


The  
Psychedelic Gospels



The  
**Psychedelic Gospels**

The Secret History of  
Hallucinogens in Christianity



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# Contents

	Acknowledgments	ix
PREFACE	An Invitation to Readers	xi
	Map of Churches and Sacred Sites Visited	xiii
	Sacred Mushroom Seeker	1
	<i>R. Gordon Wasson (1898–1986)</i>	

## PART ONE

### The First Religion

1	Green Man of Rosslyn Chapel	10
	<i>Roslin, Scotland–1446</i>	
2	O Immortal Soma!	23
	<i>Indus River Valley, India–1400 BCE</i>	
3	Santa, the Reindeer Shaman	35
	<i>Siberia, Russia–2000 BCE</i>	
4	Eleusinian Mysteries	48
	<i>Greece–1500 BCE</i>	

5	María Sabina and the Little Saints <i>Mexico—1955</i>	63
6	Miracle of Marsh Chapel <i>America—1962</i>	78


## PART TWO

### ..... Hidden in Plain Sight

7	Battle of the Trees <i>Mérigny, France—1291</i>	94
8	The Prophet Has Spoken <i>Nohant-Vic, France—1120</i>	110
9	Down the Rabbit Hole <i>Rennes le Château, France—1891</i>	122
10	Canterbury Tales <i>Canterbury Cathedral, England—1180</i>	137
11	Saint Bernward's Secret <i>Hildesheim, Germany—1015</i>	152

PART THREE  
.....

Cosmic Consciousness

12	The Pope's Banker <i>Aquileia, Italy—330</i>	170
13	The Dark Church <i>Cappadocia, Turkey—1050</i>	184
14	Kingdom of Heaven <i>Jerusalem—30</i>	199
15	Psychedelic Renaissance <i>America—2015</i>	213
APPENDIX	Interdisciplinary Committee on the Psychedelic Gospels	222
		
	Notes	229
	Bibliography	240
	Index	250





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PREFACE

# An Invitation to Readers

There is an old saying, “If you want to hide something, put it in plain sight.” To our surprise we learned that this saying is especially true for Christianity, where medieval works of art were created to illustrate the teachings of the Bible for the largely illiterate population. A close look at these religious works of art reveals the presence of psychedelic plants—hidden in plain sight—for centuries.

Psychedelics?

Hidden in plain sight . . . in Christian churches?

Yes, that’s exactly what we said.

Working with stunning visual evidence found in cathedrals and churches, we invite you to join us as we relive our discovery of the “Psychedelic Gospels” and propose an alternative theory of the origins of Christianity—one radically different from that portrayed in the Bible.

This book takes you along, step-by-step, on our decade-long anthropological adventure, providing an easily readable account of this controversial theory.

It was during the turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1970s when we had our first experiences with psychedelics, a class of drugs that in time we came to know as “entheogens”: psychoactive plants and chemicals that generate mystical experiences. It was through entheogens that we

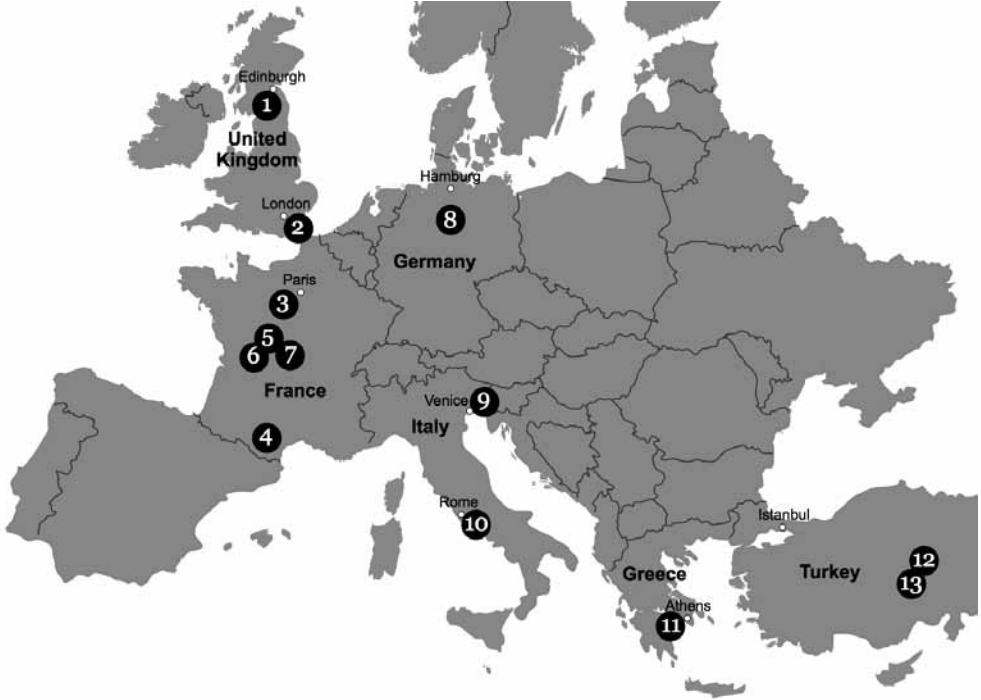
first came to experience God as the divine intelligence that permeates the universe.

Later, in 2006, we made an archaeological discovery that caused us to seriously consider the role of entheogens in the foundations of Judeo-Christianity. At that point our personal experiences with psychedelics merged with our professional interests (Jerry's in anthropology and religion, Julie's in psychotherapy and spirituality), and we felt compelled to undertake a search for evidence of entheogens in Christian art.

While our findings are startling, our intention is not to question people's faith in Christianity but to uncover a mystery that we believe applies to many religions. Our findings do not deny the importance of religious sacraments but suggest that they should encompass *all* of God's creations, including psychoactive plants.

All that we ask of you, dear reader, is to consider what we have to say with an open mind and to follow our findings and speculations to their conclusions. Our journey begins in Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland.

# Map of Churches and Sacred Sites Visited



- 1) Rosslyn Chapel, Scotland
- 2) Canterbury Cathedral, England
- 3) Chartres Cathedral, France
- 4) Rennes le Château, France
- 5) Chapel of Plaincourault, France
- 6) Abbey of Saint-Savin, France
- 7) Church of Saint Martin, France
- 8) Saint Michael's Church, Germany
- 9) Basilica of Aquileia, Italy
- 10) Vatican Museums, Italy
- 11) Eleusis, Greece
- 12) Dark Church, Turkey
- 13) Ihlara Valley, Turkey





# Sacred Mushroom Seeker

R. Gordon Wasson (1898–1986)

In the summer of 2006, my wife Julie and I visited Rosslyn Chapel during our twenty-fifth-anniversary trip to Scotland. There, hidden in a dramatic stone sculpture for more than half a millennium, was a secret of profound significance. In time, this controversial secret compelled us to rethink and challenge conventional ideas about the history of religion, including the origins of Judeo-Christianity.

Our fascination with Rosslyn was initially inspired by Dan Brown's bestseller, *The Da Vinci Code*.<sup>1</sup> The novel considered Rosslyn Chapel as a temporary resting place for the legendary Holy Grail, which, according to the royal bloodline theory, was the remains of Jesus's wife Mary Magdalene. Filled with curiosity, we decided to visit this gothic "cathedral of codes," located a few miles south of Edinburgh.

It was a drizzly, cold day in May when we walked through the timeworn wooden portal of the north entrance and first laid eyes on Rosslyn's ornate interior. I took Julie's hands in mine to warm them. "Look at this . . . look at that," Julie and I kept saying to each other. We moved from one captivating sculpture to another: stone angels playing instruments, Moses wearing horns, the seven deadly sins dancing across an arch. Across the magnificent ceiling were rosettes, stars, and ears of maize carved some fifty years before Columbus "discovered" Indian

corn in America.\* Outside, in the churchyard, we found the statue of an archangel holding a scroll that reads “Love Conquers Death.”

Ever observant, Julie pointed up at a stained-glass window. “Look, on each side of the window, the statues are missing,” she said. As we surveyed the church, we realized that, while the plinths and niches were undamaged, all of the statues were missing, each and every one of them. A Rosslyn guide told us that the statues had been removed during the time of the strident religious reformer Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) because they were “too pagan.” Although no one knew for certain where they were, it was rumored that the statues were buried in the crypt beneath the church.

I imagined Sir William Sinclair (1410–1484), founder of Rosslyn Chapel, contemplating the enigmatic carvings covering the interior of this exquisite church, this “masterpiece in stone.” He surveys the resplendent Apprentice Pillar with eight dragons at its base gnawing away at the roots of Yggdrasil, the Nordic tree of life. He pauses before the image of the Seal of the Knights Templar: two riders on a single horse. His eyes trace the sinuous vine that links more than a hundred Green Men gazing out from the walls.

Devils, demons, and exotic plants decorate the chapel, side by side with images from the Old and New Testament. Here in the northlands of Scotland, far from the chilling reach of the Inquisition, Sinclair has created an eccentric “Bible in stone,” an unusual synthesis of pagan and Catholic symbolism. The interior of Rosslyn is more Gaudi than Gothic. The arches, pillars, and intricate carvings flow into one another. Sinclair passes from the nave of the church into the Lady Chapel. He pauses between the altars to the Blessed Virgin and Saint Andrew and looks up. Here, Sinclair has hidden the sacred lore of antiquity—sculpted into the forehead of Rosslyn’s most prominent Green Man, who sardonically stares down from the ceiling, suspended from a stone boss. And there it will remain unnoticed for more than five hundred years.

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\*This opinion is held by a few modern authors, including Robert Lomas and Christopher Knight. Other medieval scholars believe the maize is stylized wheat, strawberries, or lilies.



## Green Man Discovery

And here I was, a few weeks after visiting Rosslyn, sitting in a restaurant in Saint Andrews, Scotland, examining a plaster replica of that very same Green Man, which I had purchased in the Rosslyn Chapel gift shop as a memento. I had just made the discovery of a lifetime and, for the first time that I could recall, was . . . speechless.

Julie and I arrived in this ancient city after a frustrating morning drive. I had missed the turnoff to the Scone Palace, the crowning place of Scottish kings, featuring antique furniture and porcelains that Julie very much wanted to see. We drove into Saint Andrews tired, hungry, and irritated. As soon as we sat down for lunch in the Bella Italia restaurant, Julie excused herself to go the ladies' room. The sparkling lemon Pellegrino quenched my thirst. The afternoon sun pouring through the wood-framed windows warmed my hands. The smell of pizza baking in the oven calmed my nerves. Absentmindedly, I reached into my backpack for the map. I found the Green Man head instead and placed it on the table. Suddenly, I was staring at it in astonishment.

Just then Julie returned. "What's up?" she asked, as soon as she saw my face.

"Sit down and take a look at this," I said excitedly, slowly rotating the Green Man head 180 degrees on the red-and-white checkered tablecloth.

"Oh my God!" Julie exclaimed in a loud voice. "Oh my God," she whispered, this time glancing suspiciously around the room. We gazed at the psychoactive mushroom, cleverly sculpted, upside down, on the Green Man's forehead (see fig. 1.1, p. 13).

As an anthropologist who for the past four decades has taught a course on "Hallucinogens and Culture" at Florida International University in Miami, I was well versed in the role of visionary plants in early shamanic religions. But nothing I knew about sacred rituals in tribal cultures prepared me for the radical speculations that this Green Man discovery in a Catholic church raised about Christianity and, by implication, about Jesus.

What if these sacred plants were the source of secret initiations

reserved for the royalty of the High Middle Ages and for the worthy disciples of early Christianity?

Soon afterward, Julie and I put aside plans for retirement and set out on a journey of discovery through Europe and the Middle East in search of visual evidence of psychedelics in Christian art and icons. In addition to changing our lives, what we found at Rosslyn that fateful day set us on a collision course with the theories and legacy of Gordon Wasson, the renowned “sacred mushroom seeker.”

## Twentieth-Century Darwin

R. Gordon Wasson (1898–1986) was a man of extreme contradictions. “He was both a respectable banker and, like it or not, a ‘founder’ of the psychedelic movement.”<sup>2</sup>

In the 1950s, Wasson’s research into the religious role of psychoactive mushrooms took him to a remote village in southern Mexico. There, Wasson befriended María Sabina, a highly venerated shaman who invited him to participate in a *velada*, a candlelight healing ceremony. On the night of June 29, 1955, Wasson, an urbane J. P. Morgan vice president and amateur mycologist, sat on the dirt floor of a Mazatec Indian hut, ingested sacred mushrooms, and transformed from a skeptic into a true believer. How was this possible? What mysterious power lurked within what Wasson had earlier referred to as “those repugnant fungal growths”?

That evening, high in the misty mountains of Oaxaca, Wasson, the son of an Episcopalian clergyman, slipped far beyond his father’s world. There, Wasson had a “soul-shattering” encounter. He experienced the kind of religious ecstasy that his father preached about—the kind usually reserved for true mystics. Describing the visions created by the magic mushroom, Wasson writes, “It permits you to see, more clearly than our perishing mortal eye can see, vistas beyond the horizons of this life, to travel backward and forward in time, to enter other planes of existence, even (as the Indians say) to know God.”<sup>3</sup>

When his article, “Seeking the Magic Mushroom,” appeared in *Life* magazine in 1957, Wasson achieved instant fame.<sup>4</sup> He was the first

“white outsider” to reveal to the general public the discovery in the New World of a living mushroom tradition. Centuries ago, Spanish chroniclers had documented a similar tradition among the Aztecs, who knew the intoxicating mushrooms as *teonanácatl*, meaning “flesh of the gods.” “A New York banker goes to Mexico’s mountains to participate in age-old rituals of Indians who chew strange growths that produce visions,” states the article’s headline. In the opening paragraph Wasson describes how “my friend Alan Richardson and I shared with a family of Indian friends a celebration of ‘holy communion’ where ‘divine’ mushrooms were first adored and then consumed.”

Although he did not know it then, Wasson was about to achieve much more than scientific acclaim. He was about to become an unwitting catalyst for the psychedelic movement. A decade before Timothy Leary, the self-anointed high priest of the 1960s acid generation, there was Gordon Wasson. His meticulous scholarship documented ancient practices of ingesting—and provided academic respectability for studying—sacred psychoactive plants. Eventually Wasson preferred to call them “entheogenic” plants, meaning “god-generated-within” plants, rejecting “psychedelic” as a term used by “the Tim Learys and their ilk.”\*

Thomas Riedlinger, editor of *The Sacred Mushroom Seeker*, insightfully observes that Wasson was “a level-headed scientist whose scholarly writings, while grounded in fact, yet inspire many readers to regard the sacred mushrooms with religious awe and reverence.”<sup>5</sup> As a pioneering researcher whose poetic prose “gave wings to the young field of ethnomycology” (the study of the historical uses of mushrooms), Wasson’s

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\*The terms “entheogen” (*adj.*, entheogenic), “psychedelic” (a variety of natural and synthesized, consciousness-altering substances), “hallucinogen” (a substance that induces hallucinations), “visionary plants,” and “sacred plants” are used interchangeably throughout this book depending on the context. In contrast to the “holy mushroom theory of religion,” which focuses exclusively on psychoactive mushrooms, the “entheogen theory of religion” affirms that a variety of visionary plants are the main source of religion, including *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms, psilocybin mushrooms, peyote, ayahuasca, cannabis, daturas, and ergot. For an in-depth discussion of the entheogen theory of religion, see Michael Hoffman, “Entheogens and Religion.” For comprehensive descriptions of entheogens, including illustrations, common names, botanical names, usage, preparation, and chemical components and effects, see Schultes and Hofmann, *Plants of the Gods*.

publications were paragons of erudition: well reasoned, richly illustrated, and extensively documented.

In his masterwork, *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (1968), Wasson identifies the elusive Soma plant-god of the Hindu *Rigveda* as the psychoactive mushroom *Amanita muscaria*. In *The Road to Eleusis* (1978), Wasson and his coauthors analyze an LSD-like fungus as the visionary ingredient in the secret potion of the “mysteries” practiced in ancient Greece.

