Benny Shanon

Entheogens

Reflections on 'Psychoactive Sacramentals' [1]

In our Western culture psychoactive substances are usually regarded as 'drugs'. However, in many other societies, all over the world and throughout human history, such substances have been used as sacraments, that is, principal instruments of religious rituals and spiritual work. Indeed, nowadays, an increasing number of people refer to the psychoactive agents more generally known as psychedelics (etymologically, mind manifesting) or hallucinogenic by the term *entheogens* — that is, agents that bring one in touch with the Divine within (Ruck *et al*., 1979; Ott, 1996). An excellent discussion of nomenclature is presented in the chapter by Forte in the anthology under review.[2]

The delightful anthology compiled by Roberts on *Psychoactive Sacramentals* (henceforth, PS) presents two dozen essays on the use of psychoactive substances as sacraments. The contributions in PS are varied. Their authors include scientists engaged in the study of psychoactive substances and of altered states of consciousness, theologians and students of religion, clergymen and practitioners of Asian meditative practices, psychologists and other mental health professionals, educators, and policy makers. Some of the authors (Hoffman, Grof, Smith, Stolaroff and Tart) are first of the line veterans who were personally involved in the making of the psychedelic movement about half a century ago. The contributions themselves include reflections on the very notion of entheogen, personal accounts of the use of psychoactive substances, firsthand accounts of important moments in the modern history of entheogenic research (notably, the remarkable testimony of Hoffman, the inventor of LSD, and the three essays concerning the famous Good Friday experiment by Pahnke), discussions of the use of entheogens in different cultures, ancient and contemporary, reflections about the

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[1] **Thomas B. Roberts (ed.)**, *Psychoactive Sacramentals: Essays on Entheogens and Religion*, San Francisco, CA: Council on Spiritual Practices, 2001, 286 pp., $16.95, ISBN 1-88975-02-1 (pbk).

[2] Perhaps this is an unjustified bias on my part, but personally, I would make a distinction between natural and synthetic substances. While I view psychotropic plants as precious gifts, I am not certain it is justified to regard synthetic substances in this fashion.

use and abuse of psychoactive substances in western society, discussion of their potential application in psychotherapy, examination of the religious and spiritual import of entheogens, practical recommendations, a juridical analysis and even a poem. Special praise is due to the series of questions for further study and reflection listed in the last item in the collection, that of the editor himself; not only are these thought provoking, they also offer a most instructive and insightful systematic typology for topics of research and reflection in the field at hand. All told, PS presents a valuable source of information, analysis, opinion and wise guidance for all — scientists, religious mentors, clinicians, policy makers and lay persons — interested in psychoactive substances. In fact, I wish persons who regard these substances as evil and menacing drugs would have a look at this book as well; perhaps (hopefully) it would make them see things in a different perspective.

To my knowledge, the first scholar to highlight the sacramental use of psychoactive substances was de Felice (1936/1975 in his book *Poisons sacrés, ivresses divines* (which so far as I know has not to have been translated into English; this would explain why it is not cited in this collection). De Felice puts forward the hypothesis that the use of psychotropic substances is deeply embedded in human culture, and that it is intrinsically intertwined in a most basic human instinct — the search for transcendence. Thus, he proposes, the use of psychotropic substances is at the roots of perhaps all religions. Similar ideas were later made by La Barre (1972), Wasson *et al*.(1986), Ott (1995) as well as in a popular, nonscientific fashion, by McKenna (1992); see also the anthology edited by Forte (1997) and published earlier in the series to which the present book also belongs.

That psychoactive plants (traditionally referred to as power or master plants; see Luna, 1984) have been used from time immemorial by indigenous shamans is well known. Indeed, in some regions of the world (notably, South America) there are hardly any shamanistic practices that do not use such plants. The rituals performed with these plants have been, and to a certain degree still are, at the very centre of the cultures of the indigenous people and served for both religious and healing purposes (Dobkin de Rios, 1972; 1984; Myerhoff, 1974; Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1975; Schultes and Hoffman, 1979; Winkelman, 1995; 2000; as well as the various contributions in the anthologies by Harner, 1973, and by Langdon and Baer, 1992).

