

How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence

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After nearly five decades of being underground, psychedelics have returned. Before the ban, psychedelic research was burgeoning in the 1950s and 1960s given their anticipated therapeutic potential, but was hampered globally in the 1970s and 1980s despite purported evidence of these benefits. In the wake of the prohibition, we are now experiencing what has been widely hailed as the *psychedelic renaissance*, which began with the revival of research in the 1990s. However, by many accounts, while the research was officially curbed, there were always those dedicated to this cause and who continued the work in underground communities. It is worth reflecting as to why there is a resurgence now – what is behind the explosion of interest in psychedelics, especially in a non-traditional context.

There is evidently a search for more holistic forms of mental health treatment that go beyond the management of symptoms in support of authentic healing and wholeness. The vacuum created by the loss of religion in the world today is often unrecognized here because of the hegemonic dominance of modern science and its empirical epistemology that rules out alternative modes of knowing. For many, this void has been filled with modern psychology and science. As the wounds of the collective psyche become more apparent in our day, there is perhaps nothing more urgent than the need to recover an authentically integrated psychology or “science of the soul” that is rooted in metaphysics, sacred science, and the spiritual healing of psychic illness.

In this connection, we need to stress that there is a global mental health calamity right now.¹ Statistics demonstrate the alarming rise in the number of individuals taking psychotropic medications. There is mounting research suggesting that these drugs do not work as commonly supposed – in many cases, they not only create more problems (such as unwanted side effects), but can also cause chronic and potentially irreversible harm. The fact that more people are being diagnosed and treated does not mean that there has been a decrease in mental health problems; on the contrary, the number of those seeking mental health support has markedly escalated.

Although we see mental health services, including medication management, being made available to more people than ever before, cases have not declined as one might expect. If modern therapy and psychiatry were as effective as they are widely touted to be, the numbers would plateau and steadily decrease rather than dramatically rise as they have been. Psychotropic medications can reduce certain symptoms and might appear to be of benefit in improving cognitive functions – at least in some cases or for short periods. At the same time, however, they could impede spiritual development and psychological integration; vital considerations that are often overlooked.

It is with these preliminary observations that we begin to explore the contents of this book under review. Michael Pollan's work offers a vast compendium of information about the history of psychedelics and their use – both traditional and modern – in treating various mental health disorders. This informative and engaging book consists of a prologue and the following chapters: 'A Renaissance'; 'Natural History: Bemushroomed'; 'History: The First Wave'; 'Travelogue: Journeying Underground'; 'The Neuroscience: Your Brain on Psychedelics'; and 'The Trip Treatment: Psychedelics in Psychotherapy.' The work concludes with an epilogue, 'In Praise of Neural Diversity.' To escape the 'counter-cultural' baggage of the term *psychedelic* (a Greek compound coined in 1956 meaning "mind manifesting"), the word "entheogen" ("the divine within"), has been proposed also derived from the Greek. Prior to the introduction of these terms, the label *psychotomimetic* (also known as 'psychotogenic'), referred to the ability of these substances to mimic symptoms of psychosis, such as the alteration of perception, thoughts, and feelings.

Pollan draws our attention, early on, to a central finding of his study: "What is striking about this whole line of clinical research is the premise that it is not the pharmacological effect of the drug itself but the kind of mental experience it occasions—involving the temporary dissolution of one's ego—that may be the key to changing one's mind" (p. 11). Pollan notes that many of the individuals that he interviewed for his book were materialists or atheists prior to partaking in psychedelics. Subsequent to their experience, however, they reported the "sacred" horizons of existence opening up in them, which left an enduring mark on their lives.

The author notes that the recent renaissance in psychedelic research could be seen as commencing from 2006. In that year, a unanimous court decision was handed down which ruled that the Brazilian organization UDV (União do Vegetal or Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal) founded by Mestre Gabriel or José

Gabriel da Costa (1922–1971) could import *ayahuasca* (containing dimethyltryptamine or DMT) to the United States for religious use. The ruling was based on the *Religious Freedom Restoration Act* of 1993, which aimed to restore the right – under the First Amendment’s religious freedom clause – of American Indians to use peyote in their sacred rites. 2006 also saw the appearance of a groundbreaking article, “Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical Type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance,”² which was the first rigorously conducted study to examine the psychological effects of psychedelics.