Despite these academic distinctions, somewhere along the way Wasson crossed over. He converted from trail-blazing scientist to passionate proselytizer. What is only hinted at in *Soma* blossoms into a full confession in *The Road to Eleusis*. Here, Wasson proclaims:

As man emerged from his brutish past, thousands of years ago, there was a stage in the evolution of his awareness when the discovery of a mushroom (or was it a higher plant?) with miraculous properties was a revelation to him, a veritable detonator to his soul, arousing in him sentiments of awe and reverence, and gentleness and love, to the highest pitch of which mankind is capable. . . . What today is resolved into a mere drug . . . was for him a prodigious miracle, inspiring in him poetry and philosophy and religion.<sup>6</sup>

Undoubtedly, of all the praise bestowed on Wasson, none was more illustrious than being compared to one of the most brilliant minds in the history of science. Jonathan Ott is an expert on hallucinogenic plants of the Americas. As a disciple and ardent admirer, Ott praises Wasson as “a twentieth-century Darwin.” Shoulder-to-shoulder they stand: Charles Darwin and Gordon Wasson. Ott observes that “like Darwin, whose fundamental discovery was a mechanism to *explain* evolution (which was already accepted by many in his day), Gordon Wasson discovered the mechanism to explain a central aspect of cultural evolution: the genesis of religion.”<sup>7</sup> Just as Darwin developed a naturalistic theory of evolution to explain the origin and descent of man, so Wasson developed a naturalistic theory of entheogens to explain the origin and diffusion of religion.

In others words, just as Darwin took God out of the creation of man, so Wasson took God out of the creation of religion!

No wonder both were reluctant to publish their revolutionary theories. Ott notes, “Gordon Wasson, like Darwin, came from a family steeped in religion. Like Darwin, his religious background led to some hesitancy in expounding a theory, which would prove controversial and iconoclastic.” But here the comparison ends, quite dramatically. Whereas Darwin rigorously pursued his theory of evolution wherever it led, Wasson mysteriously beat a hasty retreat after his first encounter with obvious iconographic proof, found in the Chapel of Plaincourault in France, of psychoactive mushrooms in medieval Christian art.

After indefatigably tracking the tenuous trail of the sacred mushroom around the globe, in Greece, India, Mexico, Russia, and the Far East, why did Wasson—who was widely regarded as “intellectually tenacious”—stop at the sign of the cross?

Was Wasson afraid of betraying the church? As the son of a clergyman, did Wasson feel a filial allegiance to his father and a loyalty to Catholicism?

Was he afraid of the power of the Vatican? Did Wasson draw back because he was concerned that his hard-won reputation might be destroyed?

## Wasson’s Paradox

In our opinion Wasson’s greatest paradox was this: the discrepancy between his zealous exploration of a controversial theory about the role of entheogens in early religion and his reluctance to pursue this theory past the portals of the church and into the hallowed halls of Christianity.

In writing this book we did not seek to speciously praise Wasson but to wholeheartedly pursue his revolutionary theory into the churches and cathedrals of Christendom, into the artworks and icons of Christianity, and ultimately into the Bible and the Gnostic Gospels.<sup>8</sup> We wanted to honor his pioneering insights into the entheogenic origins of religion by following them to their logical conclusions—no matter how unsettling these findings may be to Jewish and Christian orthodoxy.

Along the way we discovered the hidden cause of Wasson's greatest contradiction and came face-to-face with a powerful secret about the life of Jesus. If widely known, this secret would challenge everything we have been taught about the origins of Christianity.

This book retraces the tracks of Wasson's worldwide research into the use of visionary plants among indigenous peoples of Siberia and Mexico and in the classical cultures of ancient Greece and India. It begins with an accidental discovery in Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland.



PART ONE  
.....

# The First Religion

*We have drunk soma and become immortal,  
we have attained the light, the Gods discovered.*

THE HYMNS OF THE R̥GVEDA



# 1

## Green Man of Rosslyn Chapel

Roslin, Scotland—1446

**S**ir William Sinclair, the last Prince of Orkney and first Earl of Caithness, founded Rosslyn Chapel in 1446. It was said of him: “Prince William, his age creeping upon him . . . it came into his mind to build a house for God’s service, of most curious work . . . that it might be done with greater glory and splendour.”<sup>1</sup> Sinclair’s construction of the chapel as it stands today ended four decades later with his demise, leaving his original plan for a larger cross-shaped church incomplete.

Unfinished though it may be, throughout the centuries Rosslyn has inspired artists and writers. In his poem “Rosabelle,” Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) wrote about the legend that the chapel appeared to be ablaze whenever a Sinclair died: “Seem’d all on fire that chapel proud/  
Where Roslin’s chiefs uncoffin’d lie/  
Each Baron, for a sable shroud/  
Sheathed in his iron panoply. . . . Blazed battlement and pinnet high/  
Blazed every rose-carved buttress fair—So still they blaze, when fate is nigh/  
The lordly line of high Saint Clair.”

In recent years, Rosslyn has been the focal point of fanciful histories linking it with the Knights Templar, the Freemasons, and the



Ark of the Covenant. It has even been associated with a musical score encoded in the “orchestra of angels” found in the arches. A most intriguing connection between Rosslyn and the Holy Grail can be traced to *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, an alternative religious history by Michael Baigent, first published in England in 1982.<sup>2</sup> This book introduces the theory that Jesus survived his crucifixion, that he and Mary Magdalene were married, and that they had a child whose bloodline survives to this day.

Intrigued by Rosslyn’s myths and legends, we visited this Gothic chapel during our anniversary trip to Scotland. The village of Roslin was only a short taxi ride from our cozy inn in Edinburgh, but the trip took us back in time. We passed King Arthur’s Seat, the highest peak in the region; it offers a panoramic view of Edinburgh Castle, which has guarded the city for more than a thousand years. Rosslyn Chapel sits like a tiara atop the gentle hills that slope down to the emerald-green valleys of the county of Midlothian. The elegant flying buttresses on each side of the church are crowned by delicate spires. Inside, the two-story chapel is supported by pillars that form an arcade of twelve pointed arches.

Formally known as the Collegiate College of Saint Matthew, Rosslyn Chapel was established as a place to celebrate the Divine Office by reciting the daily hymns, psalms, and other prayers prescribed by the Catholic Church. But despite this catholic lineage Rosslyn Chapel is unique in the architecture of Christendom because of the rare blend of ecumenical and pagan carvings that cover almost every surface of the church. These intricate sculptures portray religious icons side by side with mystical, natural, and heraldic motifs. Every step in the chapel reveals new wonders, drawing the eye restlessly upward from the angels in the arches to the stars high above in the vaulted nave.

While ambling through this “herbal in stone,” I became fascinated by the more than one hundred Green Man carvings located throughout the church. Green Men are carvings of human faces surrounded by foliage. Branches, vines, and leaves may sprout from the nose, mouth, nostrils, and even eyes, sometimes bearing flowers or fruit. Many of these images have an unnerving quality. They embody a vital fecundity

proudly proclaiming the Green Man's survival from pre-Christian, pagan times.

While the expressions of Rosslyn's Green Men ran the full gamut of emotions from jovial to somber, from disembodied to proud, the unique carving of Rosslyn's preeminent Green Man caught my eye. Jutting down from the low ceiling at the end of a stone boss in the Lady Chapel, his alabaster face was encased in laurels. These, in turn, were connected by vines shooting out from the corners of his mouth and from the tear ducts of his eyes. As I bent my head backward to get a better look, the Green Man leered back at me, his diabolical gaze and sarcastic grin mocking the sacred setting.

In *Man and His Symbols*, Carl Jung surveys world art and identifies major archetypal themes that underlie the visual creations of diverse cultures. These archetypes include the Great Mother, the Wise Old Man, the Shadow, the Phoenix—symbol of death and rebirth—and the Trickster. Certainly, Rosslyn's most prominent Green Man was none other than the Trickster, who takes many forms to trick us into learning.

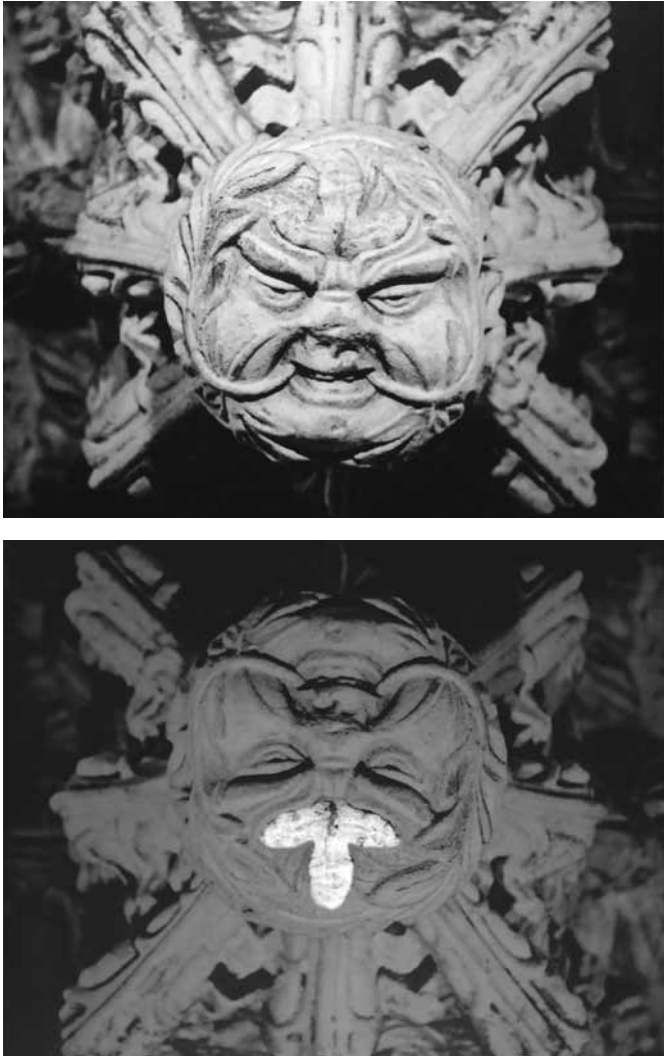
But on this holy ground, in this sacred setting . . . to learn what, I wondered.

At the end of the day, browsing through the Rosslyn gift shop, I came upon a plaster replica of this Green Man head. I purchased it as a memento of our visit, wrapped it in paper, and dropped it into the bottom of my backpack.

After leaving Edinburgh, Julie and I traveled northwest to the Isle of Skye, where we celebrated our anniversary. From there, we drove eastward to Saint Andrews, world famous as the birthplace of golf. Although I had never been on a golf course in my life, a friend of mine who is a fanatical golfer (is there any other kind?) made me promise that we would not leave Scotland without visiting this medieval city.

## Green Man Decoded

And so, several weeks after leaving Rosslyn, I found myself sitting in an Italian restaurant in Saint Andrews, on what would soon turn out to be a most fateful day. While slowly rotating the Green Man head on the



*Fig. 1.1. Green Man, Rosslyn Chapel: front view and inverted view with highlighted forehead (Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

table, I suddenly noticed what appeared to be a mushroom—embedded upside down in his forehead.

The raised dots on the mushroom's cap, the veil on its stem, and the bulbous base were all characteristic of stages in the life cycle of *Amanita muscaria*, known in English as the fly agaric. This potent hallucinogen was widely recognized as the psychoactive fungus of Scandinavian

folklore, often illustrated with elves and fairies frolicking under its bright red cap dotted with white spots.\*

As I considered the implications of this discovery, I asked myself a question: Was the Green Man of Rosslyn Chapel providing a clue to the presence of sacred mushrooms in Christian rituals?

I knew that the archaeological record of entheogen use by humans stretched back some ten thousand years.<sup>3</sup> However, if entheogens eventually resolve the puzzle presented by Upper Paleolithic cave art, then their use by our ancestors could date back as far as thirty thousand to fifty thousand years ago, adding substance to the idea that entheogens were the catalyst for humanity's earliest religious experiences. Professor David Lewis-Williams of the Rock Art Institute at South Africa's Witwatersrand University describes this puzzle as "the greatest riddle of archaeology—how we became human and in the process began to make art and to practice what we call religion."<sup>4</sup> In discussing possible solutions to this riddle, author Graham Hancock<sup>†</sup> suggests that "anatomically modern humans present in Europe around 40,000 years ago encountered a potent natural hallucinogen . . . [which] would undoubtedly have produced the sorts of visions and experiences of a parallel spirit world that the cave paintings seem to reflect."<sup>5</sup>

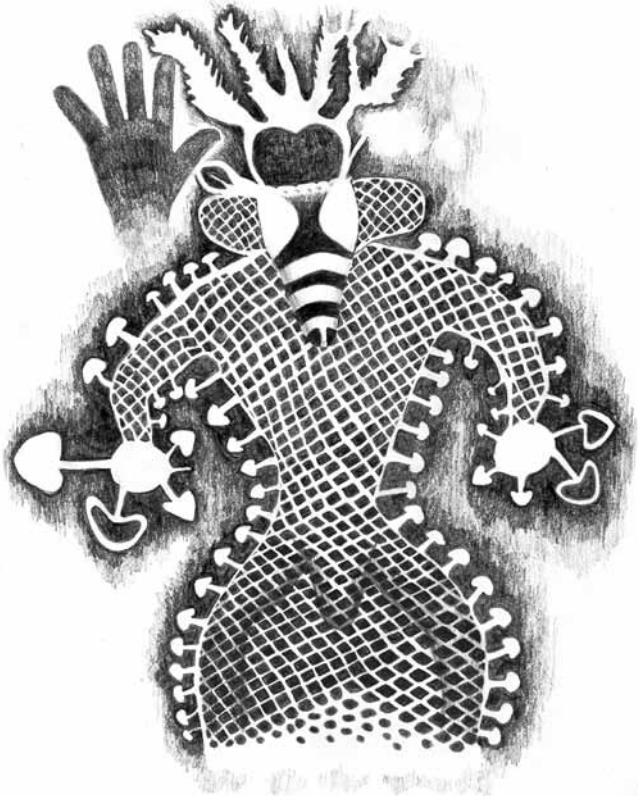
In many indigenous cultures, entheogens played a seminal role in early man's search for the sacred. They were the magical portal to supernatural realms of ecstatic shamanism, humanity's first religion, in which shamans mediate between the visible and spirit worlds. They were prominent in the pantheistic religions of ancient Greece and India. Even today, they are ritually consumed by indigenous peoples around the world.

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\*On August 22, 2015, while writing this book, Julie and I met Paul Stamets, one of the world's leading experts on mycology (the study of mushrooms). In that meeting, Stamets, who had visited Rosslyn Chapel, confirmed that the mushroom we found on the Green Man's forehead was a "taxonomically correct *Amanita muscaria*." He showed us photos he had taken at Rosslyn of other Green Men with mushroom motifs.

†Hancock considers the following psilocybin-containing hallucinogens: *Psilocybe semilanceata* and several varieties of *Panaeolus*, as well as members of the Solanaceae family, such as datura, mandrake, henbane, and belladonna.

*Fig. 1.2. Bee-faced mushroom shaman, Tassili-n-Ajjer, Algeria, 9000–6000 BCE (Illustration by Diego H. Black)*



But for years I had discounted the claims of a small group of iconoclastic scholars who argued that secret hallucinogenic rites were also practiced in Christianity, from early on into the High Middle Ages. After all, it was none other than Gordon Wasson, the “sacred mushroom seeker,” who categorically concluded that evidence of entheogens in the Bible began and ended with the story of Genesis.

### Preeminent Authority

Once Wasson and his Russian-born wife, Valentina, realized the magnitude of their revolutionary discovery—identifying the magic mushroom of antiquity and introducing it to the modern world—they pursued this new undertaking with a rigorous exclusivity of purpose. Concerned that the few remaining islands of traditional entheogenic use would

soon vanish, Wasson reports that “Valentina Pavlovna and I resolved to do what we could to treat our subject worthily, devoting our lives to studying it and reporting it.”<sup>6</sup> In time, Wasson became the world’s pre-eminent authority on ethnomycology. This was no small accomplishment for an amateur mushroom seeker who started out with little more than a passionate curiosity—but with no advanced degree or scholarly training in the sciences.

“I suppose that he was, in his way, a genius,” observes Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, who collaborated closely with Wasson on his masterwork, *Soma*. “Certainly he had the inspiration; but he also had the other 99% of what genius demands. I mean by this the ‘perspiration.’”<sup>7</sup>

As the leading authority in the field, Wasson’s opinion on the absence of psychoactive mushrooms in early Christianity has been taken as gospel. On this point, Wasson was crystal clear. While concluding in *Soma* that mushrooms had played a role in the religious life of our remote ancestors, Wasson also proclaims that “my book brings the role of the fly-agaric in the Near and Middle East down to 1000 BC.”<sup>8</sup> For nearly half a century, Wasson’s position prevailed. His view that evidence of entheogens in the Middle East ended a millennium before the birth of Christ precluded almost all scholarly investigation into the presence of psychoactive plants in the origins of Christianity.

Case closed. Or . . . was it?

### Debunking *The Da Vinci Code*

It was now four o’clock in the afternoon of the day we had arrived in Saint Andrews. While I had not yet realized that this was the day that would change our lives forever (that would not hit me until slightly before midnight), I did know it was time for my daily nap. I crawled under the fluffy comforter in our cozy room at the Bell Craig Guest House while Julie strolled through the quaint streets. As I awoke to the light touch of her fingers on my arm, she said softly, “Jer, guess what’s playing in the theater just around the corner.”