Especially interesting are new entheogenic religions that have been founded at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. In the United States we encounter the Native American Church, which employs peyote; in Brazil there are several syncretic sects employing the Amazonian brew ayahuasca. Of the latter, in PS the Udião de Vegetal is mentioned (in the contribution by Schinzinger) but, actually, the older and more famous is the Church of Santo Daime established in the 1930s by Mestre Irineu Serra, an Afro-Brazilian rubber plantation worker, following his contacts with the indigenous Amerindian traditions.[3] Several books about these sects have been written, but since they are all in Portuguese I shall not cite them here. Recently, one book by Polari, an intellectual and high official of the Santo Daime, was translated into English (see

[3] The name Santo Daime is mentioned in the essay by Lucas, but actually nothing is said about it.

Polari, 1999; a most interesting article titled 'Might the Gods be alkaloids' is found on the web-site <http://www.santodaime.org/archives/alex1.htm>).

In recent years, several scholars and investigators have put forth the hypothesis that the use of entheogenic agents has been the source not only of shamanistic rituals throughout the planet, but also of some of the more institutionally established religions. Wasson (1968) suggested that *soma*, the magical nectar of the Hindu Vedas, was actually an infusion of an hallucinogenic mushroom, *Amarita muscaria*. The sacred drink employed in ancient Zoroastrian religion, the *homa* or *haoma*, was suggested to be a psychoactive agent as well, the constituent plant of which is the mideastern shrub *Peganum harmala*, *harmal* in Arabic. Indeed, Flattery and Schwartz (1989) proposed that the Indian soma too was made of this plant, not of a mushroom, as originally suggested by Wasson. As for Europe, Wasson and his collaborators (Wasson *et al.*, 1978; 1986) argued that at the centre of the famous Greek mysteries of Eleusis was the consumption of another psychoactive brew, one containing ergot alkaloids. A most forceful broad historical analysis highlighting the essential role of entheogens in the development of human culture is presented in Ott (1995).

Shamanic practices are embedded in oral traditions. Institutional religions have texts. The literary evidence suggesting altered states of consciousness in the religious rites of ancient India and Persia is quite abundant. The Rig Veda, the oldest classical vedic scripture, is a compendium of hymns to Soma. In these, worshipers often praise the brew as a divinity and mark the special effects that it has induced in them. Zoroastrian hymns to homa are similar. The following are my own free translations of examples presented in de Felice (1936/1975):

> Oh Haoma of gold, I am asking you for wisdom, force, victory, health, healing, prosperity and grandeur. (*Zen Avesta*)
>
> Oh, King Soma, prolong our lives
> Like the sun who nourishes the days every morning.
>
> *
>
> The Soma is full of intelligence
> It inspires man with enthusiasm
> It makes the poets sing.
>
> *
>
> We have drunk the Soma: we have come to be immortal, we have arrived the at Light, we have reached the Gods.
>
> *
>
> Half of me is in the skies, and the other extends to the low depths
> Have I drunk Soma?
> I am tall to the utmost, my elevation reaches the clouds
> Have I drunk Soma? (*Rig Veda*)

More recently, suggestions have been made that the two great monotheistic religions of the West, Judaism and Christianity, also have their roots in the consumption of psychoactive substances. Analysing the Hebrew Bible, Merkur (e.g. 2000; see also his contribution in PS), a psychoanalyst and student of religion,

suggested that the Manna that the people of Israel received from heaven during their wandering through the Sinai desert was actually an entheogen. Merkur's exegetical discussion of the Manna (along with the priestly showbread) also extends to the New Testament. Several years before, Allegro (1970) linked early Christianity with the use of a psychoactive mushroom. On the basis of my own reading, I shall add that the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, found in Hag Hammadi library, is quite conducive for an entheogenic reading. Unpublished speculations, based on the study of Arab folklore, have also been made that Islam, as well as pre-Islamic Arab religion, are rooted in the use of entheogens (see Rajdi at <http://www.arabia.com/desertland/>).

In his contribution to PS, Merkur claims that the references to the Manna are the only explicit references to an entheogen in the bible. It seems to me that there are in the Old Testament several other allusions which may indicate possible entheogenic use in early Hebrew religion. Admittedly, none is direct. The following comments are presented not as demonstrative arguments, but as food for thought; obviously, all I shall say here is speculative.

The first case I shall note is one in which an explicit mention of a psychoactive plant is actually made — it involves Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife. Initially, Jacob loved Rachel much more than he did Leah, her sister whom his father-in-law obliged him to marry as well. However, because Rachel was barren, Jacob stayed with Leah, a state of affairs which upset Rachel to the point of wishing to die. Given this background, the scriptures recount:

> And Reuben [Jacob's first son, whose mother is Leah] went in the days of wheat harvest, and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them unto his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah: Give me, I pray thee, of thy son's mandrakes. And she said unto her: Is it a small matter that thou hast taken my husband? and wouldest thou take away my son's mandrakes also? And Rachel said, Therefore he shall lie with thee tonight for thy son's mandrakes (*Genesis*, 30.14–15).