It is important to clarify that, while modern psychedelic science could be said to have begun in 1938 when chemist Albert Hofmann (1906–2008) synthesized lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) at Sandoz laboratories in Basel, the use of sacred plants in the traditional world – especially for the First Peoples and their shamanic traditions – has existed for much longer. In this context, we are reminded of the Mazatec native healer, María Sabina (1894–1985), who introduced the use of psilocybin mushrooms to R. Gordon Wasson (1898–1986) in 1955, who then documented his experiences in a famous *Life* magazine article entitled “Seeking the Magic Mushroom”³ (1957). This helped to popularize psychedelics in the modern West which, in turn, served to launch the 1960s counter-culture movement. It was Wasson who sent specimens of the *Psilocybe mexicana* mushroom to Hofmann who, in 1958, was able to identify two psychoactive compounds for the development of a synthetic version of psilocybin.

Without María Sabina, Wasson’s contributions to psychedelic science would not have been as influential as they are both now and prior to the ban on these substances. However, it was because of his lack of respect for their traditional uses that María Sabina later expressed regret for introducing Wasson to psilocybin mushrooms: “Before [R. Gordon] Wasson nobody took the mushrooms only to

find God. They were always taken for the sick to get well.”⁴ She remarked:

Before Wasson, I felt that the *saint children* [mushrooms] elevated me. I don't feel like that anymore. The force has diminished. If Cayetano [García] hadn't brought the foreigners ... the *saint children* would have kept their power.... [F]rom the moment the foreigners arrived ... the *saint children* lost their purity. They lost their force; the foreigners spoiled them. From now on they won't be any good. There's no remedy for it.⁵

This statement is very disheartening and casts a negative light on the modern uses of these substances outside of a traditional context.

It is worth documenting Wasson's response to these reflections. Although apologetic, he did not regret his cultural appropriation, suggesting that this knowledge would have been lost had he not saved it from its inevitable fate. In 1976, Wasson wrote:

These words make me wince: I, Gordon Wasson, am held responsible for the end of a religious practice in Mesoamerica that goes back far, for a millenia. I fear she spoke the truth.... At the time of my first velada with María Sabina, in 1955, I had to make a choice: suppress my experience or resolve to present it worthily to the world. There was never a doubt in my mind. The sacred mushrooms and the religious feeling concentrated in them through the Sierras of Southern Mexico had to be made known to the world, and worthily so, at whatever cost to me personally. If I did not do this, “consulting the mushroom” would go on for a few years longer, but its extinction was and is inevitable.⁶

It is difficult to accept that psilocybin was first introduced into the modern West by Wasson – a Vice-President of Public Relations at J. P. Morgan & Company – and Henry Luce (1898–1967), the owner of *Life* magazine; two less likely representatives of the counter-culture could hardly be imagined! Upon Wasson's return

from Mexico, it is reported that he facilitated his own *ad hoc* mushroom ceremonies at his Manhattan apartment.

Wasson did not set out on his journey to meet the Mazatec healer, María Sabina, and learn about the sacred mushroom without certain preconceived theories about who she was and what he would find – this fact deeply influenced his reporting to the outside world. In his romanticized depictions, he ignored the Mazatec people’s present-day devotion to Catholicism and María Sabina’s dual participation in both her native religion and the Christian tradition.

The assumption that Christian participation compromises one’s “Indianness” needs to be questioned, as this is certainly not the case. For example, Joseph Epes Brown (1920–2000) – a renowned scholar of Native American traditions – found that Black Elk (1863–1950), the Lakota *wicasa wakan* or holy man, held a view similar to that of the Mazatec. Brown makes a valid point about this delicate relationship:

Throughout virtually all indigenous American Indian traditions, a pervasive theme has been that all forms and forces of all orders of the immediately experienced natural environment may communicate to human beings the totality of that which is to be known of the sacred mysteries of creation, and thus of the sacred essence of being and beings.... Such conditioning to openness of mind and being towards manifestations of the sacred makes it understandable that for these peoples religious matters of whatever origin are not open to either question or argument. When, therefore, the Christian message came to the peoples through dedicated missionaries who led exemplary and sacrificial lives, the people easily understood the truths of message and example due to the profundity of their own beliefs; it was not difficult for them to adapt new expressions of values into the sacred fabric of their own culture. The historical phenomenon is thus not conversation as understood in an exclusivistic manner by the bearers of Christianity, but rather a continuation of the people’s ancient and traditional

facility for what may be termed non-exclusive cumulative adhesion. If this process of polysynthesis can be accomplished with neither confusion nor dissonance, it is ultimately due to the ability of American Indian peoples to penetrate and comprehend the central and most profound nature of all experience and reality.⁷

Brown, who met Black Elk in 1947, was a catalyst in providing practical support for the maintenance of indigenous spiritual traditions, as recorded in his account of the seven sacred rites of the Lakota.⁸ In stark contrast, Wasson's work appears not to have been focused on protecting the integrity of Mazatec spirituality and its sacramental use of this medicine; rather, he opened the doors for their mass consumption without regard for their context-specific nature or for the traditional peoples who were the rightful custodians of these remedies.