“What?” I asked.

“*The Da Vinci Code*,” Julie replied.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I said, bolting up in bed.

“No, I’m not. It starts in fifteen minutes, so hurry.”

The lights dimmed soon after we settled into the plush upholstered seats. Since we had recently read the novel, we quickly recognized the main characters: Robert Langdon, Harvard professor of iconography; Sophie Neveu Saint-Clair, French cryptologist; and Leigh Teabing, British Holy Grail seeker. And the unforgettable Silas, the fierce albino monk on a clandestine mission to destroy the Priory of Sion, the secret society sworn to protect the descendants of Jesus and Mary down through the ages.

I found myself annoyed by the “big reveal” scene in Leigh Teabing’s chateau. Projecting Leonardo da Vinci’s famous *Last Supper* painting on a large screen, Leigh explains to Sophie that the long-haired, feminine-looking figure at the right of Jesus in the painting is not the apostle John but actually Mary Magdalene. Leigh argues that the absence of a chalice in the painting means Leonardo (who we learn was a Grand Master of the Priory) knew that Mary Magdalene was the actual Holy Grail and the bearer of Jesus’s child. This idea is further supported by the shape of the letter “V” formed by the positions of Jesus and Mary’s bodies, given that “V” is the symbol for the womb and the sacred feminine.

Later on in the film, our ears perked up as Robert deciphers a coded message on the papyrus scroll that Sophie’s grandfather left for her in a bank vault: “The holy grail ’neath ancient Roslin waits. The blade and chalice guarding o’er her gates. Adorned in masters’ loving art, she lies. She rests at last beneath the starry skys.” Robert informs Sophie that “Roslin” is another name for Rosslyn Chapel, whose ceiling is decorated with stars. He insists that they leave London immediately for Scotland.

Despite selling millions of copies, Dan Brown’s novel has been roundly criticized by experts, especially for its historical distortions.

Julie and I already knew that the idea of a secret Priory of Sion was an elaborate fraud. It had been widely debunked by journalists



and scholars as one of the great hoaxes of the twentieth century. In the 1960s, a Frenchman named Pierre Plantard created a fictitious history for the Priory. He described it as a secret society founded by Godfrey of Bouillon on Mount Zion in the Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1099. Plantard forged and planted evidence of the Priory story around France in order to support his claim of being the Great Monarch prophesied by Nostradamus.

“These guys are shameless,” I said to Julie, referring to both Dan Brown’s novel and *Holy Blood/Holy Grail*, the pseudo-historical work on which it was based. “Every first-year social science student knows that ‘absence of evidence is not proof.’ The lack of a chalice in Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* proves nothing at all about the Holy Grail. And by itself, without context, the supposed ‘V’ in the painting is meaningless. How can they base such a radical theory—about Jesus surviving the cross and marrying Mary—on a far-fetched interpretation of Da Vinci’s masterpiece and a patently fraudulent myth about the Priory of Sion?”

“It’s a movie so of course it’s fabricated,” Julie replied. “That’s not the point.”

“Well, what is it then?” I asked.

“The point is,” Julie said, “that it is because of *The Da Vinci Code* that you came to Rosslyn and discovered the secret of the Green Man. How many people, throughout the centuries, have stared at that same Green Man head but did not see what you saw, until you put it on the table and spun it around?”

### What Would Jesus Say?

Nevertheless, for me, personally, the *Da Vinci Code* movie was “high art”—if we invoke Aristotle’s criteria that true art must inspire catharsis in the viewer. Indeed, while discussing the film, I experienced a purifying catharsis that fused together the Green Man, medieval Christianity, and the life of Jesus. For a moment my intellectual skepticism was suspended, inspiring me to ask questions that until then had seemed implausible.



*What if Jesus experienced divinity and immortality by ingesting visionary plants?*

Swept up in speculation, I wondered what Jesus would say if we could somehow walk and talk with him in the hills surrounding Galilee. Would the holy man speak to us in parables about a secret teaching reserved only for disciples? “Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given” (Matthew 13:11). Would he explain his mysterious declaration offering a pathway to immortality? “I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever” (John 6:51).

Would Jesus clarify his perplexing words at the Last Supper? “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whosoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:53–54).

I pondered the message of these mystifying sayings in which Jesus offers the eating of “living bread” as the gateway to immortality. Could they be biblical similes for ingesting entheogens?

For a moment, I was on the verge of throwing caution to the winds, of embracing these speculations as *the truth*. I found myself moving rapidly from a mild suspension of disbelief to its rambunctious overthrow. Suddenly, the words of Victor Turner, my esteemed professor of symbolic anthropology at Cornell, popped into my head, warning me to take stock of the situation. Turner’s favorite dictum was “good theory comes from good field work.” In other words, go out and gather the facts before jumping to conclusions.

### “Truth Conquers All”

After dinner we returned to our room. While I was lost in thought, Julie, who is an excellent researcher, had been surfing the Web, seeking the source of the sole quote William Sinclair had carved inside Rosslyn Chapel.

On the architrave adjoining the Apprentice Pillar is a Latin inscription that reads “Forte est vinu. Fortior est rex. Fortiores sunt mulieres: sup om vincit veritas.” It means “Wine is strong, the king is stronger, women are stronger still: but truth conquers all.”

“Listen, Jerry,” she said, “this quote comes from the Book of Esdras [Ezra] 1, in the King James version of the Bible. But given William Sinclair’s penchant for coded messages, I decided to look at this inscription as an invitation to read further. Well, here’s what I found in Esdras 2:14–38.”

Let no man therefore come unto me now, nor seek after me these forty days. So I took the five men, as he commanded me, and we went into the field, and remained there. And the next day, behold, a voice called me, saying, Esdras, open thy mouth, and drink that I give thee to drink.

Then opened I my mouth, and behold, he reached me a full cup, which was full as it were with water, but the colour of it was like fire. And I took it, and drank: and when I had drunk of it, my heart uttered understanding, and wisdom grew in my breast, for my spirit strengthened my memory: And my mouth was opened, and shut no more.

I was about to speak, but Julie continued reading.

The Highest gave understanding unto the five men, and they wrote the wonderful visions of the night that were told, which they knew not: and they sat forty days, and they wrote in the day, and at night they ate bread. As for me I spake in the day, and I held not my tongue by night. In forty days they wrote two hundred and four books.

And it came to pass, when the forty days were fulfilled, that the Highest spake, saying, “The first thou hast written publish openly, that the worthy and unworthy may read it: But keep the seventy last that thou mayest deliver them only to such as be wise among the people: for in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the stream of knowledge.” And I did so.

“Listen to these descriptions: water the color of fire, spring of understanding, fountain of wisdom, stream of knowledge,” Julie observed. “These could easily be poetic analogies for the juice of the *Amanita* mushroom.”

“Julie,” I said, “do you realize that some archaeologists search their entire lives without finding a single artifact! We’ll never be able to prove that Sinclair wanted people to read Esdras 2. But during the past two weeks, we’ve uncovered confirmation of an entheogen in the Green Man icon of Rosslyn and enticing evidence in the Esdras text of the Old Testament!”

### In for a Penny, In for a Pound

“So what’s next? Where do we go from here?” Julie asked. “What we’ve learned at Rosslyn makes me curious. What other clues are out there?”

“Who knows how many more artifacts there are, like this one, visible in plain sight in ancient churches, just waiting for someone to recognize them for what they really are,” I replied. “We owe it to ourselves, to science, to find out.”

At this point, there was no turning back. We were, as the British say, “in for a penny, in for a pound.” Confronted with a potential breakthrough of such significance, Julie and I made a pact to quietly undertake a journey of discovery to seek answers. And so, during our twenty-fifth-anniversary sojourn in Scotland, we vowed to devote ourselves to a quest for compelling evidence of entheogens in early Christianity—and ultimately in the life of Jesus.

But, concerned about the highly controversial nature of this research, we knew that we needed strong scientific principles to guide our quest.

We found them in the words of the astrophysicist Carl Sagan, who, observes in *The Demon-Haunted World*, “There are no forbidden questions in science, no matters too sensitive or delicate to be probed, no sacred truths.” However, he also cautioned that “to find the truth we need imagination and skepticism both. We will not be afraid to speculate, but we will be careful to distinguish speculation from fact.” And

most importantly, Sagan stressed that “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.”

This is the story of our quest for extraordinary evidence. Our journey begins by retracing Wasson’s tracks as he seeks the sacred mushroom throughout the ancient world. It starts with his exploration of the Hindu *Rigveda*, one of the world’s oldest religious texts.



2

## O Immortal Soma!

Indus River Valley, India—1400 BCE

The year 1973 was a time of emotional turmoil for me. My first wife had fallen in love with another man, and I knew we were headed for a divorce. I was at the end of a long involvement with Cesar Chavez's farmworker movement, on which I had written my doctoral dissertation and which had given my life a great sense of purpose.

It was in the summer of that tumultuous year that, at the urging of a friend in Miami, I accompanied him to a Rainbow Family Gathering, an earlier hippy version of Burning Man, which took place on the banks of Strawberry Lake in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. There I ingested a tab of Orange Sunshine LSD. Under the influence of this powerful hallucinogen, while wandering about in the woods I found an ornately carved wooden staff lying on the forest floor. There were bright beads around the handle, which bore the image of a black raven. I was certain that the staff had been left behind by Native Americans. When I picked it up, I felt a surge of energy emanating from the staff to my hand, up my arm, and into my body. At that moment, I believed that this staff was calling me to the ancient path of shamanism. When I returned to the campfire that night, I sensed that my friend was jealous that I had found the staff, which only confirmed my suspicions of its power.

Back at home in Miami, I became delusional. At first, I was excited by this new reality. I began to envision myself as a powerful healer. Then, I became paranoid. I imagined that I was meeting people who were not really people, the kind of malevolent spirits described in Carlos Castaneda's books on Don Juan, the Yaqui shaman: spirits who would whisk me away to other realms from which there was no return.<sup>1</sup>

I was on the verge of losing my mind, or at least of losing control of my mind. It was then that I understood the lure of magical thinking. It was then that I coined the phrase "the myth is strong because the need is strong." At this critical juncture, my rational intellect reappeared like a life raft in a storm. Once rescued from this mental maelstrom, I was flooded with questions. How could this be happening . . . to me? To a university professor who prized logical thinking? Was this happening to others? Were people reluctant to talk about this somber side of psychedelics? Was this what Aldous Huxley meant when he wrote *Heaven and Hell*?

And above all, where was the higher consciousness, the sublime transcendence that so many psychedelic explorers of my generation had written about?

"Psychedelic" means "mind manifesting." Obviously there was a dark side of the psyche that was best kept locked away or at least under firm control. Perhaps this was why our European predecessors rejected superstition and paganism in favor of science and monotheism. For the first time in my life, I had lost my intellectual arrogance, my sophomoric sense of superiority. I realized how psychologically fragile we all are. I promised myself never again to dismiss people who said that they were losing their minds.

Soon after this sobering experience, I decided to teach a course called "Hallucinogens and Culture" at Florida International University in Miami. "If you want to learn something, teach it," the saying goes. But in this case, teaching about hallucinogens was fraught with danger. These were the politically super-charged years of the early "War on Drugs." This was the era when President Nixon branded Timothy Leary as "the most dangerous man in America." When my teacher's

union representative warned me that I should not talk about personal experiences with psychoactive drugs in the classroom because they were illegal substances, I realized the paradoxes inherent in this topic. First, I would be talking about experiences that could not be fully described in words. Second, I could not discuss personal explorations without the risk of being denied tenure (which I was granted a few years later) or, worse, of losing my job. Third, I could not take students on “field trips” or allow them to talk about their own journeys, thereby eliminating one of the fundamental tools of anthropology.

What to do? What to do? I wondered about how I could make this a rewarding educational experience. I decided that this would not be a moralistic course about why drugs could be hazardous, a “just say no” course. I also decided that it would not be an endorsement of psychedelic tripping, which could be dangerous especially for young people in the formative stages of their lives, as well as for anyone who was emotionally or mentally unstable. After much thought I decided to create a course that would offer an academic study of the relationship between hallucinogens and culture throughout the ages, from the ecstatic shamanism of the reindeer herders of Siberia to the Eleusinian mystery cults of ancient Greece to the contemporary “mind explorers.” The course would be taught through a series of case studies well documented in the scholarly literature. While searching for robust case materials, I learned about the Soma plant-god of the Hindu *Rigveda*.

## Hymn to the Sound of Truth

As an anthropologist, I relish poring over long-lost volumes of forgotten lore. I am intrigued by artifacts that may contain cryptic clues to humanity’s lost past. Of these, there are many. But in my humble opinion, when it comes to breathtaking manuscripts, there is nothing more impressive than the *Rigveda*, a thirty-five-hundred-year-old sacred Sanskrit text. In essence, the *Rigveda* is a prodigious poem comprised of 1,017 hymns and 10,600 verses, organized in ten books known as “Mandalas.” And what poetry it is! The kind inspired by the archetypal feminine muse, whom poet Robert Graves calls “the White Goddess.”

The kind that gives me goose bumps every time I read it, as with these verses from “Hymn to the Sound of Truth.”

*I am the ruling Queen, the amasser of treasures,  
full of wisdom, first of those worthy of worship.  
In various places the divine powers have set me.  
I enter many homes and take numerous forms. . . .*

*It is I myself who announce and utter the tidings  
that Gods and men alike rejoice to hear.  
The man I love I make increase in strength.  
I make him a priest, a sage, or a learned seer. . . .*

*I breathe out strongly like the wind while clasping  
unto myself all worlds, all things that are.  
I tower above the earth, above the heavens,  
so mighty am I in my power and splendor!<sup>2</sup>*

Surely this omnipotent female voice is dramatically different from the patriarchal prophets of monotheism. She is the queen, gatherer of abundance, the life-giving principle within all things who commands homage in every sphere. Once the *Rigveda* was translated into English, French, and German more than two hundred years ago, Western scholars were awed by its majestic poetry and unique cosmology. But they were perplexed by their collective failure to identify the elusive Soma plant-god, gloriously praised in this ancient Vedic text.

## When Gordon Met Valentina

Ironically, the most significant breakthrough in the quest for the identity of the mysterious Soma of the *Rigveda* grew out of a 1927 honeymoon quarrel between R. Gordon Wasson and his bride, Valentina Pavlovna, a Russian-born physician. After lunch on their first day in the Catskills of New York, the blissful couple walked hand and hand along a path by a pond near a forested mountain. As Gordon relates the story,



Suddenly, before I knew it, my bride threw down my hand roughly and ran up into the forest, with cries of ecstasy. She had seen toadstools growing, many kind of toadstools. She had not seen the like since Russia, since 1917. She was in a delirium of excitement and began gathering them right and left in her skirt. From the path I called to her, admonished her not to gather them: they were toadstools, I said, they were poisonous. “Come back, come back to me!” I pleaded. She laughed the merrier and continued picking, as it seemed to me indiscriminately. To make a long story short, we had our first marital crisis.<sup>3</sup>

Valentina won their first fight. Over Gordon’s protests, she returned to the honeymoon chalet with a skirt full of mushrooms. She put some into a soup and hung the others out to dry in the sun for use in winter. Beside himself, Gordon “acted the perfect Anglo-Saxon oaf confronting a wood nymph I had never laid eyes on. I would eat nothing with mushrooms in it.” But now curious about their divergent reactions, the newlyweds began to inquire about the differences between Anglo-Saxon cultures who fear mushrooms and Slavic cultures who esteem them.

Their initial findings sparked decades of dedicated research, which resulted in their first book, *Mushrooms, Russia and History*, published in 1957. This richly illustrated, limited-edition manuscript coined the terms “mycophobic” (fearful of mushrooms) and “mycophilic” (lovers of mushrooms) to describe diverse attitudes toward fungi in cultures around the world. In the process of writing this book, Gordon and Valentina became infatuated with the mystery of Soma.

## O Immortal Soma!

Julie and I had recently left Saint Andrews and returned to Edinburgh, where we mustered up the courage to go out sightseeing in the cold, drizzly weather. After an hour in Edinburgh Castle, we were cold and decided to have tea. Off we went down the hill to the Elephant House, a tea-and-coffee house made famous by J. K. Rowling, who penned parts of her early Harry Potter novel in the back room, which offers a view up to the foreboding castle.

As we settled in with mugs of Earl Grey tea, Julie said, “We have nowhere to go and nothing to do. Would you share your Soma class with me?”