This story is, I find, truly amazing. After the biblical text makes it very clear that the most important thing in Rachel's life was the love of her husband whom she was forced to share with her hated sister, we are told that this very Rachel is willing to sacrifice her relationship with her husband in order to obtain some mandrakes. Furthermore, it is noted that Leah, too, highly valued the mandrakes, for she compares the taking away of these to the taking away of Jacob, the target of rivalry and animosity between the two sisters. Apparently, the reason the narrator inserts this episode within the main story, whose subject matter is Jacob's relationship with his wives and the manner in which his sons (the founders to the twelve tribes of Israel) were begotten, is to indicate how valuable mandrakes were in early Israelite society. Mandrakes are, of course, highly psychoactive (see, for instance, Schultes and Hofmann, 1979).

The foregoing story explicitly mentions a psychoactive plant but does not include any report on a psychedelic experience as such. For such a report (but not any mention of a substance), let us consider the most sacred and tremendous event in Jewish history — the theophany at Mount Sinai. It is on this occasion that the Ten Commandments were given and it was then that the covenant

between God and the People of Israel was established. For this solemn occasion, the people had to prepare themselves in three days of purification and sanctification, during which no sexual activity was allowed. It is said that God came upon the mountain, and that under penalty of death no one except for Moses was allowed to step forward:

> And it came to pass on the third day in the morning that there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mount and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled. . . . And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking (*Exodus*, 19.16; 20.18).

After the laws were given to the Israelites, the people offered sacrifices to their God and:

> They saw the God of Israel and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness. . . . And the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel (*Exodus*, 24.10, 17).

There are several features in the foregoing descriptions that resemble prominent characteristics of non-ordinary states of consciousness induced by psychotropic substances. The first is the fear of death. Some of the most powerful and significant moments associated with the use of entheogens may involve experiences of self-death followed by rebirth; for pertinent examples and discussion the reader is referred to Leary *et al*. (1969), in which a parallel is drawn between the stages described in the Tibetan Book of the Dead and experiences encountered under the influence of LSD. Second is fire, which is a manifestation of light. In psychedelic states, light is often experiences as the source of everything that exists and as the power that sustains the cosmos, life, and the mind. Many who have had the experience identify this power as God. The third feature I shall mark is synaesthesia, that is, the blending of percepts pertaining to different sensory modalities. In the biblical text cited above, we read that the Children of Israel saw the thunders and the noise of the trumpet. The blending of the senses in general, and the seeing of auditory material in particular, are very common feature of psychedelic experiences (see Klüver 1928; 1966; Watts, 1962; Ludwig, 1969; Houston and Masters, 1972). Finally, I shall note that the preparatory prescriptions and prohibitions indicated in the biblical text are very similar to those specified in traditional contexts of entheogenic use.

In the foregoing passages no substance is mentioned. However, it is interesting to note that in the Southern region of Israel and in the Sinai peninsula there grow two plants that can induce psychoactive effects. One is *Peganum Harmala*, and the other *Mimosa hostilis*. Significantly, these two plants respectively contain the molecules contained in Banisteriopsis caapi and Psychotria viridis, the two plants which are the constituents of the powerful Amazonian brew ayahuasca. In fact, mimosa also grows in the arid areas of northeastern Brazil, and there it is the basis of the entheogen Jurema (see de Mota, 1979). Flattery and Schwartz (1989) have made the case for the use of Peganum in the ancient Middle East and argued that it was an entheogen which, as noted above, they identified with the

Zoroastrian Haoma. Indeed, this plant is still used amongst local traditional communities — both Moslem and Jewish — in conjunction with magic and witchcraft (see Emboden, 1972; Danin, 1983; and Palevitch and Yaniv, 1991). A further examination of the Scriptures reveals that Mimosa (*shita*, in Hebrew) wood had a very special status: It is from it that the ancient Israelites constructed the tabernacle and built the ark in which the Tables of the Covenant were guarded. Curiously, the coffins of the pharaohs too were made out of this wood. Apparently, this is not because the wood was especially valuable — rabbinical commentaries on the Bible explicitly note that is was not.