Pollan discusses the therapeutic utility of these compounds. In the early 1950s, psychedelics had been used to try to treat many conditions, such as addiction, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, schizophrenia, autism, and end-of-life anxiety. Bill Wilson (1895–1971), co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), had sought to introduce LSD therapy into A.A. in the 1950s. This was in large part because Wilson credited his own sobriety to a mystical experience induced through Belladonna, a plant that can produce a type of psychedelic experience, which was administered to him at Manhattan's Towns Hospital 1934. It is not widely known that the central tenet of A.A. – a “spiritual” awakening that brings about the surrender to a “higher power” – stems from a psychedelic experience. In 1956, Wilson had several LSD sessions with Sidney Cohen (1910–1987) and Betty Eisner (1915–2004). Wilson had hoped to find a place for LSD within A.A.; however, his colleagues in the fellowship vehemently disagreed with him and wanted no part of it.

British psychiatrist Humphry Osmond (1917–2004) stressed the potential of LSD to allow mental health professionals to “enter the

illness and see with a madman's eyes, hear with his ears, and feel with his skin" (p. 146). Aldous Huxley (1894–1963), in correspondence with Osmond, noted: "People will think they are going mad, when in fact they are beginning, when they take it, to go sane" (p. 162). Abram Hoffer (1917–2009), a Canadian psychiatrist, emphasized that it was the transpersonal dimension that was of therapeutic benefit: "We considered not the chemical, but the experience as a key factor in therapy" (p. 149). This is something that Sidney Cohen recognized in an article published in 1965 when he coined the expression "therapy by self-transcendence"⁹ (p. 159).

Through his extensive study of the research on psychedelic substances, Pollan points to the purported therapeutic efficacy of these compounds in mental health treatment. The ability of psychedelics to provide remarkable results in merely hours, compared to what may take years in mainstream psychotherapy, is highlighted as extraordinary. In his initial experience with psilocybin, Timothy Leary (1920–1996) reported a profound transformation: "In four hours by the swimming pool in Cuernavaca [Mexico], I learned more about the mind, the brain, and its structures than I did in the preceding fifteen [years] as a diligent psychologist" (p. 187). Pollan notes: "Of all the phenomenological effects that people on psychedelics report, the dissolution of the ego seems to me by far the most important and the most therapeutic" (p. 389). Yet, at the same time, he offers a word of caution regarding psychedelics: "It is one of the many paradoxes of psychedelics that these drugs can sponsor an ego-dissolving experience that in some people quickly leads to massive ego inflation" (p. 193). This is likely unavoidable when traditional medicines are misused outside of a proper context.

The author also highlights the different positions taken by researchers on whether to make psychedelics more readily available. For the historical record, it is worth pointing out that many were opposed to how Leary hazardously unleashed these substances onto the world. Leary founded the Harvard Psilocybin

Project in 1960 and, in 1971, President Richard Nixon (1913–1994) declared him “the most dangerous man in America” (p. 58). An example of someone critical of his approach was Myron Stolaroff (1920–2013), who wrote the following to Leary:

Tim, I am convinced you are heading for very serious trouble if your plan goes ahead as you have described it to me, and it would not only make a great deal of trouble for you, but for all of us, and may do irreparable harm to the psychedelic field in general. (p. 199)

Aldous Huxley, Humphry Osmond, and Al Hubbard (1901–1982) all shared Leary’s sense of historical mission to get psychedelics out into the world, and they had a very distinct manner of accomplishing this. They believed that if they could capture the hearts and minds of the influential or intellectuals, this would be the best way to introduce psychedelics into the culture. Leary’s approach, by contrast, was to start at the bottom and work this influence into the higher levels of the culture. It is worth adding that Huxley’s book *The Doors of Perception* (1954) was, according to some, responsible for launching the psychedelic revolution.