“Sure,” I replied enthusiastically, ever pleased to have an audience. As I told her, I always start off with the story of how Wasson cracked the code of Soma. In the opening passage of his book, *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*, Wasson describes how the original Aryan people swept out of central Eurasia, some two thousand years before Christ, settling in what is now Afghanistan and the valley of the Indus River in India. They spoke the Vedic tongue, the parent of classical Sanskrit. They practiced a tribal religion, with a hereditary priesthood and a pantheon of supernatural spirits, deities, and other gods.

Wasson writes, “Unique among these other gods was Soma. Soma was at the same time a god, a plant, and the juice of that plant.”<sup>24</sup>

“But, what manner of plant was this?” Wasson wondered. According to the botanical references of the *Rigveda*, it was a very strange plant indeed. It had no trunk, no branches, and no leaves. It had no blossoms, roots, or visible seeds. Nevertheless, the *Rigveda* offers lavish praise of Soma, which needed no precise description because the plant was well known to the priests and participants in the Soma sacrifice. Soma is “the pillar of heaven.” Soma is “the child of heaven and a brilliant red banner of cosmic sacrifice.” Soma is “the God for Gods.”

But these depictions pale in comparison to the enlightened state achieved by drinking the juice of the Soma plant. “Heaven does not equal half of me—have I been drinking Soma?” “I will pick up the earth and put it here or there—have I been drinking Soma?”

And then there is the most famous verse of all, expressing a sense of immortality: “We have drunk Soma and become immortal; we have attained the light, the Gods discovered. Now what may foeman’s malice do to harm us? What, O Immortal, mortal man’s deception?”

## Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds

“How did Wasson finally identify Soma?” Julie asked.

“That’s coming soon,” I replied. “But, first, consider the research

challenge Wasson faced. Like Latin, Sanskrit was a dead language. And for some unknown reason, the Soma plant had fallen out of use some two thousand five hundred years ago in India. All Wasson had to go by were the effusive portrayals of the plant provided by the *Rigveda*. To better appreciate the difficulties of solving a millennia-old mystery, let me take you through a thought experiment I share with my students.”

“I’m all ears,” Julie replied.

“Okay,” I continued, slipping into a professorial voice. “Put on your seat belts and fast-forward four thousand years into the future. Now imagine you are an anthropologist living in the future, in the year 6006, interested in studying the psychedelics of the twentieth century. English is a long-dead language. Everyone speaks a form of Microsoft-generated Esperanto. Drugs are a thing of the past, as we’ve learned to alter our genes to eliminate disease.”

“How are you ever going to investigate this topic?” I asked. “Well, you know that people were primitive back then. They poisoned the water with pesticides and the air with radioactivity, causing cancer. On weekends they turned to religion, entering dark caves where they danced wildly to pulsating sounds and lights. There they worshipped totemic insect gods, the most revered of which was the cult of the Beatles. As an anthropologist, you suspect that somewhere in the ancient hymns, sung in praise of the Beatles, in the flowery language of the times, in sacred songs like ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,’ was a clue to the psychedelic sacraments of the twentieth century.”

“That’s fascinating,” Julie laughed, immediately seeing the title of the song as an acronym for LSD. “You’ve made your point. So tell me,” she said, growing impatient, “how did Wasson solve the mystery of Soma?”

## Miraculous Mushroom

After Valentina died of cancer in 1957 and his retirement from banking in 1963, Wasson began his quest for the identity of Soma in earnest. He traveled extensively in the Far East, seeking information to support his novel ideas about the only plant in history that has ever been deified.

His main theory, published in 1968, was that Soma was not a plant at all but a “miraculous mushroom”: the *Amanita muscaria*, or fly agaric. (Throughout this book, the terms “Soma,” “*Amanita muscaria*,” and “fly agaric” are used interchangeably.)

An agaric is a type of fruiting fungus distinctively characterized by a cap that is clearly differentiated from the stalk, with gills on the underside of the cap.\* The young *Amanita muscaria* pops up out of the soil looking like a white egg, covered in a universal veil. As the fungus grows, the bright red cap bursts through the broken white veil (see plate 1). Over time, the cap changes shape from round to hemispherical to flat and, finally, in fully mature specimens, to concave, resembling a cup or goblet.†

Summarizing his conclusion, Wasson writes, “In a word, my belief is that Soma is the Divine Mushroom of Immortality, and that in the early days of our culture, before we made use of reading and writing, when the *Rigveda* was being composed, the prestige of this miraculous mushroom ran by word of mouth far and wide throughout Eurasia, well beyond the regions where it grew and was worshipped.”<sup>5</sup>

“I’ve seen these red-and-white spotted mushrooms in fairy tales, on Christmas cards, and even in Walt Disney’s *Fantasia*,” Julie said.

“Yes, and my students point out that it pops up in Super Mario, a video game in which Mario and his brother Luigi travel through the Mushroom Kingdom in order to rescue Princess Toadstool.”

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\**Amanita muscaria* is a member of the genus *Amanita*, which contains some six hundred species of agarics. While *Amanita muscaria* itself is not deadly, the genus *Amanita* contains some of the most toxic mushrooms in the world. Prominent among these is the highly toxic *Amanita phalloides*, known as the “death cap,” which damages the kidneys and liver, often fatally.

†The effects of *Amanita muscaria* include, but are not limited to, euphoria, peace of mind, and a sense of well-being, along with synesthesia (alteration of the senses, such as “seeing music”), macrosopia (objects appearing much larger than they are), and the opposite, microsopia (objects appearing much smaller). Some people report entering into a dream state, similar to lucid dreaming, as well as out-of-body experiences. When the mushroom is eaten fresh, and not dried, nausea can occur, along with increased salivation and perspiration. In high doses, delirium and disassociation may occur.

## Pissing Soma Day by Day

Wasson's basic problem was this: he knew the mushroom was a hallucinogen whose botanical identification had eluded Vedic scholars for more than two hundred years. After all, the poet-priests of the *Rigveda* recited these sacred hymns for fellow devotees who were intimately familiar with Soma's unique appearance and qualities. Thus, the ancients praised Soma with what to contemporary ears are obscure metaphors, such as "mainstay of the sky" and "divine udder."

Assessing the problem, Wasson developed a strategy that led to its solution. First, knowing his scientific limitations as an amateur mycologist, he assembled a dream team of interdisciplinary experts. Over the years, he attracted renowned collaborators, such as Greek and Latin classicist Robert Graves, author of *The White Goddess*; Vedic scholar Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, a Sanskrit expert; and pharmacologist Albert Hofmann, who first synthesized LSD at Sandoz Labs in Switzerland in 1938.\* Second, because he assumed that its flowery phrases held the key to Soma's botanical description, Wasson confined his research solely to the text of the *Rigveda*.

Third, he insisted that any solution must address all of the *Rigveda*'s enigmas, which Soma did eloquently. In fact, Wasson's psychoactive mushroom theory solved the most bizarre puzzle of all. According to Hindu scripture, in addition to consuming Soma *directly* by either eating the mushroom or drinking its juice, a devotee could ingest Soma *indirectly* by drinking the urine of a person who had already consumed Soma. In the *Rigveda*, both Indra, the supreme deity, and the priests are described as drinking Soma in and then pissing it out. One verse addresses Indra with these words: "Like a thirsty stag, come here to drink. Drink Soma, as much as you want. Pissing it out day by day, O generous one, You have assumed your most mighty force."

By proposing *Amanita muscaria*, Wasson provided a compelling solution to the urine enigma as well. In time, pharmacological

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\*Wasson's voluminous correspondence, along with his books, personal papers, and collected artifacts, are available to researchers at the Tina and R. Gordon Wasson Ethnomythological Collection Archives in the Harvard University Botanical Museum.

analysis revealed that muscimole and ibotenic acid (which converts to muscimole)—the psychoactive agents in the fly agaric—rapidly pass out through the urine, largely unmetabolized and still potent after ingestion.

“Yuck, drinking urine,” Julie said, making a face.

“Yes, this is distasteful to us, but it goes to the heart of ‘cultural relativism’ in anthropology,” I replied. “This means that when we encounter really strange behavior, like Aztec cannibalism or, in this case, Hindu urine drinking, we have to suspend our moral judgments and seek an explanation within the belief system of the people we are studying. To simply blame this on ‘the primitive mind’ is not an explanation. It is the lazy man’s way of doing anthropology.”

“After all this, how was Wasson’s theory received?” Julie asked.

“In general, his main conclusion has now been widely accepted in most academic and popular circles,” I replied. “But there are still some who oppose it.”

“Why?” Julie quizzed me. “It seems like everyone would have accepted it by now.”

“Not so,” I explained. “Over the years, scholars have proposed dozens of candidates for the identity of the Soma plant, including cannabis, *Peganum harmala*, and even fermented drinks. For example, Terence McKenna, an ethnobotanist, argues that another psychoactive mushroom, *Psilocybe cubensis*, is a better candidate for Soma than *Amanita muscaria*.<sup>6</sup> And even the most open-minded Hindu scholars were concerned about the broader implications of the Soma theory, which extended far beyond the *Rigveda*. In the words of one expert, the vision granted by Soma ‘was the focal point of Vedic religion. Indeed . . . the nature of that vision—and of that plant—underlies the whole of Indian religion, and everything of a mystical nature within that religion is pertinent to the identity of the plant.’”<sup>7</sup>

“This implies that profound Hindu religious concepts regarding the human soul—immortality, reincarnation, dharma, and karma—were initially conceived during the Soma ritual. It came down to this: if Wasson was right, then the most majestic passages of the *Rigveda*, one of the masterworks of civilization, could be attributed to a lowly fungus—and a hallucinogenic one at that.”

## With Soma Eyes

Novelist Marcel Proust writes, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” For Julie and me, our voyage of discovery was about visiting ancient landscapes and seeing them, as if for the first time, through “Soma eyes.”

In his review of Wasson’s work, Daniel H. H. Ingalls, professor of Sanskrit at Harvard University, argues that the greatness of a discovery “lies in the future discoveries that it may render possible. To my mind the identification of the Soma with a hallucinogenic mushroom is more than a solution of an ancient puzzle. I can imagine numerous roads of inquiry on which, with this new knowledge in hand, one may set out.”<sup>8</sup>

In time, the impact of Wasson’s work reached far beyond that of successfully identifying a single psychoactive mushroom in the *Rigveda*. Looking through “Soma eyes,” a new generation of anthropologists, classicists, and ethnobotanists began to revisit the scriptures and religious art of earlier cultures in search of the “Soma factor.” The “Soma factor” means that they were looking not only for evidence of *Amanita muscaria*, but for clues to the presence of other sacred plants, well known to botanists and pharmacologists, that could have played a role in early religions. Certainly, the central role of Soma in Hinduism, one of the world’s great religions, offered a stunning precedent.

Now freed from the intellectual shackles of mycophobic Anglo-Saxon values toward “drugs,” what they found was astonishing. More than four hundred cultures worldwide had religious practices that induced an altered state of consciousness. In many of them, entheogens opened the portal to the supernatural world of ancestors and gods. Noteworthy examples include the use of

- peyote by the Apache, Kiowa, and other First Peoples of North America
- psilocybin by the Mazatec of Oaxaca in contemporary Mexico
- morning glory, which has LSD-like properties, by the Aztec of ancient Mexico

- ayahuasca by the Conibo and Jivaro of the Amazon Basin in South America
- ergot by the devotees of the Eleusinian Mysteries of ancient Greece
- ibogaine by the Fang and Pygmies of Central Africa
- pikuri by the Aborigines of Australia
- fly agaric by the reindeer herders of Siberia in Russia

For thousands of years people around the world have had a sacred relationship with psychoactive plants that played a central role in shamanism, humanity's archetypal religion.

## Ancient Empty Streets

It was late in the day when we finished discussing Soma. The rain had stopped. The rays of the afternoon sun bathed the ramparts of Edinburgh Castle in golden light. Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" was playing over the Elephant House's speakers: "And the ancient empty street's too dead for dreaming."

I looked over at Julie, who was on fire with excitement. She was fifty-eight, and I was sixty-four. But now, at the thought of traveling and working together, we felt reinvigorated. Sensing a kinship with Gordon and Valentina, we were excited to be sharing this journey together as a couple, to be traveling along a trail they had blazed more than a half century ago.

Over the past few weeks, my life and research had come full circle and were now fully intertwined. Four decades ago I had taken the "road less traveled," which led me to Gordon Wasson, to the *Rigveda*, and now to Rosslyn Chapel. What started out long ago as a personal experience with a powerful hallucinogen had suddenly turned into a professional quest for the answer to a history-making question: Were entheogens a seminal force in the creation of Christianity?

What we needed now, more than anything, was evidence to guide this inquiry. We unexpectedly stumbled upon our next clue in the middle of a herd of wild reindeer, two hours north of Edinburgh, atop the Cairngorms, Scotland's highest mountains.





# 3

## Santa, the Reindeer Shaman

Siberia, Russia—2000 BCE

On Christmas Eve, when the streets are all covered with snow and a hush falls over the land, parents recite the story of Santa Claus to wide-eyed children. They discreetly wink as they tell the timeworn tale of a jolly old elf who is dressed all in red and white from his head to his toes. Miraculously, Santa travels around the world in one night, in a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer, stopping at each home to place gifts under the Christmas tree festively decorated in tinsel and colorful ornaments with a star on top.

How improbable! How curious! But what if this snow-white lie, which we dutifully recount each year, was grounded in an ancient reality whose roots reach back thousands of years to the vast forests of Siberia? What if the real story of Santa was even stranger than that of the commercial myth of Saint Nick, the little sleigh driver “so lively and quick”? What if it was stranger than most of us could ever imagine?

It was high in the Cairngorms in the heart of the Scottish Highlands that Julie first heard the true story of Santa Claus and his flying reindeer. Driving east from the Isle of Skye, where we spent our twenty-fifth

anniversary, Julie and I stopped in Inverness, located at the north end of Loch Ness. From there, we followed route A9 as it twisted and turned up into Cairngorms National Park. After lunch in the alpine resort town of Aviemore, Julie made a few phone calls and found lodging at the Braeriach Guest House. Sitting on the banks of the River Spey in the quaint village of Kingcraig, this two-story stone-walled Victorian inn has five guest rooms, all furnished with wooden sleigh beds. The view from our bedroom window looked out past a flower garden to the fast-moving river, on to a wide pastoral valley dotted with black-and-white cows, and up to the peaks of the snow-capped mountains. Over tea that afternoon, we asked our innkeeper Fiona, a refugee from the hubbub of London, what we should see during our stay.

“Oh, my favorite place would be to visit the wild reindeer. When you return, you can have dinner at the Boathouse Restaurant, only a twenty-minute walk from here through the forest.”

The following morning we drove to the long wooden cabin that housed the Cairngorm Reindeer Center. There we met three other couples and our guides, Beth and William, who would lead us up into the mountains. Beth explained that the “reindeer were reintroduced into Scotland in 1952 by a Swedish reindeer herder, Mikel Utsi. Starting from a few reindeer, the herd has grown in numbers over the years and is currently held at between a hundred and thirty and a hundred and fifty by controlling breeding.”<sup>1</sup> About fifty of these reindeer live in a natural environment in the forests and highland plateaus nearby. The region is rich with lichen, the chief food of reindeer.

After the orientation we drove in a car caravan up a steep, curvy road. After parking in a small clearing, everyone donned knee-high Wellington boots. It was a cold day, and the trail was wet and muddy from a drizzling rain. We were excited and a bit apprehensive at the thought of encountering creatures in the wild. As the trail opened onto a large pasture, bordered by a dense dark-green forest, the sun broke through the clouds and the rain lifted. As we shed our rain gear, Will put down the sack of food he had carried on his shoulder and instructed us how to behave around the reindeer—who were still nowhere to be seen. “You can pet them, even touch their noses, but not their antlers.

They grow very fast, a couple of inches a week, and are very sensitive.”

Just then, Beth began bellowing loudly. It felt eerie to be huddled together on a chilly hilltop while our guide howled into the wilderness. It took a minute before we realized that she was rounding up reindeer. Suddenly, we saw a huge light-brown stag emerge from the woods. He strode majestically toward us, his giant antlers swaying to and fro. Another reindeer followed and then another, slowly walking toward us, a plodding procession of caribou.

As the males, females, and calves drew closer Beth began calling them by name: Sting, Marley, Cranna, Oryx, Gandhi, Magnus . . . Elvis. As the herd approached, Will opened the sack and scooped pellets of food into our hands, telling us to pick a reindeer and go up to him slowly with outstretched arms. I walked up to a large bull. He nuzzled his warm, silky nose into my palms, gently licking them clean. Julie stood back and observed. Soon, everyone was talking, smiling, and even giggling at the sheer delight of being in the presence of these gentle caribou.

