

PSYCHOACTIVE SACRAMENTALS

FOREWORD

This book is apt to stretch a reader's consciousness a few notches. All the more so because it is not pushy. There is strength in gentleness. But no matter how gentle the process of stretching, the unknown towards which we stretch will make us uneasy. This book will stir up fears. Three are likely to arise: fear of inauthentic spirituality, fear of drugs, and fear of an ill-prepared encounter with the holy. All three are reasonable fears; all three can be overcome by open-minded reasoning plus a modicum of courage. This is not a book for the timid, but it will reward the courageous.

In my own Catholic Christian tradition sacramentality is not something to be toyed with. It has the feel of a high-security area. The very term "sacramental" (used in the book's title with theological precision as a noun) has the ring of a warning sign: Danger! High voltage! It points towards nothing less than encounter with God. Sacramentals are natural things – spring water, ashes, herbs – through which faith encounters God's power. I take this seriously. But precisely because I take it so seriously, I must allow God to choose the means and circumstances of this encounter. Because I have faith in the Church's traditional sacramentals, I ought to be able to stretch that faith to include the possibility of encountering God through all available sacramentals.

Whatever we receive with the trusting courage of faith can become a means for encountering God. Food shared and eaten in gratefulness becomes an encounter with God's life-sustaining love. The waters at Lourdes and other sacred places bring health of mind and body to countless pilgrims who encounter in faith God's power to heal. The Creator of life-giving bread and health-giving water created also psychoactive sacramentals. Can we then forbid God to work through them as well for our good?

Water, fire, wind that blows where it will – these biblical images want to remind us that no one can put divine aliveness in a box. Communion with that source of life demands that our consciousness must stay ever ready to be stretched. In our society few people have close enough contact with nature to be conscious of a higher power at work in it and through it. This was different, I remember, during my childhood in the Austrian Alps. On Easter morning we would run down to wash in the mountain stream, never doubting that God's blessing touched us through the ice cold water on our skin. And in a nearby shrine we could drink from a healing spring that flowed out from under the altar. Faith simply accepted with gratefulness that God works through all created things. All?

If we can encounter God through a sunrise seen from a mountaintop, why not through a mushroom prayerfully ingested? But precisely because an overpowering encounter with God through an entheogen can happen to one who is quite unprepared for it, we must ask: Can this be genuine? Especially those who have spent years and decades in ascetical effort are apt to sneer at "instant enlightenment" or "effortless beatific vision." "How could one get it so cheaply?" they ask; "can this be genuine spirituality?" My answer is this: A primary religious experience is no more (though also no less) than a seed for a spiritual life. A genuine encounter with the Ultimate does not guarantee a genuine spirituality. The experience may be authentic, but how authentic their spirituality will be depends on what those who had the experience do with it. Will they allow it to transform their lives? Will they have determination and patience enough to let the light which they glimpsed for a moment gradually penetrate every smallest detail of their days? Not a few men and women who have risen to this task bear witness that entheogens first helped them open their eyes to that light. Honesty demands that we acknowledge this.

Yet, can you blame someone who is so deeply aware of the devastation caused by drug abuse that the mere mention of psychoactive substances triggers panic? There is good reason to be wary of mind-affecting drugs. They can cause chemical damage to the brain and body, create addiction, or engender dangerous behavior. But not all drugs are alike. The classic entheogens, unlike drugs such as cocaine and alcohol, have virtually no

organic toxicity. Their addictive risk is small: too small to measure when used in ceremonial settings. Entheogenic traditions from Eleusis to the Native American Church have succeeded in creating ritual contexts in which hazardous acting-out is virtually unknown.

The wise will feel a fear far greater than fear of inauthentic spirituality or fear of drugs, namely the fear of an ill-prepared encounter with the holy. Psychoactive sacramentals may open us for an experience of transcendent reality, but who is ready to meet this *mysterium tremendum*? The holy can destroy those who stumble into its awful presence unprepared. Should we avoid it, then? If we do, how can we survive, cut off from the primary religious experience of ultimate communion?

What is most distinctive about the spiritual awakening in our time is a looking beyond secondary religious phenomena – doctrine, ethics, ritual – to their primary source. Not as if doctrine, ethics, and ritual were unimportant. They are important, and precisely for this reason we must cultivate the experience on which their survival depends. After all, what is doctrine, if not an attempt to put into words the heart's communion with the ineffable? What is ethics, if not willing commitment to the demands this communion makes on us? What is ritual, if not the celebration of the primary religious experience of communion? Secondary religious phenomena give us fresh access to that primary experience from which they well up, as from their source. They provide channels in which the energy of primary religious experience can flow: irrigation channels for the world's wastelands. Even churches can become wastelands, if they close themselves off from the living waters of the Spirit, if they think that secondary religious experiences can replace the primary one.

Yes, in whatever form we dare to approach the holy, we must always do so with fear and trembling. We must do everything we can to prepare ourselves. There is reason to fear overconfident blundering into the presence of a power that takes us beyond ourselves. Yet there is still greater reason to fear a timidity that shrinks from the experience of ultimate communion. Christian tradition has long known this timidity and called it "sloth," a refusal to rise to grace-filled opportunities. This fear produces isolation, alienation, and violence; it keeps the world divided and at war. The primary religious experience stretches our awareness just far enough to catch at least a glimpse of universal belonging; this makes us ready to

share, to trust, to love. The future of our planet will depend on whether or not we translate this vision into reality. This takes courage.

At this moment in history, nothing could be more dangerous for the future entrusted to us than a closed mind. If we don't dare to live with our minds wide open, they close up and shrink. The authors of this book discuss the entheogens as powerful tools for opening our minds. Various spiritual traditions offer other tools for the same end. Immersion in silence can dissolve the walls of the mind. The practice of gratefulness can open the mind's eye to see each detail of daily life bathed in "light invisible." Selfless service, too, can open heart and mind till we see God's face in the faces of all who suffer. The entheogens, with their own particular properties, are spiritual tools among many. We are free to choose. But while the means are optional; the end is not. The future depends on stretching our consciousness far enough soon enough. In view of this supreme challenge, *Psychoactive Sacramentals* is truly a timely book.

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2 February 2000