectively interprets as religious or paranormal, some framework must be provided to make sense out of them. The structure he and/or his culture erects may emphasize the religious and de-emphasize the paranormal (e.g., Yoga, Zen, orthodox Judeo-Christian doctrine); it may emphasize the paranormal and de-emphasize the religious (e.g., voodoo, mediumistic groups), or it may emphasize both (e.g., native peyote rituals, spiritualist churches, "faith healing" services). For an individual or a culture to de-emphasize both is tantamount to repressing important elements of one's being, to ignore vital sources of strength, and to bypass critical areas of the human potential.

Finally, these poorly-understood phenomena should be examined and studied by the student of religion and by the religious counselor. Not to do so will relegate a type of human behavior to obscurity which, instead, should be brought into awareness and given its chance to assist mankind's creative development.

40. James, *op. cit.*