Pollan also discusses the government’s covert program of testing these compounds and shaping the public mindset about psychedelics. It is difficult to ascertain the full extent of the government’s secretive MK-ULTRA program and the harm it caused, including to what degree the CIA negatively influenced the dominant culture about psychedelics. James Fadiman notes: “In the shadows, the CIA had tried to use these substances to confuse and terrify people. Through front organizations, the CIA also sponsored small conferences and publications where therapists and researchers shared their findings.”¹⁰

Researchers and mental health practitioners need to be aware of the complexity involved in understanding and treating the human psyche. As the soul is inseparable from the spiritual dimension of existence, treating it requires knowledge of humanity’s spiritual traditions. This is something that modern Western psychology does

not appear to comprehend. Each person consists of Spirit, soul, and body, and these dimensions cannot be ignored without causing potential harm. The soul is a mystery; it is immersed in time while also being rooted in the timeless. The human body is of both time and space, whereas the Spirit transcends both. The human psyche belongs to the intermediary realm between body and Spirit, but partakes of both dimensions. With the loss of spiritual metaphysics in our contemporary culture, Western psychology has become correspondingly degraded. Any consideration of the psyche is altogether absent from the discipline and, as a result, the field of mental health has been in a state of disarray.

Practitioners of ancient and traditional forms of medicine had not only a profound knowledge of the nature of things but a deep understanding of metaphysics and cosmology, along with their connection to a “science of the soul.” Such is not the case with today’s mental health professionals. The required study and experience (clinical hours, supervision, and preparation for licensure)—although very demanding—cannot compare to the training of traditional healers or the apprenticeship of a venerated shaman, which also included methodological supports for the purification of the soul and the cultivation of fundamental virtues. Given the dominance of modern science, some assert that mental health professionals, whatever their credentials may be, will have a greater knowledge of the mind and human behavior than traditional healers. However, this does not appear to be the case.

When we see, for example, psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy being practiced, it is not easy to separate its secular therapeutic application from the effects it may have on the spiritual health of the individual receiving this treatment modality. It can be argued that, because there are mental health professionals administering the psychedelic in a therapeutic environment (which are all secular), there is no blurring of this line. However, the issue is that whenever a person is being treated, especially when their consciousness is being dramatically altered, the Spirit, soul, and body are all present

whether this is acknowledged or not. Even if practitioners suggest that they are only addressing the psycho-physical realm, these two dimensions make up an irreducible whole in the Spirit and this cannot be partitioned in such an arbitrary manner.

From one perspective, it may seem efficient to administer a psychedelic the way that is done in psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy, seeing as the therapist engages the patient minimally or only as needed. But from the traditional perspective, this is precarious at best. In the healing ceremonies of the traditions where subtle and spiritual influences are evoked, the spiritual guide is present to the subtle and spiritual world, which is not always perceived by others.

A large part of this role is providing spiritual protection while the person is journeying in the subtle realm. Secular psychotherapists are unable to provide this protection and are often unaware of its vital importance in the healing process. In traditional worlds, the employment of psychic elements was always entrusted to someone with deep knowledge of the spiritual realm, and of the relationship between the soul and body, which no amount of secular training can offer.

Whitall N. Perry (1920–2005) illustrates why psychic phenomena are so seductive and difficult to discern: “The confusion is between the psychic and spiritual planes of reality, where the unfamiliar, the strange, and the bizarre are mistaken for the transcendent, simply by the fact that they lie outside the ordinary modes of consciousness.”¹¹ This recognition appears to be missing from the standard professional literature, and in any of the discussions related to the promises of psychedelic science and its implementation. René Guénon (1886–1951) elaborates on these dangers:

It is impossible to be too mistrustful of every appeal to the ‘subconscious’ ... in a sort of ‘cosmic consciousness’ that shuts out all ‘transcendence’ and so also shuts out all effective spirituality ... but what is to be said of someone who flings himself into the ocean

and has no aspiration but to drown himself in it? This is very precisely the significance of a so-called ‘fusion’ with a ‘cosmic consciousness’ that is really nothing but the confused and indistinct assemblage of all the psychic influences ... these influences have absolutely nothing in common with spiritual influences.... Those who make this fatal mistake either forget about or are unaware of the distinction between the ‘upper waters’ and the ‘lower waters’; instead of raising themselves toward the ‘ocean above’, they plunge into the abyss of the ‘ocean below’; instead of concentrating all their powers so as to direct them toward the formless world, which alone can be called ‘spiritual’, they disperse them in the endlessly changeable and fugitive diversity of the forms of subtle manifestation ... with no suspicion that they are mistaking for a fullness of ‘life’ something that is in truth the realm of death and of a dissolution without hope of return.¹²

Therapists working with individuals in psychotherapy need a properly metaphysical and spiritual framework in which to situate the myriad phenomena and experiences that may arise when dealing with psychic forces; however, this possibility cannot be admitted by mainstream psychology, as the discipline has renounced its metaphysical and spiritual roots. A question then beckons: If a therapist were to adopt a “science of the soul” (something familiar to all religions and spiritual traditions that do not depend on modern psychology), could psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy be a promising option?