Julie noticed an albino reindeer standing off to the side, away from the herd. She asked Beth why he did not join the group.

“Oh, him. Sircus is his name,” Beth replied. “He only takes food from me or Will. He’s a real loner.”

“Really? Do you know why?” Julie inquired.

“I think it’s because he loves mushrooms so much,” Beth said.

At the mention of mushrooms, Julie’s ears perked up. She glanced over at me with a knowing look. *Aha*, she thought.

“Now, don’t get me wrong,” Beth continued. “All reindeer love fly agaric, but for Sircus they are his favorite food, even more than lichen. Sometimes, during the summer mushroom season, he eats so many that he just stands there mesmerized, staring into the sun, swaying back and forth. That’s why his face is so blotched and pink. It’s sunburned.”

As Beth finished speaking, Sircus turned toward Julie and without hesitation walked up to her. He placed his soft muzzle into her palms and ate slowly, all the while looking into her eyes. Julie glanced toward me, her face beaming. She stood still for a long while, gently petting Sircus. Then, just as quickly as they had appeared, the reindeer turned

and ambled back toward the forest. Sircus followed. Everyone was silent on the downhill walk back to the cars.

“Jer,” Julie said softly to me, taking my hand along the trail, “I swear I had a real connection with Sircus, as if we knew each other. Don’t you think it strange that I could have such a spiritual encounter with a reindeer?”

“Yes, you must be Saint Francis of the animals,” I said.

Julie laughed and nodded her head in affirmation.

## Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer

Once back at the inn, I was tired from our excursion and lay down to take a nap. But when I happened to glance over at the bookshelf next to the bed, I noticed the *Field Guide to Mushrooms of Great Britain*. Soon, I was turning its richly illustrated pages. After finding Sircus’s favorite, the red-and-white *Amanita muscaria*, I eventually fell into a deep and restful sleep.

When I awoke, I carried the field guide downstairs, planning to show it to Julie. I found her sitting near a roaring fireplace. She was engaged in animated conversation about our reindeer adventure with the other houseguests: Anne and John, a well-groomed, middle-aged couple from Devon, whose English accent I could understand if I listened carefully, and Bonny and Sid, young punk bikers from Liverpool whom I could barely understand at all. No wonder George Bernard Shaw observed, “England and America are two countries separated by a common language.”

After Julie mentioned that the Reindeer Center rented the caribou out during the Yuletide season to pull sleighs bearing gifts for children across Great Britain, the conversation turned to Christmas and Santa Claus.

“Does anyone know what Santa has to do with Christmas, the birth of Jesus, and this?” I asked, opening the mushroom field guide and showing everyone the photo of the bright red *Amanita* mushroom covered with snowy white dots.

Before I could finish the sentence, I felt Julie’s two hands firmly

tugging on my arm, as she said in her calming therapist's voice, "Sorry to interrupt, honey, but if we don't leave now, we won't be able to walk to dinner and back before dark."

We strolled under tall trees whose leaves sparkled in the late afternoon sunlight. The air carried a sweet scent of wildflowers. Soon we came to the rustic restaurant on the banks of an alpine lake. After finishing the delectable grilled trout fresh from the lake, Julie asked pointedly, "What were you thinking back there?"

"I was just trying to explain my theory of Santa Claus," I said defensively. "I . . ."

"Come on. You know what I'm talking about," Julie objected. "What about our vow of secrecy, the one we made to each other at the beginning of this trip? Right before I escorted you out the door, you were about to blurt out that we were searching for the psychedelic roots of Christianity. I need to know that you won't go around talking to people about our work while we are on this research trip."

"Okay, I promise," I replied.

"Now, tell me," Julie said with a sigh of relief, "what were you trying to say about Santa back there at the inn?"

"While most people think of Christmas in terms of the quintessential Christian celebration," I began, "the truth is that nearly all of the symbols associated with Santa Claus are based on the shamanic traditions of pre-Christian Europe."

"I always thought of shamanism as a tribal religion," Julie said. "I certainly never thought of Santa as a shaman! What do you mean?"

## Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy

The classic anthropological definition of shamanism comes from Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), who described it as "archaic techniques of ecstasy."<sup>2</sup> By "ecstasy" he was invoking the Greek term *ekstasis*, which literally means "to be outside oneself" and in this context figuratively means "flight of the soul." In essence, shamanism refers to ancient methods for inducing the flight of the soul, for both the living and the recently deceased. One of the most concise descriptions of the universal

foundations of shamanism is found in Peter Furst's *Hallucinogens and Culture*. These foundations include "the skeletal soul of man and animal and the restitution of life from the bones; all phenomena in the environment as animate; [and] separability of the soul from the body during life."<sup>3</sup>

At the very center of these belief systems stands the persona of the shaman and his or her unique ecstatic experience. With the aid of spirit helpers he can travel to and intercede with the supernatural forces of the Upperworld and Underworld whose mystical geography he has traversed through training and trance. Frequently, although not always, his mastery comes from the use of sacred psychoactive plants, which serve both as a portal to other realms and as a source of transforming power or "soul stuff." With the concept of "transformation" so fundamental to this worldview, it is easy to see why sacred plants with the power to radically alter consciousness and provide direct access to these supernatural realms would be universally revered in ancient religions. Throughout prehistory the religions of our ancestors were shamanistic.

"But how does shamanism work?" Julie asked.

Seeing a puzzled look on Julie's face, I searched for an analogy.

"Imagine yourself," I replied, "as a Koryak reindeer herder living a nomadic existence in the endless boreal forest belt of Siberia. You live in a world without maps, compasses, or clocks and certainly without GPS. Season upon season you travel with your clan and reindeer herd through a seamless landscape of green and brown forests sometimes interrupted by the blues and grays of lakes and rivers. Then one day you watch your favorite reindeer nibble on a bright red-and-white mushroom that popped up out of the moist ground overnight. Suddenly, the reindeer begins to cavort about in a very un-reindeer-like fashion. You try the mushroom and soon find yourself transported through magical landscapes filled with talking spirits who instruct you how to live well and prosper."

Julie was listening intently as I asked her, "So what would you think about this world?"

"That it was showing me a spirit world that could help me thrive in the natural world," Julie replied.

“Precisely,” I agreed, “and that’s the point. For tribal peoples, these supernatural realms were accessed through the shamanic flight of the soul. It’s only within the context of shamanism that we can understand the true origins of Santa Claus.”

## Mushroom Rock Art of the Chukchi

Often overlooked and certainly overshadowed by Wasson’s cracking of the Soma code in the *Rigveda* is his equally surprising discovery of an ancient “Siberian fly-agaric complex” among the ancient indigenous peoples of the Arctic Circle. Peering deep into the wellsprings of time long before the Aryan invasion on the Indus Valley,\* Wasson traced the roots of Aryan worship of the Soma mushroom back some six thousand years to the semi-nomadic reindeer herders of Eurasia known to anthropologists as the fathers of shamanism. Today there remain some three hundred thousand reindeer herders divided into thirty ethnolinguistic groups.†

When Wasson published *Soma* in 1968, he had to rely on second-hand data derived from folk tales and linguistic analysis and on the first-hand accounts of “explorers, travelers, and anthropologists” who visited these remote regions as far back as the late eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> At that time he was unaware of recent Russian archaeological expeditions that had found iconic evidence—dramatic images etched in stone—of the use of psychoactive mushrooms among the ancient Chukchi.

During field expeditions in 1967 and 1968, Russian archaeologist N. N. Dikov discovered numerous mushroom and reindeer petroglyphs

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\*According to the widely accepted Aryan invasion theory, between the fourth and second centuries BCE, several migrations occurred involving different Proto-Indo-Aryan groups from the steppes of central Asia toward the alluvial plains and valleys of north-west India. However, academics continue to debate whether the Indo-Aryans invaded and assimilated the less sophisticated Indus Valley cultures, or whether the Indo-Aryans moved in as the superior Indus Valley civilization was in a state of decline, adopting their mythologies and technologies.

†They inhabit three far-flung, forest-belt regions of Russia and Scandinavia. Among them are the Lapps and Nenets in the Far West; the Ostyak, Samoyed, and Vogul of the central tundra and taiga zones; and the Chukchi, Koryak, and Kamchadal who live in the extreme Far East of Russia.

(rock carvings dating from 1000 BCE) on the banks of the Pegtymel River in the Far Eastern Chukotka region, located across the Bering Sea from Alaska.<sup>5</sup> These rock drawings graphically reflect the worldview of nomadic herders and their traditional shamanic practice of ingesting *Amanita muscaria*. Since that initial discovery, Russian researchers have identified more than two hundred similar compositions at rock art centers in northern Russian, mainly in areas inhabited by reindeer herders.<sup>6</sup>

The central images of these carvings are reindeer and an increasing number of “incomparable” anthropomorphic images of people, mainly women, wearing huge mushroom-shaped hats or, in another interpretation, dancing women with mushrooms hovering over or emanating from the crowns of their heads.

The northern region where these figures are found is one where fly agaric thrive.<sup>7</sup> In a later work, observing that these “doubtless” *Amanita muscaria* “mushrooms were much larger in scale than normal,” certainly when compared to the humanlike figures, Wasson concurs that this suggests “mushroom possession.” A common theme in these visions is the personification of the spirit (*wapaq*) of the mushroom as “little men or women.” The Koryak believe that the spirits residing in the fly agaric appear in the form of tiny mushroom folk who give instructions to the be-mushroomed person. One observer reports that among the Ob-Ungrians, “the mushroom eater enters the realm of the little people, talks with them, learns from them what he wishes to know—the future, the outlook for a sick person, etc.”<sup>8</sup>



*Fig. 3.1. Silhouette of Pegtymel petroglyphs, Chukotka, northeastern Russia, circa 1000 BCE (Illustration by Diego H. Black)*



## Santa, the Reindeer Shaman

“So are you saying that the story of Santa Claus originated with the reindeer herders?” Julie asked.

“Not at all,” I replied, “simply this: while most people think of Christmas in terms of the classic Christian holiday, the truth is that most of the symbols associated with Santa Claus are based on the religious traditions of pre-Christian Europe. In fact, every major meme of our modern myth of Santa Claus can be found in Wasson’s pioneering description of a Siberian fly agaric–reindeer culture.

“Convince me,” Julie insisted.

“Okay, I will,” I replied.

### *Flying Reindeer*

In *Soma*, Wasson notes that “reindeer have a passion for mushrooms and especially for the fly-agaric, on which they inebriate themselves. Reindeer have a passion for urine and especially human urine. (When the human urine is impregnated with fly-agaric, what regal cate is there, to be served to a favored reindeer!)”<sup>9</sup> In fact, some herders carry seal-skins filled with their own urine to lure stray reindeer back to the herd.

Reindeer have a seminal place in the lives of these semi-nomadic herders as the primary source of useful everyday articles and of spiritual significance. Practically, the reindeer provide transportation by sleigh, food and milk, clothing, shelter in the form of skins for yurts, tools, and many other necessities. Spiritually, flying reindeer serve as guides for shamans, transporting them through the spirit world. The hundreds of flying reindeer megaliths found in Siberia and Mongolia offer graphic representations of myths and legends about winged reindeer who transport their ecstatic riders up into the highest branches of the Cosmic Tree, universally revered by ancient peoples as the Tree of Life.

### *Christmas Tree as Cosmic Tree*

In addition to the nearly universal flood myth similar to the story of Noah in the Bible, many tribal cultures have a deep belief in a sacred Cosmic Tree. In the context of shamanism, this tree provides a cosmic

axis around which the three planes of the universe revolve. Its roots run deep into the Underworld, its trunk holds Middle Earth, and its branches reach skyward into the Upperworld.

The birch, pine, cedar, and fir trees play a conspicuous role among Siberian cultures and serve as the nodal points for shamanism. But it was Wasson who first pointed out that birches and evergreens play an essential role in the life cycle of the fly agaric. This is because fly agaric has a symbiotic relationship with these trees in that its invisible spores colonize the host trees' roots prior to the mushroom bursting into view aboveground as an early stage *Amanita muscaria*, wrapped in a pure white veil. As a result, tribespeople were amazed to witness how these mushrooms apparently sprang from the earth without any visible seeds in what appears to be a virgin birth.

Like the Cosmic Tree, the center point between heaven and earth, the North Star is also considered sacred. Among reindeer herders, it is also known as the "Immobile Star" or the "Pole Star," because all the stars in the heavens revolve around it. Thus today we symbolically place a star at the tippy-top of the Christmas tree, and for this reason Santa makes his home in the North Pole.

### *Santa, the Archetypal Shaman*

Our contemporary image of Santa Claus as a rotund, jolly, white-bearded fellow in a red suit (or robe) with white fir trim is a modern version of the archetypal Siberian mushroom shaman. In fact, even today some Siberian male shamans and female mushroom gatherers still dress in ceremonial red-and-white trimmed jackets when they go to gather the sacred mushrooms. The biochemical effects of Soma are most pleasant and transformative when the mushrooms are dried before consumption. For this reason, the shaman initially hangs the fresh fungi to dry in the branches of pine trees (like the colorful ornaments that decorate the Christmas tree).

After the mushroom harvest is complete, the shaman collects his gifts in a sack and places them on his sleigh, which a team of reindeer pulls back to his yurt (Santa's sleigh full of toys, pulled by flying reindeer). A yurt is the nomad's teepee-like dwelling typically made out of birch branches and

reindeer hides. In winter, snow drifts can cover the yurt's main entrance, so the shaman enters through the smoke hole at the top (Santa coming down the chimney) to deliver his gifts to appreciative clan members. To further dry the mushrooms, they string them up around the fireplace, and in the morning they awaken to a ritual feast of dried magic mushrooms (Christmas gifts placed in stockings over the fireplace). Once they ingest the mushrooms, the celebrants leave the physical plane and are transported to the mystical realms of the Cosmic Tree, guided by spirits that live within the mushrooms (Santa's helpers, elves that live in the North Pole).

All of these Christmas themes include the image of Santa Claus: the Christmas tree, the flying reindeer pulling Santa's sleigh, Santa coming down the chimney, the exchange of gifts—even the elves who live in Santa's workshop at the North Pole.

Dusk was falling as we started to walk back around the lake toward the inn. The Santa Claus conversation had sparked Julie's inquisitiveness. "What about the Christian Saint Nicolas?"

"To be sure, religious historians argue that many saints were simply Christian versions of earlier pagan gods, adapted by the church to encourage heathens to accept the new religion of Rome. It is said that Saint Nicholas's legends were created mainly out of folk tales about the Teutonic god Hold Nickar, a malevolent water spirit who tips over boats and torments sailors, or even about *Alte Hoerner*, which stands for 'Old Horney.'

Julie smiled at the sexual reference to Santa Claus.

"No, no, it's not what you're thinking. In old German, *Alte Hoerner* literally means 'old horned one' and in this case the 'ancient horned god,' referring to the headdress of reindeer antlers worn by Eurasian shamans. Later on, when pagan deities were demonized by the medieval church under Pope Gregory, the horned god of shamanism became the devil of Christianity. And 'Santa' became 'Satan.'"

### "Rings of Smoke through the Trees"

"Look, look around us!" whispered Julie. A low-hanging cloud was slowly creeping through the woods, completely encircling us in a ring of



*Fig. 3.2. Earliest-known depiction of a Siberian shaman, produced by the Dutch explorer Nicolaes Witsen, who authored an account of his travels among Samoyedic- and Tungusic-speaking peoples in 1692. Witsen labeled the illustration Priest of the Devil and gave this figure clawed feet to highlight what he perceived as demonic qualities.<sup>10</sup>*

ghostly white gossamer. The mist moved silent as cat paws, covering the ground and the trunks of the trees in a blanket of clouds. The tops of trees stood bare, silhouetted against the gun-metal sky and the fading sun, silent sentinels of the forest.

“Jer,” Julie spoke, in hushed tones, “this is unearthly. All evening, we’ve been talking about the way of the shaman, portals between the worlds, about how all things are alive with spirit.”

“Look,” I said, patiently, “just because this rare cloud rolls in just as we were discussing shamanism doesn’t mean there’s a connection. You can’t prove that; no one can.”

“No, I can’t prove it,” Julie spoke quietly, “but think about what’s happened today! We came to the mountains for vacation, and I met Sircus, an albino, *Amanita*-loving reindeer, who walks up to me and peers into my soul. We spend the evening talking about mystical realms. And now all around us the forest is alive, as if the living spirit of nature

was welcoming us to the world of the shaman . . . affirming our decision to retrace Wasson's steps."

I was about to object, but just then these lines from Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" ran through my head: "There's a feeling I get when I look to the west/ And my spirit is crying for leaving. In my thoughts I have seen rings of smoke through the trees/ And the voices of those who stand looking. Ooh, it makes me wonder/ Ooh, it really makes me wonder."