Let me also add that my own private searches led me to look for Peganum in the Judean desert. An especially large wild field of the plant is found just next door to the Qumran caves, the home of the Essenes, the ancient Judaic (and perhaps proto-Christian) mystic group who lived in that area from the second century BC to the second century AD. Qumran is also the place where the oldest biblical manuscripts (along with other religious texts), the so-called Dead Sea scrolls, have been found. I was startled: Was it that the Essenes made use of this psychoactive plant?

Last but not least is the story of the Tree of Knowledge. There is much to be said about this story but this is not the place for it. Here, let me confine myself to one simple, yet instructive, observation. Whatever the interpretation one gives to this story, one thing is clear — it was told in a context in which people (adult individuals, not children reading fairy tales) believed that knowledge could be obtained by means of the ingestion of plant material, and that this knowledge had a relationship to the Divine. As the Serpent told Adam and Eve: 'In the day ye eat [of the fruit of the tree] then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.' Indeed, the biblical text goes on noting that having eaten of the fruit 'the eyes of them both were opened' (*Genesis*, 3.7), and that God's appraisal was that 'the man is become as one of us, to learn good and evil' (*Genesis*, 3.22).

There are also various post-biblical Jewish texts (Talmudistic, rabbinical and cabalistic), that are indicative of knowledge of plants and their psychoactive qualities (see, for instance, Feliks, 1994). One should also remember the obvious, grape wine, which — as all know — has prominent sacramental use in both Judaism and Christianity, is also a mind-altering substance. So, apparently, was the incense used in the Jewish temple. This incense was a concoction made out of many ingredients. One of them is called *knei bosem* (in Hebrew, fragrant reeds); it has been suggested (Benet, 1975) that the term cannabis is a derivative from this semitic term.

What does it mean that a plant conveys knowledge? What is the status of the knowledge that is presumably achievable through the consumption of psychoactive plants? What does it mean that a plant (or a substance) triggers the Divine which is within? What, for that matter, does it mean that the Divine is within one? All these are tough questions, and this is not the place to discuss them in full. Here, I shall confine myself to a brief anthropological-cum-psychological comment and to the citation of a parable.

That veridical knowledge is attained through the consumption of psychoactive substances is a fundamental tenet of the indigenous Amerindian cultures. Such consumption is considered to be 'the only path to knowledge' (Chaumeil, 1983). The world revealed in this manner is taken to be real whereas the ordinary 'real' world is often regarded as illusory. For anthropological data, the reader is referred to Reichel-Dolmatoff (1975), Langdon (1979), Chaumeil (1983), Overing (1985a,b), Luna (1986) and Lagrou (1998). But epistemological beliefs of this sort are not confined to indigenous people. William James (1929) singles out noesis (i.e., the feeling of knowledge) as one of the key defining features of the mystical experience. Nowadays, this characterization is included in standard definitions of mysticism (see Stace, 1961; Pahnke, 1972; Hollenback, 1996 as well as the contribution of Riedliger in PS). In the famous writings of Carlos Castaneda (see, for instance, Castaneda, 1974) the tenet just noted is, of course, pivotal. For further theoretical discussion, see Smith (1976; 2000) as well as Shanon (2001; 2002).

The parable I would like to cite was recounted to me by an ayahuasca user in the Amazonian region; it now stands as the main motto for my forthcoming book on the psychology of the ayahuasca experience (Shanon, 2002):

> God wanted to hide his secrets in a secure place. 'Would I put them on the moon?', He reflected. 'But then, one day human beings could get there, and it could be that those who would arrive there would not be worthy of the secret knowledge. Or perhaps I should hide them in the depths of the ocean,' God entertained another possibility. But, again, for the same reasons, he dismissed it. Then the solution occurred to Him — 'I shall put my secrets in the inner sanctum of man's own mind. Then only those who really deserve it will be able to get to it.'[4]

In conjunction with this, let me also cite the verse from the Gospel that serves as the motto to PS: 'The kingdom of God is within you' (*Luke*, 17.21).

I would like to end my discussion with brief comments on more applied issues which are very much at the primary focus in PS (at least half of the essays are explicitly concerned with them). These have to do with the spiritual and/or religious import of the psychedelic experience, the psychological considerations pertaining to the use of psychoactive substances, and the socio-legal status thereof.