This is difficult to answer. Even though, ideally, an outstanding level of spiritual acumen would have to be present in someone who practiced spiritually-informed therapy, this does not mean that a sufficient knowledge of psychedelics would be available to successfully guide treatment sessions; especially if the therapist did not belong to a tradition that sanctions the use of such substances within a proper context. In any case, would such an application even be appropriate in the first place? There is not sufficient space in this review to explore further this critical question.

What is often overlooked is that these compounds were never intended as a substitute for religious practice. Participation in a spiritual tradition was a given, prior to the desacralizing influence of the modern world. Wherever these plant medicines were used, they always required the observation of spiritual and ethical codes of conduct, along with purification rites prior to their usage in a religious context. Furthermore, neither was it simply about ingesting these substances.

Every faith provides a way of understanding the Spirit and of living in accordance with this reality. It is said that psychedelics have been known and used in sacred rituals throughout the world since time immemorial; however, we need to add the following caveat: “If drugs could change and transform consciousness, it is certain that this knowledge would have been incorporated into spiritual teachings from time immemorial. On the other hand, intoxicants and drugs have served universally as supports adjacent to ritual practices, even where the use is purely symbolic.”¹³

The authentically spiritual dimension found within the world’s religions is what keeps a faith healthy, as it were. Yet many do not know how to access this dimension of these traditions, so it is often assumed to be missing when this is assuredly not the case. We must take the time to rediscover these neglected elements at the heart of all religions. There are those who are averse to the idea of religion and are only interested in its mystical or esoteric aspects, as is the case with the widespread attitudes of those who say that they are “spiritual but not religious.” This often fails to recognize that religion is the vehicle that allows us to access its inner dimension. We recall that while the word “religion” off-putting to many (who prefer the notion of “spirituality”), we need to remember that the etymological root of the English word “religion” is the Latin *religare*, meaning to “re-link,” or “bind back” to the Divine that is transcendent to, and immanent in, all things.

Certain advocates have gone so far as to claim that the very phenomenon of religion itself had its genesis in psychedelics.¹⁴ In particular it has been suggested that these compounds were the key components of both the *Soma* mentioned in the Rig Veda and the Avestan *Hoama* of the Zoroastrians. Some have identified this substance as the mushroom *Amanita muscaria*¹⁵ or the fungus ergot (or *Kykeon* of the Eleusinian Mysteries) which contains psychoactive alkaloids such as LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide). It has also been asserted that that *Manna* of the Old Testament was a psychedelic,¹⁶ as well as the psychoactive mushrooms associated with the cult of Mithras¹⁷ (said to be used in ancient Egypt).¹⁸ Even the origins of Christianity have been ascribed to *Amanita muscaria*.¹⁹ Needless to say, such flagrant reductionism is open to serious challenges.

Although these sacred plants were thought to have been used from around 5000 BC;²⁰ that is, at the beginning of what the Hindu tradition calls the *Kali-Yuga* or ‘Iron Age’ – the culmination of our current temporal cycle – or, at best, the preceding *Dvapara Yuga* or ‘Bronze Age.’

Thus, it could be said that the use of sacred plants occurred late in the cosmic cycle (*manvantara*) and not at its inception; namely, the *Krita-Yuga* or *Satya-Yuga* (known as the ‘Golden Age’ in Western cosmology). This appears to suggest, as Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), the Romanian historian of religion noted, that “the use of intoxicants ... is a recent innovation and points to a decadence in shamanic technique.”²¹

To reduce the origin of religion to psychedelics is to completely misconceive the nature of revelation. Sacred plants can certainly be a medium through which spiritual influences may be channeled, but to suggest that they are the source of all religious manifestations is arguably risible. Spiritual phenomena are not the concoction of human beings but, rather, should be seen as firmly grounded in a

‘vertical’ dimension of reality that is transcendent, yet immanent in all things at the same time.

As the Psalmist reminds us, we cannot ask God to “take off the veil from mine eyes” (119:18) without first adhering to an authentic religious form. The veil exists for the protection of the seeker and cannot be lifted prematurely without grave consequences, and this is taught in various examples of traditional exegesis. As we have already seen, we should “enter houses through their proper doors” (Qur’ān 2:189). Within the Hindu tradition, it is said: “Nourished by the sacrifice, the Gods shall indeed bestow on you the enjoyments ye desire. Whoso enjoys—without offering to Them—Their gifts, he is verily a thief”²² (Bhagavad Gītā 3:12). There is a similar image in the Gospels: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber” (John 10:1). The inner chamber of religion is only accessible through the outer portal.