We stood silently in the middle of the mist-filled forest, wondering what the future would bring. At our next stop in Greece, the cradle of Western civilization, we walked among the monumental ruins of Eleusis, where rituals involving entheogens had been practiced for two thousand years.



# 4

## Eleusinian Mysteries

Greece—1500 BCE

In 339 BCE, Socrates was condemned to death by a jury of his peers for corrupting the youth and impiety. The charges of impiety included “failing to acknowledge” the deities of Athens and “introducing new deities.”

Think about this! Socrates was the first of the triumvirate of intellectual giants (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle) who established the foundations of Western philosophy. It was Socrates who gave us the Socratic method, which Aristotle acknowledged as the essence of the scientific method. It is therefore very puzzling that this same Socrates should be condemned for being a freethinker in fourth-century Athens—a thriving city-state that, during the democratic Age of Pericles, valued individual liberty and free speech over authority. What was the real reason behind this charge of “impiety” brought against Socrates, a charge so serious that the famed philosopher ultimately accepted the guilty verdict and carried out his own death sentence by voluntarily drinking the hemlock?

The real reason involved an entheogen. This entheogen was the psychoactive “mixed potion” drunk by the initiates who participated in the Eleusinian Mysteries of ancient Greece. These rites were held annually at Eleusis, located fourteen miles west of Athens, in honor of Demeter,

goddess of grain and the harvest. Upon “pain of death,” no one, neither slave nor landowner, was permitted to break their oath to never reveal what they saw, heard, and were taught at the Mysteries. How solemnly did Athenians hold to this oath? So solemnly that Socrates’s disciple Alcibiades was recalled from his generalship in the middle of a Sicilian military campaign to face charges of “profaning the mysteries.” At that point, Alcibiades fled to Sparta.

In a satirical comedy titled *The Birds*, the Greek playwright Aristophanes portrays Socrates in the company of psychoactive plants while performing necromancy (the ritual of summoning the spirits of the dead). This is one of several artistic references that shows that Socrates was also profaning the Mysteries, and that, like Alcibiades and others, he was treating the “forbidden Mystery ceremony as a private social event for the entertainment of their dinner guests.” This literary analysis confirms the novel hypothesis by Wasson and his co-researchers that “interpreted the Eleusinian Mysteries as communal shamanic ceremonies involving the ingestion of drugs.”<sup>1</sup>

Looking through “Soma eyes,” Wasson revisited the sources of classical Greek archaeology, literature, and herbalism. They revealed a thirty-five-hundred-year-old secret hidden in the mute stones and statues at the archaeological site of Eleusis. Wasson’s research identified the mysterious potion, the *kykeon*, that was consumed by the participants at the highest stage of the initiation as containing a psychoactive, LSD-like ergot, *Claviceps purpurea*, a parasitic fungal growth found on rye, barley, wheat, and wild grasses. This miniscule mushroom sprouts on the stalks of rye and barley that grow wild on the Rarian plain adjacent Eleusis. After consuming this libation, which was distributed by priestesses in the *telesterion*, the inner sanctuary at Eleusis, the initiates would return home “nobler in spirit, contented, less fearful of death, and with raised hopes of a better life.”<sup>2</sup>

### “No One Knows”

It was a blazing hot summer day when Julie and I climbed the broad marble steps of the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. But

we were oblivious to the heat. With a dog-eared paperback version of Wasson's work *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries* as our guide, we were giddy with anticipation. Today Julie and I would see firsthand the archaeological masterpieces of Eleusis.

Just as we reached the top of the steps, a distinguished-looking man stepped out from behind a massive Ionic column where he had taken refuge from the sun. He wore a short-sleeved white shirt and linen pants. His black and silver glasses matched his curly hair. He exuded an air of authority as he approached us.

"Hello, my name is Nicholas. Would you like a guided tour of the museum?" he asked in flawless English delivered with a sycophantic smile.

"No, thank you," Julie replied, glancing briefly at me, "we know what we are looking for."

Taken aback, Nicholas took a deep breath, opened his palms in an expression of sincerity, and parried, "Madam, I have been guiding tourists through this museum for more than twenty years. I can show you treasures of Greek history that few people know about."

"Sorry, but we don't need a guide today," Julie said as she turned and walked away.

"Why did you say that we know what we're looking for?" I whispered in her ear as we entered the museum.

"I don't know. He gave me a creepy feeling, and I just wanted to get rid of him," Julie replied.

Inside the museum, we walked briskly past the treasures of Greek antiquity, barely pausing to glance at the golden Mask of Agamemnon, the Aphrodite of Cindus, or even the magnificent bronze statue of Zeus hurling a thunderbolt. We finally stopped before the Great Eleusinian Relief that filled the wall before us.

We studied the goddess Demeter, on the left, as she bids farewell to the naked Triptolemus, king of Eleusis, who prepares to leave on his mission to teach men how to cultivate the soil and grow grain, in accordance with her instructions. On the right, her daughter, Persephone, holds a pine torch and also bids Triptolemus farewell.

"What do you think Persephone might have been holding over his head?" Julie asked, trying to make out the damaged portion of the stone





*Fig. 4.1. Authors at the Great Eleusinian Relief of Demeter, Persephone, and Triptolemus*

relief. “And over there, it looks like Demeter was placing something into Triptolemus’s palm. What could that be?”

“I don’t know, but let’s try to find out from the curator,” I replied. I was immediately reminded of Julie’s fine eye for visual details, and how she’d noticed the statues missing from the niches of the stained-glass windows at Rosslyn.

As we turned to stand in front of the relief so that a friendly tourist could take our picture, I noticed that Nicholas was also in the hall, snapping a photo of us. He quickly pointed his camera in another direction and scurried out of the room.

“I think he’s following us,” I whispered to Julie.

“That would be strange.” she said. “Let’s go find that gorgeous vase.”

The National Archaeological Museum is an imposing neoclassic building housing five permanent collections. The Vases and Minor Arts collection occupies seven exhibition halls documenting the evolution of Greek pottery and vases from the eleventh to fourth century BCE. Again, we hurried back in time through the Hellenistic period and finally stopped in the Classical Era, the time of the Peloponnesian War of 431 to 404 BCE.

“Here it is!” said Julie, pausing before the delicate pale peach-colored *lekythos*. “Look, there’s Triptolemus again, this time wearing regal robes and a crown, standing before Demeter. See, he’s bringing stalks of grain to Demeter, who in turn is pouring the sacred potion.”

“And look how Triptolemus’s staff separates the two figures, man and goddess, into distinct realms,” I pointed out. “It’s amazing how Greek mythology depicts mortal men and immortal gods interacting with each other, as if it were an ordinary occurrence.”

At the museum bookstore the salesperson told us that they had never carried any of Wasson’s work and pleasantly directed us to the office of the curator who oversaw the exhibition hall with the Great Eleusinian Relief. To our surprise, she had never even heard of Wasson’s work, nor was she aware that anything was missing from the relief. In response to our suggestion that the *kykeon* could have contained a hallucinogen, the curator simply smiled and firmly informed us, “As to the secret of the Mysteries, there have been many theories over the years, but in reality no one knows. It remains a great mystery.”

*Fig. 4.2.*  
 Lekythos (vase)  
 showing crowned  
 Triptolemus  
 and Demeter,  
 450–435 BCE,  
 National  
 Archaeological  
 Museum, Athens  
 (Photo by  
 Julie M. Brown)



When we finally exited the museum, Nicholas, who apparently had been following us, came up and smiled at us, offering his hand in a gesture of friendship.

“Did you find what you were looking for in Eleusis? There are so many magnificent treasures here, but I noticed you only stopped at the Eleusinian relief and *lekythos* of Demeter and Triptolemus. Why so interested?” Nicolas persisted.

“We really don’t have time now, we are going to meet a friend for lunch,” Julie said.

“Then why don’t we meet tomorrow to have a cup of coffee? I have something you’ll be very interested in,” Nicolas offered.

“Thank you, but we are planning to leave Athens tomorrow,” I said, wanting to get rid of him. “But it was nice meeting you.”

On our walk back to the Athens’ metro, Julie and I discussed our encounter with Nicholas. I told Julie that I was concerned about why he followed us around and took our photo and about what he really wanted. That evening, from the rooftop patio of our hotel, we gazed up at the Acropolis, which was brilliantly lit, looking like the skeleton of a gigantic fossil against a dark blue evening sky. There we planned the next day’s trip to Eleusis.

### Homeric Hymn to Demeter

According to the Homeric Hymn to Demeter,\* composed around 600 BCE, Hades, brother of Zeus, seized Demeter’s beautiful daughter, Persephone, and carried her away to his realm in the Underworld to be his bride. The hymn begins with the following supplication: “Let me tell you the story of Demeter, the holy goddess whose hair grew in rich plaits as only a goddess’s does, and of her daughter, whom Hades seized. Zeus, the thunder god, gave her to him. This is how it happened.”<sup>3</sup>

As Persephone gathered flowers with the daughters of the goddess Ocean, Earth brought forth the narcissus to tempt the girl. The narcissus plant was irresistible, “smelling a smell so sweet that the whole broad sky and all the earth laughed.” As Persephone reached out with both hands to take this marvelous flower, “the earth gaped open and Lord Hades, whom we all will meet, burst forth with his immortal horses into the Nysian plain, and carried her off.” Persephone shrieked the shrill cry of a maenad, so loudly that “the mountains resounded with her immortal voice, and the depths of the sea, until at last her mother heard her cries.”

Demeter threw a great black cloak over her shoulders to disguise her Olympian identity from mortals and searched heaven and earth for her precious daughter. Distraught, she came to the town of Eleusis, where the daughters of Celeus offered her hospitality. There Demeter removed

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\*This hymn was not composed by Homer but is referred to as “Homeric” because it was written in the style of Homer, the author of *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey*.

her cloak, revealed herself as an Olympian goddess, and ordered Celeus to build a temple for her on a mound above the Kallichoron Well outside the city wall.

Angry at gods and men alike, Demeter, goddess of the harvest, shut herself up in the temple and brought a great famine on the land, causing men to suffer and to cease their sacrifices to the gods. This caused Zeus to intercede with his brother Hades to allow Persephone to return to the Upperworld for half of each year. According to Greek myth, this is the reason we have spring and summer when Persephone is above-ground and Demeter rejoices, and fall and winter when she is again belowground and Demeter laments. Appeased at last, Demeter made the land fruitful again and out of gratitude for their hospitality taught the Eleusinians the cultivation of grain to improve their prosperity. After making the fruit and grain spring up again, Demeter bestowed august gifts upon rulers of Eleusis. As recounted in the closing passages of the Hymn to Demeter:

To them she showed the performance of her rites and taught her Mysteries . . . holy rites that are awesome, that no one may transgress nor reveal nor express in words, for an overwhelming reverence for the gods stops his voice. Whoever among men who walk the earth has seen these Mysteries is blessed, but whoever is uninitiated and has not received his share of the rite, he will not have the same lot as the others once he is dead and dwells in the mould where the sun goes down.<sup>4</sup>

The Eleusinian Mysteries are unique among religious cults for two reasons. First, the Eleusinian Mysteries, which began as a local cult of Demeter in Eleusis, soon evolved under the patronage of Athens into a Pan-Hellenic institution and ultimately gained universal recognition under the Roman Empire. Second, the Eleusinian Mysteries, a religious ritual revolving around a sacred psychoactive potion, were practiced at Eleusis without interruption for nearly two thousand years, from 1500 BCE to 379, until the crowning of Christianity as the official religion of Rome led to the destruction of the cult and the desecration of Eleusis.

## Unveiling the Mysteries

Back at our hotel that evening, Julie and I pored over our tattered copy of *The Road to Eleusis*.

I explained to Julie that in researching this book, Wasson collaborated with two distinguished colleagues to solve the puzzle of the Mysteries. The first was Albert Hofmann, the Swiss pharmacologist renowned for his 1943 discovery of LSD and also for his encyclopedic knowledge of plant alkaloids. The second was Greek scholar Carl A. P. Ruck, who had made significant contributions to the often overlooked area of Greek ethnobotany.

To Hofmann, Wasson posed a challenging question: “whether Early Man in ancient Greece could have hit on a method to isolate an hallucinogen from ergot that would have given him an experience comparable to LSD or psilocybin.” After two years of research, Hofmann was able to answer Wasson’s question in the affirmative:

The answer is yes, Early Man in ancient Greece could have arrived at an hallucinogen from ergot. He might have done this from ergot growing on wheat or barley. An easier way would have been to use the ergot growing on the common wild grass *Paspalum*.<sup>5</sup>

In analyzing ergots of wheat and barley in his Swiss laboratory, Hofmann found that they contained the alkaloids of the ergonovine group and traces of lysergic acid amide (a less potent relative of LSD), both psychoactive. Since these alkaloids are water soluble, they were prime candidates for the consciousness-expanding components of the potion consumed at Eleusis, which, we know from the Hymn to Demeter, were prepared from barley, water, and mint. It takes no great leap of logic to assume that the wild barley found on the Rarian plain, located adjacent to Eleusis, in the second millennium BCE was host to an ergot-containing, water-soluble hallucinogenic alkaloid.

Ruck’s assignment was even more daunting: to scrutinize classical Greek mythology, poetry, and literature in search of hints as to what took place behind the fortress-like gates of Eleusis that protected the

sacred rites from profane eyes. “Ancient writers unanimously agree that something was seen in the great *telesterion* or initiation hall within the sanctuary. . . . The experience was a vision whereby the pilgrim became someone who saw, an *epoptes*.”

As Ruck argues, it was a powerful, unforgettable vision. “Eyes had never before seen the like, and apart from the formal prohibition against telling what had happened, the experience itself was incommunicable, for there are no words adequate to the task.” Nevertheless, Ruck’s translations provide a window into the wonder expressed by ancient Greeks of high intellect—Pindar the poet, Sophocles the tragedian, and Plato the philosopher—who all testified to the overwhelming value of the rites. As Pindar wrote, “Blessed is he who, having seen these rites, undertakes the way beneath the Earth. He knows the end of life, as well as its divinely granted beginning.” To which Aelius Aristides added that Eleusis was “both the most awesome and the most luminous of all the divine things that exist among men.”

### Trapped in the *Telesterion*

The day after exploring the National Archaeological Museum we hired a driver to take us to Eleusis (see fig. 4.3). There in the modest exhibition hall we saw the votive relief depicting the departure of Triptolemus, a clay *kernos* vessel, and a large statue of the upper part of a Kore maiden, which served as a pillar supporting the roof of the entrance to the sanctuary (see plate 2). The hall also featured a model of the *telesterion*, the Eleusinian sanctuary, and a diachronic map of the excavated remains of the archaeological site.

Following our visit to the exhibition hall, Julie and I fought the heat and ambled slowly down the long, sloping hill to the sprawling archaeological site, stopping in the spacious ruins of the *telesterion*. It was here in this once regal sanctuary that the events surrounding the lives of Demeter and Persephone were reenacted and the faithful initiated into the heart of the Mysteries.

As we gazed on the rows of worn stone seats that bordered the sanctuary on all sides, we imagined the hierophants ceremoniously removing





*Fig. 4.3. Archaeological remains of the Eleusinian sanctuary, view of the Greater Propylaea (main entrance during the Roman period), Attica, Greece (Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

the *kernos* vessels carrying the sacred potion from the inner sanctuary. In the candlelit darkness they conveyed the vessels to the stately “kernos-bearers,” priestesses who danced in flowing white robes with the vessels on their heads. After the hierophants began drinking, the initiates followed, listening to the chanting, waiting for the moment of revelation and for “a vision unmistakably induced by what had been drunk.”

As Julie and I stood there contemplating the majesty of this mass *ekstasis*, this collective flight of the soul, I glanced up toward the Eleusis museum. I was taken aback to see Nicolas striding toward us, followed by two tourists. Julie took my hand, concerned that we were now trapped in the *telesterion* with the Greek guide we had tried to avoid the day before.

As Nicolas approached, he turned to the couple and said, “*Schauen Sie bitte herum, während ich mit diesen Amerikanern spreche.*” Having



spent a college year abroad in Germany, I understood well enough to whisper to Julie, “He’s sending them off to look around while he talks to us.”

“So, my friends,” Nicolas said, his voice dripping with sarcasm, “what a surprise to run into you again. I thought you were leaving today.”

“We were planning to, but the treasures we saw yesterday inspired us to visit Eleusis instead,” I said somewhat apologetically.

“No matter. I was intrigued to hear that you’ve found the key to the Mysteries, that you agree with that American mushroom-hunter Wasson,” Nicolas said sternly, obviously in no mood to beat around the bush.