First, do drugs have religious import? This is the title of the most famous (and the most cited) item in the discussion of this question in the literature — Smith (1964); it is also considered in Smith's own contribution to PS. I shall not discuss this complex question here, only reiterate one of Smith's key points, namely, that it is crucial to distinguish between religious experience and religious life (Smith, 1976, 2000 as well as, amongst others, the essays in PS by Walsh, Tart and Roberts). The experiences occasioned (a most apt term Smith borrows from Aldous Huxley) by entheogens can be of utmost religious, spiritual and/or mystical impact on people. However, the meaning of these experiences and their long-term effects on a person's life totally depend upon the individual in

[4] Recently, after the manuscript of my book was already sent to the publisher, Nurit Shacham showed me that the same story is cited in 'Circles in a Forest', a novel by the South African writer Dalene Matthee. I have checked with this writer for the sources of her story, but she could not tell.

question. By no means are they a direct, automatic result of the substance consumed. In traditional contexts of entheogen use (especially familiar to me are those — both indigenous and not — pertaining to ayahuasca) the non-ordinary experiences induced by entheogens are intimately coupled with regulations of the general conduct of the life of both individuals and society. Personally, I have known many individuals whose lives have been tremendously enriched and significantly changed for the better through the use of ayahuasca. Definitely, there are also individuals for which this is not the case.

The various essays in PS which deal with psychological issues examine the psychological impact of the psychedelic experience (Walsh, Grof, Tart), discuss its employment in psychotherapy (Grof, Vaughan, Ann Shulgin), highlight the misuse and abuse of substances (Tart), and draw wise practical recommendations for their prudent use (Stolaroff, Roberts). With respect to these issues, let me again refer to ayahuasca. In the different contexts of ayahuasca use it is often said that what is experienced with the brew depends on each person's own merit. In Shanon (2002) I suggest that essentially, the ayahuasca experience can be regarded as 'a mirror of the soul'. This is the case while, at the same time, many facets of this experience manifest most remarkable inter-personal commonalities (see Shanon, 1998). The reader shall note that this is also the conclusion of the parable I have cited above.

And like the religious ramifications of psychoactive substances, so with the psychological ones: By no means are the effects associated with these substances — be they positive or negative — the direct result of the biochemical action the substances have on brain and body physiology. In the literature on altered states of consciousness, the two factors of *set* (parameters pertaining to the person) and *setting* (parameters pertaining to context) are singled out as crucial in determining what happens to people under the influence (see Leary *et al*., 1969; Zinberg, 1984). A simplistic reductionistic view, according to which the psychological effects of psychoactive substances is a simple result of the physiological action of a chemical is definitely wrong. As in all matters psychological, a key factor is meaning — the meaning imposed by human beings in the matrix of activities defining their use of the substances at hand. An analogy I find useful is with sex. If we were to film the physical act of the most amorous marital conjugation we would see the very same anatomy and physiology we would detect in a the filming of squalid pornography. The difference between the two cases is neither in anatomy nor in physiology, but in the meaning people invest into the act. Precisely so with respect to psychotropic substances. Whether they are drugs (which, unfortunately, they certainly can be made to be) or sacraments (which, to my mind, they should be) depends on the people who use them. There is no question about it — there are numerous cases of immature, disrespectful and irresponsible use of substances; many accounts of such uses (or rather, abuses) are reported, for instance, in Hayes (2000). I shall note that in the case of ayahuasca, consumption is never alone, never for fun, always within a ritual grounded in a tradition (that is, what will be done during its course is set beforehand and

known), directed (rather rigidly) by a person whose societal role is to do this, and with all sorts of precautions being taken (especially for novices).

This brings me to the socio-legal considerations. I am neither a jurist nor a policy maker and the evaluation of society is outside my professional expertise (for pertinent discussion see Grinspoon and Bakalar, 1997; Sterling, 1997; Doblin, 2001). Yet, as an individual whose life has been immensely enriched by the encounter (in mid-adulthood and in a traditional context) with an entheogen (ayahuasca), I cannot see psychoactive substances as evil agents. Surely, every powerful tool involves potential risks and demands wise and responsible employment. But would we censor the use of fire for cooking and heating because with fire entire civilizations may be (and have been) destroyed? Would we ban motor vehicles in light of the great number of casualties related to driving? An approach both wiser and more effective would be, I surmise, to educate people how to use these powerful substances responsibly and with the respect they deserve. Traditional societies conferred such instruction on their members. For our society, PS is, I find, a welcome educative step forward.

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