In the same way that we display common courtesy towards a friend by entering their house through the front – not the back – door, we must likewise embark on the spiritual path through one of the revealed traditions and not attempt to access its inner sanctum without the consent and blessing of the religion itself. To do so through the profane use of psychedelics, that is without participation in a traditional framework that allows and integrates such a use, is to demonstrate a lack of reverence which could engender spiritual harm. This was something to which Wasson, along with many modern Western seekers in search of mystical experiences, did not give sufficient importance—as the remorseful words of the Mazatec healer María Sabina, quoted earlier, illustrates so well.

After all, no saints or spiritual sages were interested in mystical states in and of themselves; what they sought was inner transformation by the purification of the soul and cultivation of virtues. In the Buddhist tradition, one is cautioned about becoming

attached to blissful states of meditative absorption (Pāli: *jhānas*). In Islamic spirituality, the superficial state of *ḥāl* is understood to be fleeting in nature, unlike the abiding spiritual ‘station’ of *maqām*. The wayfarer requires persistence and continuous effort on the path in order to reach a permanent proximity to the inner Truth (*Ḥaqīqah*). Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240) stresses the need to go beyond all spiritual experiences: “None of the great ones (*al-akābir*) ever seek states. They only seek stations.”²³

Huston Smith (1919–2016), one of the twentieth-century’s most internationally renowned and revered doyens of the world’s religions (who is mentioned in the book being reviewed), studied these matters in depth and reiterates the shortcomings of secular uses of psychedelics: “Religion is interested not in altered states but in altered traits—life transformations. The evidence is quite clear that chemically induced mystical experiences offer less on that front unless they are established in a sacred context.”²⁴ He elsewhere makes the following reservations:

If the only thing to say about the psychedelics was that they seem on occasion to offer direct disclosures of the psychic and celestial planes as well as (in rare instances) the Infinite itself, we would hold our peace. For though such experiences may be veridical in ways, the goal, it cannot be stressed too often, is not religious experiences; it is the religious life. And with respect to the latter, psychedelic “theophanies” can abort a quest as readily as, perhaps more readily than, they can further it.²⁵

Behaviorism and psychoanalysis, the twin pillars of Western psychology, have eroded the spiritual foundations of the human psyche and irretrievably fractured the discipline. The promises of more holistic approaches to psychotherapy lie not in augmenting the already desacralized foundations of modern Western psychology but, rather, in recovering the metaphysical roots of true healing found among the diverse religious and spiritual traditions of humanity. Only a fully integrated “science of the soul” can support

such an endeavor. This will not only benefit those seeking a more traditional form of therapy rooted in sacred realities, but will also provide therapists with the spiritual discernment necessary for a more holistic form of treatment.

As secular psychotherapy has failed to apprehend modes of knowing and healing that exist outside the epistemological constraints of modern science, how could psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy – if grounded on such a science – determine the short-term gains versus the longer-term consequences of using psychedelics in a non-ritual context? The problem is that it cannot because if the potential side-effects of psychedelics are not reported by the individual, they may not be detected at all. The potential spiritual harm caused by using these substances may not necessarily fit any of the current diagnostic criteria as found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) or the *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD) – the two main sources of diagnosing someone with a mental illness.

As mentioned earlier, for traditional healers, the human being again consists of a tripartite constitution of Spirit, soul, and body which cannot be reduced to the merely mental or physical aspects of a person. In other words, there are “remedies” that might provide a short-term benefit to our everyday cognitive functioning, but which, nevertheless are harmful to the psyche. The dissolution of our empirical ego could be an example of this; while such treatment might cure an immediate symptom or illness, if done in a secular context, it could violate the norms stipulated by spiritual traditions when using psychedelics.²⁶ This could lead to a profound and irreversible spiritual disequilibrium in individuals.

If traditional civilizations are calling us to live more devout and spiritually grounded lives, we need to embrace the time-worn paths that have been revealed to us. To fail to ground traditionally employed methods of psychotherapy in the religious outlook from which they originate, is to perpetuate modernity’s crippling

reductionism and its ongoing assault on sacred conceptions of reality.