“Why would you think that?” asked Julie, tightening her grip on the knapsack she carried with Wasson’s book inside.

“Tsk, tsk,” replied Nicolas, softening his tone. “Let’s talk frankly. After you left the National Museum yesterday, I spoke to my friend, the curator, who told me you had inquired about Gordon Wasson’s claims to have solved the secret of the Mysteries.”

Oh no, I thought to myself, this could be bad. “Have you read Wasson? Do you know his work?” I asked, trying to appear calm.

“Of course I have,” Nicolas replied condescendingly. “It is my business to know everything there is to know about Greek history and archaeology. Look, I don’t know if you are scholars or simply tourists, but please, think about what you’ll be doing if you spread these vicious lies about our sacred Mysteries.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Think about the scandal!” Nicholas exclaimed. “An amateur American mycologist suddenly solves one of the great Mysteries of Greek history—a mystery that has eluded Greek and European archaeologists for centuries. And, to add insult to injury, he claims that the greatest intellects of ancient Greece, from Socrates to Plato, were deceived by a drug-induced vision right on this very spot. In addition to damaging Greek history, have you considered the possibility that this drug theory could hurt tourism? After all, people love mysteries, especially ancient ones. I implore you to preserve our Mysteries.”

Before I could stop her, Julie spoke up. “But isn’t the truth important . . . isn’t it exactly what we should be writing about, what you should be telling visitors to Eleusis?”

Whoops, wrong answer, I thought to myself, as I stepped between Julie and Nicolas. But it was too late.

“Truth? You want the truth?” Nicolas said, raising his voice. “America and Europe are waging a war on drugs, and if Wasson’s wild ideas ever get widely publicized, everyone who has ever visited Eleusis will think we Greeks deceived them by covering up this drug cult.”

“No, no, it’s not that way,” I protested. “They were not mere drugs. They were windows to the gods. What happened here, in this very temple, was unprecedented in human history. You Greeks created a holy rite that endured for two thousand years—a ritual that opened a pathway through which God could enter human consciousness, giving the ancient Athenians a direct experience of divinity and an unshakable connection with the cosmos. Isn’t that what’s been lost for centuries, what so many people longing for spirituality are seeking today? Isn’t that why spiritual tourism is on the rise? Why, telling the truth about the Mysteries could even help your business. It could bring more tourists to Eleusis than ever.”

“Enough,” said Nicolas. “I understand what you are saying, but I don’t agree. You Americans are so optimistic, while we Greeks have a bittersweet sense of history. After all, we invented tragedy.”

“But,” I beseeched Nicholas, appealing to his Greek pride, “look at the magnificent creation you Greeks built here in honor of Demeter and the gods and goddesses of Olympus.”

“Unfortunately,” Nicholas replied, with a sweeping gesture of his arm toward the ruins of Eleusis, “whatever gods were here are long since gone.” After an uncomfortable silence, Nicholas spoke again. “Here come my German clients, so I must say goodbye. But please, think about what I said.”

Julie and I did not speak during the half-hour ride back to our hotel in Athens. Along the way, I recalled Winston Churchill’s quote, “The Balkan peoples are loaded with more history than they can bear.” Now I understood that this especially applied to the Greeks, in spades.

## Escape from Athens

In the morning, we packed our bags and left on the ferry from Piraeus, the port of Athens, to the island of Rhodes just off the coast of Turkey. Up on the deck I relished the refreshing sea breeze blowing through my hair. Plowing through the waves, cloaked in a mantle of anonymity, I contemplated the enormity of what we had seen at Eleusis and the hostility expressed toward Wasson's discoveries.

Here in the cradle of Western civilization was an elaborate ritual that had been celebrated continuously for two millennia. This was no remote Siberian mushroom rite. This was a Pan-Hellenic religious ceremony involving thousands of initiates, gathered in a resplendent marble sanctuary whose elegant ruins still stand today. This was no invocation of obscure Arctic mushroom spirits but an epic ritual conducted in praise of Demeter, one of the original inhabitants of Mount Olympus, home of the gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon.

Yet despite these dramatic differences in scale and theatrics, Siberian shamans and Greek initiates shared a common Eucharist and theology. Both used entheogenic mushrooms as a sacred sacrament, given by the gods to bring about the flight of the soul and transcendence of mortality, melting the division between earth and sky into a pillar of light. So affirms this inscription found at Eleusis: "Beautiful indeed is the mystery given us by the blessed gods: death is for mortals no longer an evil, but a blessing."

When Julie came up on deck she slipped her arm through mine. We stood there, gazing into the distance, silently bobbing up and down to the rhythm of the sea. After a while Julie spoke.

"So tell me, why do you think the curator at the National Museum didn't know about Wasson's work on Eleusis?" she asked. "After all, it's so well researched."

"It was Ruck who pointed out that the original English edition of *The Road to Eleusis* was quickly removed from the market shortly after publication in 1978, and that the book elicited absolutely no interest among his colleagues. As an academic, perhaps Ruck endured a fate worse than harsh criticism: the utter silence of the classicists who

ignored his research or in some cases conspired surreptitiously behind the walls of the ivory tower to suppress it. As Ruck reports in the twentieth-anniversary edition of *The Road to Eleusis*, ‘Students who work with me have been warned that they will be blacklisted.’<sup>6</sup>

“Wait a minute,” Julie said. “How widespread is this academic taboo against studying psychoactive plants in ancient Greece?”

“Well, there’s one classics professor, Hillman, who argues that the widespread use of psychotropic plants in ancient Greece and Rome has been covered up for the past fifteen hundred years!<sup>7</sup> D. C. A. Hillman’s work is unique in that it presents ample historical documentation, not only for the use of medicinal drugs, but also for the recreational and religious use of plants and fungi. It presents a Who’s Who of the great minds of Western civilization who explored psychoactive drug use, including Hippocrates and Galen in medicine, Homer, Virgil, and Ovid in literature, Plato in philosophy, and Pythagoras in mathematics.

Given the hostility to Wasson’s ideas that we encountered in Greece, Julie and I were not at all surprised by this conclusion that most scholars of ancient history had been ignoring entheogens for centuries. Instead, the big surprise was waiting half a world away, when we followed Wasson into the heart of indigenous Mexico. There we were appalled to see the darker side of R. Gordon Wasson emerge, as this brilliant researcher turned into a ruthless self-promoter who single-handedly destroyed one of the world’s last living mushroom cults.

# 5

## María Sabina and the Little Saints

Mexico–1955

It was when death's icy fingers threatened her sister's life that the holy mushrooms called to María Sabina, telling her to become a Wise Woman in the tradition of her indigenous Mazatec ancestors of the state of Oaxaca in southern Mexico. And it was when Wasson wrote a magazine article in 1957 about his mushroom ceremony with María



*Fig. 5.1. State of  
Oaxaca, Mexico  
(Illustration by  
Diego H. Black)*

Sabina that she became the most famous shaman of the twentieth century.

Several years after María Sabina became a widow, her sister María Ana took sick. She was bleeding internally and sharp stabs of pain in her stomach caused her to lose consciousness. María Sabina contacted various curers, people who heal with herbs, but to no avail. Fearing her only sister would die, María Sabina decided to take the “holy mushrooms,” known among the Mazatec as “little saints” and “saint children.” María Sabina had eaten them as a child to assuage hunger. She knew they did no harm and had miraculous powers because she’d seen Mazatec shaman use them to heal sickness.

That same night María Sabina took the holy mushrooms, which are eaten in pairs. She gave her sister three pairs. “I ate many in order for them to give me immense power. I can’t lie. I must have eaten thirty pairs of the ‘landslide’ variety.”<sup>1</sup> With the saint children guiding her, she spoke eloquently, healing her sister with their words and instructions. “I went on pressing my sister, her stomach and her hips. Finally a lot of blood came out. Water and blood as if she were giving birth. I didn’t get frightened because I knew that the *Little-One-Who-Springs-Forth* was curing her through me.”\* In time, the bleeding stopped, and her sister recovered.

María Sabina could not sleep that night. She had an illuminating vision that anointed her as a Mazatec shaman of the highest order. In that vision, people appeared before her, people María Sabina knew were not of this earthly plane. She heard a voice, a loving fatherly voice that said, “These are the Principal Ones.” On the table in front of the Principal Ones was a book, an open book that began growing and growing until it was the size of a person. As María Sabina tells us:

The Book was before me. I could see it but not touch it. I tried to caress it but my hands didn’t touch anything. I limited myself to

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\*All quotes by María Sabina in this chapter are from an English translation of her oral autobiography (*María Sabina: Selections*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg), as written in her native language by her fellow Mazatec Alvaro Estrada.

contemplating it and, at that moment, I began to speak. Then I realized that I was reading the Sacred Book of Language. My Book. The Book of the Principal Ones. I had attained perfection.<sup>2</sup>

Although unlettered in Mazatec, María Sabina could comprehend the wisdom contained in the book. She knew she had found her path. The Mazatec in her community understood how difficult it was to cure her sister. Now they brought their sick to María Sabina for curing: those who were ill; those who had lost their spirit. Unlike Mazatec sorcerers who use spells to heal and curers who use herbs to heal, María Sabina had become a Wise Woman who heals through the language of the little saints. But as María Sabina lamented, with the coming of R. Gordon Wasson, “my path to wisdom would soon be cut off.”<sup>3</sup>

### Wasson Archives at Harvard

From 1975 to 1976, Álvaro Estrada, a fellow Mazatec speaker, engaged María Sabina in a series of recorded conversations, which were translated into English and Spanish. These recordings became the basis for her “oral autobiography,” which gives us a rare record of the life of a modern shaman. It is only through this collaboration that we are able to capture the unfiltered story of María Sabina, who became a legend in her own time. It is only through Estrada’s work that we are able to pierce through the hyperbole—“the greatest visionary poet of Latin America in the twentieth century”<sup>4</sup>—and find the human being who chose a humble life of sacrifice and service to her people. But how could we trace the tracks of Wasson’s encounters with María Sabina as the first white outsider to participate in her all-night, candlelit healing ceremonies, known as *veladas*?

Fortunately, there was one prestigious place in the United States where we could find everything that Wasson had ever researched and written on María Sabina—not only books, but field notes, recordings, diaries, and photographs as well. That was the Tina and R. Gordon Wasson Ethnomycological Collection Archives (Wasson



Fig. 5.2. Valentina and Gordon Wasson review notes on the morning after eating sacred mushrooms, Oaxaca, Mexico, July 1955. (Courtesy of the Tina & R. Gordon Wasson Ethnomycological Collection Archives)

Archives), housed at the Harvard University Herbarium in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

During expeditions to Mexico beginning in 1953, Gordon and his wife Valentina (Tina) participated in the Mazatec Indians' sacred mushroom rituals. After Tina's death in 1958, Gordon published their Mexican investigations, including *María Sabina and Her Mazatec Mushroom Velada* (1974), followed by *The Wondrous Mushroom: Mycolatry in Mesoamerica* (1980).

Upon entering the wood-paneled library of the Wasson Archives in the stately red-brick building of the herbarium, Julie and I were greeted by Lisa DeCesare, the cheerful and helpful head of the archives. Every day during our visit, Lisa would bring us cataloged cartons containing Wasson's correspondence. Every day Lisa wore a different outfit decorated with colorful hallucinogenic mushrooms. Julie and I pored over the books and the correspondence, some dating as far back as 1945,



wishing we could spend the entire summer among these treasures of ethnomycology.

But, to our surprise, the more we learned about Wasson's dealings with María Sabina, the more disenchanted we became with him.

## God of the Flowery Dream

María Sabina was following a Mazatec shamanic tradition similar to the one practiced by Aztecs more than four hundred years ago at the time of the Spanish Conquest.<sup>5</sup> We know this historically from the rich pharmacopoeia of Aztec entheogens and medicinal plants described by the Spanish chroniclers and Catholic missionaries. We know this artistically from the colorful pictorial codices and stone figurines and statues found throughout Mesoamerica.

Undoubtedly, the most spectacular of these statues is the sixteenth-century, life-size carving of Xochipilli,\* whose name, in the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs, means “prince of flowers.” In 1973, Wasson suggested, that the Aztecs used “flowers” as a metaphor for sacred hallucinogenic plants.† Both the statue and the base upon which it sits are covered in carvings of entheogenic plants, including psilocybin mushrooms and morning glory.<sup>6</sup> Wasson eloquently describes the unique mask worn by Xochipilli and the mood it conveys:

In our statue the mask portrays a god living in ecstasy and does so with the power of genius. Here is one who is not seeing, not living as ordinary mortals see and live, who is seeing direct with the eyes of the soul. This being is not with us, is in a far-off world. He is

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\*This statue is currently on display in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. It was probably carved a century before the arrival of the Spanish. The statue was discovered in the mid-nineteenth century on the side of the Popocatepetl volcano in the mountains surrounding Mexico City, which was founded on the site of Tenochtitlan, the former Aztec capital.

†These plants are *Psilocybe aztecorum*, tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*), *ololiúqui* (*Turbina corymbosa*), *sinicuichi* (*Heimia salicifolia*), possibly *cacahuaxochitl* (*Quararibea funebris*), and one unidentified flower.

absorbed by *temicxoch*, “dream flowers” [see plate 3] as the Nahua say, describing the awesome experience that follows the ingestion of an entheogen. I can think of nothing like it in the long and rich history of European art: Xochipilli absorbed in *temicxoch*.<sup>7</sup>

In lofty language reminiscent of the Hindu *Rigveda*'s poetic description of Soma, the Aztecs called the psychoactive mushrooms engraved on Xochipilli's body *teonanácatl*, or “flesh of the gods” (*teo* = divine, god; *nácatl* = food, flesh). These psilocybin mushrooms were well known throughout the Aztec Empire and today are widely used by the Mazatec in a seamless fusion of Aztec and Christian imagery.

After the Principal Ones appeared to her, María Sabina tells us, “Sometime later I knew that the mushrooms were like God. That they gave wisdom, that they cured illness, and that our people since a long time ago had eaten them. That they had power, that they were the blood of Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

## I Am a Lord Eagle Woman

Until the arrival of Wasson, María Sabina was revered in her community. She was descended from a long line of Mazatec shamans, which included her grandfather, great-grandfather, great aunt, and uncle. María Sabina quickly came to understand that the mushrooms were omniscient. She tells us, “The mushrooms give me the power of universal contemplation. I can see from the origin. I can arrive where the world is born.” Through all of the hardships and suffering María Sabina faced, including an abusive husband and the murder of her son, the mushrooms sustained her. As she tells us:

Years later, when I became a widow for the second time, I gave myself up for always to wisdom, in order to cure the sickness of people and to be myself always close to God. One should respect the little mushrooms. At bottom I feel they are my family. As if they were my parents, my blood. In truth I was born

with my destiny. To be a Wise Woman. To be a daughter of the *saint children*.<sup>9</sup>

During the healing ceremonies, it was not María Sabina who spoke; it was the mushrooms who spoke through her. Thus, the ubiquitous phrase “says” in the following chant stands for “mushroom says,” affirming that the mushroom is orating:

*Our shooting star woman, says*  
*Our shooting star woman, says*  
*Our whirling woman of colors, says*  
*Our woman of the fields, says*  
*Ah, our Jesus Christ, says*  
*Our woman santo, says*  
*Our woman santo, says*  
*Our woman santa, says*  
*Our woman of light, says*  
*Our woman santo, says*  
*Our spirit woman, says*  
*Ah, our Jesus Christ, says*  
*Our spirit woman, says*  
*Our woman of light, says*  
*I am a spirit woman, says*  
*I am a woman of light, says*  
*I am a woman of the day, says*  
*I am a clean woman, says*  
*I am a lord eagle woman, says*  
*Ah, our Jesus Christ, says*<sup>10</sup>

During the healing ceremonies, María Sabina’s sonorous chants would resonate throughout the darkness, filling the room with tender and plaintive music. Recalling his first *velada* with María Sabina, Wasson describes how “in our very presence a priestess of the old religion was pronouncing oracular dictates in spurts, hot and firm with authority.”<sup>11</sup>

## New World Migrations

As Julie and I left the Wasson Archives and walked through Harvard Yard on the way to lunch, we passed the famous bronze statue that bears the inscription “John Harvard, Founder, 1638.”\* There we watched a Chinese freshman carry out the tradition of rubbing John Harvard’s left foot for good luck. Years of rubbing have made the toe shine like gold. As we continued across the yard, Julie noticed that nearly every other student we saw was Asian.

“This is the second great Asian migration to the New World,” I remarked, as we turned onto Quincy Street and settled into the booth of a cozy pub.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “When was the first one?”

