



BOOK REVIEW

The Holy Mushroom: Evidence of Mushrooms in Judeo-Christianity. A critical re-evaluation of the schism between John M. Allegro and R. Gordon Wasson over the theory on the entheogenic origins of Christianity presented in The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross. J.R. Irvin. Grand Terrace, CA: Gnostic Media, 2008, 188 pp, with 38 color and 7 B&W plates. ISBN-10: 1439215170; ISBN-13: 978-1439215173; \$42.49

The Holy Mushroom (THM) investigates a critical issue in the history of entheogen studies, the response to the publication of *The Sacred Mushroom & the Cross* (TSMTC) by John Allegro (1970). In TSMTC, Allegro integrated information from art, linguistics, ethnobotany, and prehistory to present a radically new argument on the origins of Christianity in mushroom cults that survived into the current era. These arguments were summarily dismissed by Gordon Wasson, one of the best-known avocational entheogenic scholars. In spite of Wasson's publications on the entheogenic origins of religions around the world, he dismissed a central thesis of Allegro's work—that the Plaincourault fresco (circa 1291 C.E.) from France depicted an *Amanita muscaria* mushroom. This rejection—which came to be known as the Wasson-Panofsky interpretation—was based on the opinion of an art historian Erwin Panofsky who claimed that in spite of the obvious resemblances to the *Amanita muscaria*, the fresco was not a mushroom, but a stylized Italian pine tree.

THM examines the background to what became a brief public dispute leading to an almost universal rejection and ridicule of Allegro's work. Irvin examines the behind-the-scenes dynamics of this controversial rejection by Wasson through a variety of methods, including examination of private correspondences of Wasson with others regarding this topic. In a careful examination of many levels of evidence, including a careful checking and cross-referencing of texts and footnotes, Irvin argues that Wasson behaved in an incredibly irresponsible fashion—even becoming obstructionist—in shaping the academic response to Allegro's book and the opinions of subsequent generations of scholars.

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The controversy between Wasson and Allegro was influenced by many factors, not the least of which was that neither was an expert in all of the fields of inquiry relevant to the question. Wasson, a banker turned mycologist and Allegro, a philologist and esteemed investigator of the Dead Sea Scrolls, relied on information beyond their own field of expertise.

Wasson had acquired a reputation as an international authority regarding mushrooms and entheogens by virtue of his work in bringing attention to the persistent Mesoamerican traditions, embodied in the figure of Maria Sabina and in his book on the origins of the *Aryan soma*, the source of the sacred elixir of the ancient Vedic gods. Yet Wasson took the stance that entheogenic mushroom use was only part of the ancient origins of the Christian tradition (prior to 1,000 B.C.E.), and that no vestiges had survived until the current era. He summarily dismissed and even publically ridiculed and insulted Allegro, going beyond the scope of academic critique in maligning his ideas and motivations.

But by reference to private correspondence, Irvin reveals a disreputable aspect to Wasson's dismissal. Wasson apparently confided to others that he did not even read Allegro's book, but instead relied on the opinions of a Jewish Rabbi and a Catholic priest in developing the opinion there was nothing worthwhile in TSMTC—"not a single word of truth." Irvin uses cross-references to a variety of published and unpublished material to show that Wasson embarked on a life-long tirade against Allegro that was based in a wide range of falsifications and distortions. Irvin suggests that these were based on Wasson's self-interest—ignoring his own contradictions and refusing to acknowledge that he was mistaken. Wasson may have also suffered from one of the problems he often leveled at his own critics—mycophobia—compounded with his personal struggles to find some kind of reconciliation in his troubled relationship with his Christian background.

Irvin further analyzes the attacks leveled at Allegro's work and scholarship, illustrating that for the most part they were due to the erroneous published opinions of other experts, not Allegro's own errors. Irvin also provides validation of the basic thesis of Allegro in the last third of THM, which is largely color plates depicting mushrooms in Christian antiquity. Reviewing paintings and other artistic depictions (i.e., carvings, stained glass windows) Irvin shows the central role of mushrooms in depictions of the activities of Adam and Eve, Christ, and many Christian figures, especially visionaries. Irvin points out not only the repeated appearance of the typical and signature characteristics of *Amanita muscaria*, but also mushroom depictions resembling the *Psilocybe* and *Stropharia* genera.

Irvin's conclusion is that for the most part Allegro was correct, and that continuing research has borne out what is becoming apparent in cultures and religions around the world—the entheogenic inspiration—if not outright origins of—religious sentiments in cultures around the world. Irvin marshalls a

range of evidence to support his—and Allegro’s—central thesis: that entheogenic mushrooms had a widespread and integrated role in both Roman and Greek Orthodox Christianity. This evidence is manifested in an iconography that is found across Europe and shows that these psychoactive mushrooms were a fundamental part of the origins of Christianity. He notes that Allegro’s conclusion needs to be incorporated into theological understandings of the origins of Christianity, as well as into entheobotany on the religious origins in general.

Irvin’s book is very detailed in its consideration of the evidence of Wasson’s questionable behavior. As such, it is a detailed—one might even say nitpicking—consideration of the details that bear out his conclusions about Wasson’s irresponsible behavior that has led generations of mycologists and entheogen specialists to discount Allegro’s work. While Allegro’s reputation may not be salvaged with respect to this now widely discounted work, hopefully his groundbreaking conclusions will not be neglected. Irvin’s book helps to bring to light this unfortunate chapter in entheogenic studies and to reestablish the legitimacy of the hypothesis of the entheogenic aspects of Christianity. This revised perspective has been receiving increasing support from the work of Ruck *et al.* (2001, 2007) and Rush (2008).

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Michael Winkelman, Retired
Arizona State University
Michaeljwinkelman@gmail.com