R. Gordon Wasson may have benefited from the following observations by Joseph Epes Brown, which still hold true for many advocates of the psychedelic renaissance:

We are still very far from being aware of the dimensions and ramifications of our ethnocentric illusions. Nevertheless, by the very nature of things we are now forced to undergo a process of intense self-examination; to engage in a serious re-evaluation of the premises and orientations of our society.²⁷

Michael Pollan's book has done a commendable job of documenting the history of psychedelic use in the modern West and its renaissance, yet without directly acknowledging it, his book reveals the aching hunger that many, in our time, have for healing and wholeness. Mainstream psychology and secular ideologies cannot meet this abiding need, which is why people are turning to psychedelics as a *faux* religion, so to speak. In presenting his research, Pollan openly shares his own experiences with psychedelics. Yet it would be regrettable if others – intrigued by the positive assessment of psychedelics presented in this book – were to follow in the author's footsteps and encourage their misuse outside of a strictly traditional context.

To repeat, without appropriate spiritual preparation and guidance, any attempt to penetrate the intermediary realm by means of these substances, gives rise to serious concerns that are rarely considered:

Nothing could be more erroneous than the belief that the magical operation of some external power on the psychic faculties could in itself effect a real and lasting transmutation of soul, especially apart from all question of suitability and preparation of the vehicle involved ... a drug through the violence of its poison can rupture the normal channels of consciousness so as to produce "openings"

into extra-normal modalities of psychic experience ... [yet they may be none] other than fragmentary in their positive content.²⁸

People are thirsty for the transcendent but having inappropriate recourse to psychedelics will provoke an “indistinct assemblage of all the psychic influences”²⁹ in a person. Such seekers may believe that they are in contact with the transcendent when, in fact, any perceived fissure or “opening up” is much more likely to be an exposure to negative psychic forces instead. Despite public testimonials about promising therapeutic outcomes, there are clear dangers when one seeks to force open these psychic channels with drugs. Psychedelics are well known to trigger psychosis in people already suffering from mental illness or in those with a history of psychological disturbances.

Taking psychedelic medicine with a view to restoring the harmony of one’s Spirit, soul, and body is a fraught option, given the serious dangers that can beset such treatment when improperly administered. We need to acknowledge that what is poisonous in one context can also be curative in another. Keeping this essential principle in mind, we need to affirm, once again, the need to use these traditional medicines only in an appropriate context.

Some might suggest that having recourse to psychedelics in a world that is in such disarray constitutes an *upāya* or “saving means” as the Buddhists would say; precisely because they offer some kind of psychological salve for the abnormal conditions spawned by our desacralized environment. It remains unclear as to whether those who do not adhere to a spiritual tradition can benefit – and to what degree – from these sacred medicines, even under the appropriate circumstances. As such, there are many questions that remain unanswered; reflecting, no doubt, the anomalous and deeply ambiguous conditions of our time.

Perhaps out of a saving mercy in these end times, psychedelic medicine may now prove beneficial – not only to the religious faithful – but also to secular society at large; in other words, the

traditional restraints on the use of these substances may have been providentially set aside *in extremis*, so to speak. With that in mind, we recall the following saying (*hadīth*) of the Prophet Mohammed: “At the beginning, he who omits one-tenth of the law is condemned but, at the end, he who accomplishes one-tenth of the law is saved.”

Despite the potential relief that could be made more widely available to ailing individuals, it remains troubling that the psychedelic renaissance – while apparently endorsing traditional medicines – does not encourage a return to the very wellsprings of genuine wisdom (with its own healing modalities) which can only be discovered in the vast religious patrimony of humanity. It is only here that we can find a proper spiritual framework for dealing with the subtle and ambivalent phenomena of our psychic universe; over and above any medicinal value they are able to confer, despite some of the hazards that have been already identified.

Many of the problems we see in modernity betray the undiagnosed symptoms of the spiritual crisis referred to above. Rather than introducing psychedelics to contemporary humanity, which has, for the most part, no spiritual or cultural connection to these substances, would it not be better to address these traumas at their root? We can do this by returning to one of the world’s religious traditions. How can we appreciate the true value of more integrative forms of psychotherapy and healing, if we persistently ignore its divine source and the traditions that protect it against profane misuse?

In order to mitigate the risks that psychedelics pose in a secular world – and as their use might not be appropriate for all people – it would be easier to devote ourselves to the study of the vast treasury of universal and timeless wisdom that remains accessible in the world of sacred traditions – one of the great compensations available to us all in these dark and challenging times.³⁰

Endnotes

¹ See Thomas Insel, *Healing: Our Path from Mental Illness to Mental Health* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2022).

² Roland R. Griffiths, William A. Richards, Una McCann, and Robert Jesse, “Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance,” *Psychopharmacology*, Vol. 187, No. 3 (August 2006), pp. 268–292.

³ R. Gordon Wasson, “Seeking the Magic Mushroom,” *Life*, May 13, 1957, pp. 100–120.

⁴ María Sabina, quoted in Álvaro Estrada, *María Sabina: Her Life and Chants*, trans. Henry Munn (Santa Barbara, CA: Ross-Erikson, 1981), p. 73.

⁵ María Sabina, quoted in Álvaro Estrada, *María Sabina: Her Life and Chants*, trans. Henry Munn (Santa Barbara, CA: Ross-Erikson, 1981), pp. 91, 90.

⁶ R. Gordon Wasson, “A Retrospective Essay,” in Álvaro Estrada, *María Sabina: Her Life and Chants*, trans. Henry Munn (Santa Barbara, CA: Ross-Erikson, 1981), p. 20.

⁷ Joseph Epes Brown, “North American Indian Living Religions,” in *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian: Commemorative Edition with Letters While Living with Black Elk*, eds. Marina Brown Weatherly, Elenita Brown and Michael Oren Fitzgerald (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007), p. 20.

⁸ See Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989).

⁹ See Sidney Cohen, “LSD and the Anguish of Dying,” *Harper’s Magazine*, Vol. 231, No. 1384 (September 1965), pp. 69–72, 77–78.

¹⁰ James Fadiman, “Therapeutic Effectiveness of Single Guided Sessions,” in *The Psychedelic Explorer’s Guide: Safe, Therapeutic, and Sacred Journeys* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2011), p. 104.

¹¹ Whitall N. Perry, “Drug-Induced Mysticism: The Mescaline Hypothesis,” in *Challenges to a Secular Society* (Oakton, VA: The Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1996), p. 10.

¹² René Guénon, “The Confusion of the Psychic and the Spiritual,” in *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 239–240.

¹³ Whitall N. Perry, “Drug-Induced Mysticism: The Mescaline Hypothesis,” in *Challenges to a Secular Society* (Oakton, VA: The Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1996), p. 15.

¹⁴ R. Gordon Wasson, Stella Kramrisch, Jonathan Ott and Carl A.P. Ruck, *Persephone’s Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

¹⁵ R. Gordon Wasson, *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969).

¹⁶ Dan Merkur, “Manna, the Showbread, and the Eucharist: Psychoactive Sacraments in the Bible,” in *Psychoactive Sacramentals: Essays on Entheogens and Religion*, ed. Thomas B. Roberts (San Francisco, CA: Council on Spiritual Practices, 2001), pp. 139–144.

¹⁷ Carl A.P. Ruck, Mark Alwin Hoffman and José Alfredo González Celdrán, *Mushrooms, Myth and Mithras: The Drug Cult that Civilized Europe* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2011).

¹⁸ Andrija Puharich, *The Sacred Mushroom: Key to the Door of Eternity* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959).

¹⁹ John Marco Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross: A Study of the Nature and Origins of Christianity Within the Fertility Cults of the Ancient Near East* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1971).

²⁰ Peter T. Furst, “Ancient Altered States,” in *Higher Wisdom: Eminent Elders Explore the Continuing Impact of Psychedelics*, eds. Roger Walsh and Charles S. Grob (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 153. Some psychedelic researchers regard the rock art found in the mountain range of Tassili n’Ajjer southeast Algeria to be the most ancient verification of psychedelic use.

²¹ Mircea Eliade, “Shamanic Ideologies and Techniques among the Indo-Europeans,” in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 401.

²² Bhagavad Gītā 3:12, *The Bhagavad-Gītā with the Commentary of Śrī Śankarachāryā*, trans. Alladi Mahadeva Sastri (Madras: V. Ramaswamy Sastrulu & Sons, 1961), p. 87.

²³ Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 266.

²⁴ Huston Smith, quoted in Richard Smoley and Jay Kinney, “Tradition and Truth: A Gnosis Interview with Huston Smith,” *Gnosis*, No. 37 (Fall 1995), p. 35.

²⁵ Huston Smith, “Appendix: The Psychedelic Evidence,” in *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World’s Religions* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 155.

²⁶ See Mark Perry, “The Forbidden Door,” in *The Mystery of Individuality: Grandeur and Delusion of the Human Condition* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2012), pp. 245–271.

²⁷ Joseph Epes Brown, “Preface,” to *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), pp. xv–xvi.

²⁸ Whittall N. Perry, “Drug-Induced Mysticism: The Mescaline Hypothesis,” in *Challenges to a Secular Society* (Oakton, VA: The Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1996), pp. 7, 8.

²⁹ René Guénon, “The Confusion of the Psychic and the Spiritual,” in *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 240.

³⁰ See Whittall N. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (London, UK: Allen and Unwin, 1971); reissued as *The Spiritual Ascent: A Compendium of the World’s Wisdom* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2008).