“It ended around fifteen thousand years ago, when the glaciers melted and sea levels rose, covering the Bering land bridge that once connected Siberia with Alaska.† Before that happened, hunting and gathering bands from northeastern Asia, including clans of reindeer herders, migrated across the land bridge. Over time, they settled nearly everywhere in the New World from the Arctic Circle to the tip of Tierra del Fuego in Argentina.”

“Are you saying that the Aztecs and Mazatecs are descendants of reindeer herders?” Julie asked, somewhat incredulous.

“Well, yes, for example, these prehistoric Asiatic migrants practiced a form of shamanism that utilized sacred psychoactive plants,” I replied.

“If entheogen use was so widespread, how come there’s no Soma mushroom carved on the Aztec god of the flowery dream?” Julie asked.

“Ah,” I explained, “that’s because Soma thrives only in the northern temperate climates of North America; it does not grow in Latin America.”

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\*None of this is true, which is why this is also called the Statue of the Three Lies. Harvard University was actually founded in 1636, and John Harvard was a nineteenth-century student and early contributor to the university.

†Excluding some extravagant claims, scholars estimate that the oldest migrations took place forty thousand to fifty thousand years ago, and that the most recent ones ended some twelve thousand to fifteen thousand years ago.

Julie thought this over for a minute and observed, “So, if these New World migrants had a shamanic religion based on visionary plants, then when Soma was no longer available did they look for substitutes?”

“Yes, exactly,” I said. “Substitutes like peyote in Mexico and ayahuasca in Brazil. The survival of Asiatic shamanism in the New World is one of the main findings of ethnomycology. It was an anthropologist, Weston La Barre, who first proposed this hypothesis. He argues that the early Native Americans and their descendants were ‘culturally programmed’ to search the environment for Soma, or, when it was no longer available, for other sacred plants.”<sup>12</sup>

As a result of being direct descendants of Siberian herders who venerated the reindeer and the sacred Soma mushrooms, it’s no coincidence that many of the shamanic First Peoples of the Americas universally revere the New World deer. For example, the name “Mazatec” literally means “people of the deer.” To the Huichol of western Mexico, their sacred psychoactive peyote cactus represents the deer. In some cases of Christian acculturation, which took place during three centuries of Catholic Spanish colonialism, the unique status of the deer as divine is acknowledged by actually identifying Christ with the deer. Among the Cora of Nayarit, the symbolic hunt for the divine deer ends with the crucifixion of the Christ-Deer.<sup>13</sup>

## The Tragedy of María Sabina

In 1955, following scholarly reports about the existence of a living mushroom cult, Wasson, then still a vice president of J. P. Morgan and amateur mushroom researcher, came to the Mazatec village of Huautla de Jimenez.

Frustrated in his efforts to find a “first-class shaman” there who would even talk to him, much less invite him to attend a *velada*, Wasson turned to the town officials. There he met Cayetano Garcia Mendoza, acting president of the village. After Wasson used the Mazatec word for sacred mushrooms, Cayetano agreed to introduce him to María Sabina, a highly respected shaman (see plate 4). Cayetano’s wife affirmed that

she was “*una Senora sin mancha*, a lady without blemish, immaculate, one who had never dishonored her calling by using her powers for evil.”<sup>14</sup>

Acting on what she interpreted as orders from the local officials, María Sabina—who always fulfilled her obligations—invited Wasson and his companion, New York society photographer Alan Richardson, to participate in a *velada*. There Wasson ingested the psilocybin mushroom called ‘*nti-ši-tho* in Mazatec (the Little-One-Who-Springs-Forth) and had what he describes as a “soul-shattering happening.” As Wasson tells us, “It permits you to see, more clearly than our perishing mortal eye can see, vistas beyond the horizons of this life, to travel backward and forward in time, to enter other planes of existence, even (as the Indians say) to know God.”<sup>15</sup>

Wasson claims to have found God, as did many of the young American and European “blond strangers” who followed him to Huautla. But to María Sabina this was an enigma. She says: “It’s true that Wasson and his friends were the first foreigners who came to our town in search of the *saint children* and that they didn’t take them because they suffered from any illness. Their reason was that they came to find God.”

Wasson had clearly come to Mexico anticipating a religious experience, and there he found a most “unearthly experience” and much, much more. In publicizing his participation in a living mushroom ceremony, Wasson found the key to the fame he desperately sought—so desperately that he was willing to betray María Sabina and viscerally violate her trust to get it.

Soon after inviting Wasson and Richardson to participate in two mushroom *veladas*, even allowing them to take flash photographs in the dark of the second one, María Sabina became concerned that she had violated the ancient taboo against revealing the secrets of the little saints. In his report “A *Velada* in Huautla,” Wasson tells us:

We were especially grateful to the Senora for having allowed us to take photographs by strobe flash while the power of the mushrooms was on her, during that second night. It has not been easy for her

to consent to the rude, and for her novel, interruption of the flash-light. On the morning after, a messenger came to us from her. We were welcome to the pictures she said, but would we please refrain from showing these particular ones to any except our most trusted friends, *for if we showed them to all and sundry, sería un traición, it would be a betrayal.*<sup>16</sup> [emphasis added]

In ignominious disregard for the shaman who had shared her sacred ceremony with him, for the well-being of the Mazatec community that had opened its doors to him, and for this ancient tradition, Wasson did just that: he betrayed María Sabina.

In 1957, the Wassons wrote about the Mazatec *veladas* in their book, *Russia, Mushrooms and History*, as well as in a series of articles that appeared in *Life*—which at that time was one of the most popular magazines in the United States—and also in *Life en Español* and *This Week*. In the infamous *Life* article, authored by Gordon Wasson alone, he published several photographs of María Sabina taken during the second *velada*. True, Wasson makes an attempt to protect María Sabina by calling her “Eva Mendez,” but the accompanying pictures quickly gave her identity away.

The resulting publicity was disastrous, with scores of counterculture seekers descending on Huautla de Jimenez to the point that the Mexican *federales* “had to make a clean sweep of certain Indian villages in the highlands of Mesoamerica in the late 1960s, deporting the assortment of oddballs misbehaving there.”<sup>17</sup>

The North Americans who followed Wasson to María Sabina’s village were not seeking a cure for sickness; they were seeking the key to spiritual enlightenment. As María Sabina recalls,

These young people, blonde and dark-skinned, didn’t respect our customs. Never, as far as I remember, were the saint children eaten with such a lack of respect. For me it is not fun to do vigils. Whoever does it simply to feel the effects can go crazy and stay that way temporarily. Our ancestors always took the saint children at a vigil presided over by a Wise One. . . . The improper use that the young

people made of the little things was scandalous. They obliged the authorities in Oaxaca City to intervene in Huautla.<sup>18</sup>

Personally, for María Sabina the results were devastating. For profaning the sacred mushrooms before the outside world she was repudiated by the other shamans and shunned by the entire community. As tensions boiled over, her house was burned down and her son was murdered. Harassed by authorities who blamed her for the influx of undesirable outsiders, María Sabina spent many years of her life alone, mourning the loss of her family and the voice of the saint children who were now silent. She laments:

But from the moment the foreigners arrived to search for God, 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. Before Wasson, I felt that the *saint children* elevated me. I don't feel like that anymore. The force has diminished. If Cayetano hadn't brought the foreigners . . . the *saint children* would have kept their power.<sup>19</sup>

This was not only María Sabina's loss. As another Mazatec shaman bemoans, "What is terrible, listen, is that the divine mushroom no longer belongs to us. Its sacred language has been profaned. The language has been spoiled, and it is indecipherable for us."

As Wasson soared to fame by publicizing María Sabina's story, María Sabina had to struggle with the desolation that Wasson's writings wrought upon her and the Mazatec community. As Wasson benefited financially from his writings, María Sabina was broken spiritually and economically, left without her "reason to be" and without a means to support her meager lifestyle. Wasson proclaimed that his documentation of this living mushroom cult was the most gratifying work that he had even done. Be that as it may, this wealthy banker never offered to give anything of substance back to María Sabina or the Mazatec community, not even a peso worth of financial assistance to care for the Wise Woman of Huautla in her old age.



## I, Gordon Wasson

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 millennia. I fear she spoke the truth, exemplifying her wisdom. A practice carried on in secret for centuries has now been aerated and aeration spells the end.<sup>20</sup>

So states Wasson in “A Retrospective Essay,” which he penned in 1976, a few years after his last visit to Huautla when he witnessed firsthand the suffering of the Mazatec community. Wasson’s intent was to offer this “essay” as a rationalization for the singular role he played in the undoing of María Sabina and, even beyond this individual tragedy, in the death of an ancient tradition.

But, reading between the lines of Wasson’s words, Julie immediately grasped the full extent of his transparent duplicity and self-serving ruthlessness. “He is so pompous!” Julie exclaimed. “How does Wasson justify this?”

I replied, “Wasson argues that from the moment of his first *velada* in 1955, he realized he would have to make a choice: either cover up his experience or present it worthily to the world. Wasson claims that if he did not make it known, then ‘extinction was and is inevitable.’”

“That’s the height of arrogance!” Julie said. “Here’s a Mazatec mushroom cult that survived three hundred years of suppression by Spain, only to be done in by a few years of publicity by Wasson.”

“You’re right,” I said sadly. “And what makes this even more ignoble is Wasson’s admission that ‘all this we foresaw.’ After publishing an article that romanticizes María Sabina as living in a state of primordial grace, Wasson sanctimoniously lambasts the ‘nether reaches of vulgarity in the journalism of our time’ and the ‘debased accounts erupting into print around the world.’”<sup>21</sup> Ironically, Wasson harshly criticizes the press for writing about the exotic story he himself first published under the tantalizing title “Seeking the Magic Mushroom.”

“How hypocritical,” Julie opined. The injustice of Wasson, a

worldly power broker, abusing the trust of a naive native woman made her blood boil.

“Wait, there’s more,” I continued. “Wasson goes on to add, ‘Who knew? Perhaps María Sabina bids fair to become the most famous Mexican of her time.’”

“Okay,” Julie interrupted. “I’ve heard enough. This is pure envy and projection by Wasson. He’s the one who wanted the fame, who could taste it the first time he experienced the visions induced by the mushrooms.”

“This is reminding me of my favorite quote from Frank Herbert’s science-fiction novel *Dune*,” I said. It goes like this: “The person who experiences greatness must have a feeling for the myth he is in. He must reflect what is projected upon him. And he must have a strong sense of the sardonic. This is what uncouples him from belief in his own pretensions. The sardonic is all that permits him to move within himself. Without this quality, even occasional greatness will destroy a man.”

“It looks like Wasson got caught up in his own pretensions. Wasson’s hamartia was his desire to become the most famous sacred mushroom seeker of his time, no matter what the cost to María Sabina,” Julie said.

By the time Julie and I left the Wasson Archives at Harvard, Gordon Wasson had fallen far off his pedestal. While we still admired his accomplishments as a groundbreaking scholar, as the founder of ethnomycology, we had lost respect for his character and his lack of integrity.

Not only had he violated the first commandment of anthropology—the injunction to “do no harm”—he had done so knowingly, fully aware that this Mexican mushroom cult would perish under the harsh light of American publicity.

Obviously, the ancient Greeks were wise in preventing initiates from speaking about what they had witnessed in the Eleusinian Mysteries—out of reverence for the gods who had given this gift to mortals. Similarly, the Mazatec were right in not talking about their *veladas* to outsiders, preferring only to whisper among themselves about the little saints, and then only in the still of the night by candlelight. For violating the ancient taboo against profaning the sacred mushrooms, both

María Sabina and Gordon Wasson paid a heavy price during their lives.\*

After Wasson's "soul-shattering" experience in the highlands of Oaxaca, Julie and I were intrigued as to why Wasson and other psychedelic researchers claimed to have deeply mystical and religious experiences with entheogens, or even "to know God" for the first time.

It was only a short drive across the Charles River from the Wasson Archives at Harvard to Marsh Chapel at Boston University. There we found the answer in the "Miracle of Marsh Chapel."

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\*Years after her death, María Sabina emerged as an icon of Mazatec shamanism, recognized for her role in introducing the world to the role of alternative healing within indigenous communities. Her contribution is acknowledged by the International Council of 13 Indigenous Grandmothers, a group of spiritual elders dedicated to preserving indigenous healing practices. María Sabina has also become the face of the Mazatec community, with a series of colorful murals dedicated to her in Huautla de Jimenez.



# 6

## Miracle of Marsh Chapel

America–1962

It was in the spring of 1979 that I met the Mushroom Man on the sun-drenched beaches of Negril in Jamaica. I will never forget the day I sat mesmerized on the dunes after consuming magic mushrooms and communing for hours with Mother Ocean.

I had traveled alone to Jamaica to spend my spring break from teaching by napping (my favorite hobby) and juice fasting (my fountain of youth). On my second day in the homeland of the Rastafarians, I met Nu Ray, a white Rasta and self-proclaimed “wheat-grass king” from the Florida Panhandle. He instantly befriended me and invited me to stay at his clapboard beachfront cottage.

For nearly a week my host and I fasted on wheat grass and fruit juices. On the fifth day, I was strolling along the shore, cooling my feet in turquoise waters, when a Rasta, with eyes flashing and dreads bobbing up and down to his bouncy walk, offered me a small brown bag.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I am the Mushroom Man and these ’shrooms are nature’s finest from the Blue Mountains of Jamaica,” he replied.

“How much?” I inquired. I knew that psychedelic mushrooms were legal in Jamaica, while marijuana was not. Just the other day, I’d noticed a hand-painted wooden sign for “Ms. Brown’s Magic Mushrooms” posted on an open-air fruit stand on the beach.

“Five,” he replied, holding up the five fingers of his right hand. The Rasta pulled a smooth tan mushroom out of the bag and handed it to me. I dug my fingernail into the stem and watched as it slowly turned blue, the characteristic color of psilocybin exposed to oxygen. We smiled at each other. I gave him five dollars, and he gave me a fistful of fungi. This would not be my first experience with psychedelics. Nor would it be my last. But it was by far the most prophetic.

Back at the cottage, Nu Ray smiled when I showed him the mushrooms and pulled his blond dreadlocks into a long ponytail. He boiled the mycological mix down into a tea, laced the tea with honey, and handed me a large blue cup filled with shimmering light. We sat in silence and sipped, and sipped . . . and sipped. A while later, as I began to lift off, I pulled on my green Speedo bathing suit and headed for the beach.

Nu Ray handed me an orange as I went out the door. I turned right at the shore toward an isolated beach on the outskirts of town. As I walked, I threw the orange into the air, where it hung weightless, defying gravity, and then caught it one-handed as it came down. I repeated this over and over, for what seemed like an eternity. As I slowly walked by, a group of Rastas sitting on the beach were beaming at me. It was as if I had passed through an invisible gateway and entered into their secret brotherhood.

Suddenly, to my left I noticed a low-hanging, luminous pink cloud. Three child-sized elfin creatures were descending the billowy spiral staircase that extended from the cloud to just a few feet above the beach. They were giggling and jabbering in a strange, singsong language that I somehow understood, beckoning me to climb the staircase and join them. I dispassionately considered their offer but decided not to follow them because, honestly, at that moment I was not sure that if I entered their nebulous world I would ever be able to return.

The voice first spoke to me as I passed the last cottage and walked

alone along the shore, enchanted by the turquoise waters. The sonorous voice boomed, coming from everywhere and nowhere, "Today I am going to take you to play in the Temple of the Sun." I was neither surprised nor frightened. Rather, I felt elated that the Divine Presence was inviting me to enjoy this celestial playground of sun, sand, and water, all swirling together in an endless dance of motion and color. Was the voice coming from within or from the heavens? I did not know, nor did it matter. All I know is that I felt incredibly alive, more alive than I had ever thought possible. The cells of my body felt electric, racing like wild stallions.

I dashed into the water and imagined myself transformed into a pure white, winged Pegasus, prancing and splashing about in endless delight, flapping my feathery wings, which were rapidly expanding toward the sky. For what seemed to be an unending time, I communed in the warm, silky waters. *Mother, Mother Ocean, I have heard you call.* My favorite Jimmy Buffet song reverberated through my body, which had become a pulsating sound chamber. My legs transformed into fins. I morphed into a dolphin. I immersed myself playfully in the embryonic fluids of the Great Mother. Finally, exhausted but exhilarated, I crawled out of the ocean up onto the dunes and sat in lotus position, gazing blissfully over the ever-changing seascape.

And the sonorous voice spoke again, saying, "Today I am going to show you your death." I grew pensive, as if watching a movie about someone else's life.

Suddenly, the fluffy cloud on the horizon began to glow metallic gray. Growing exponentially in quantum clicks, it transformed into an ominous crystalline atom that expanded to fill the horizon. I grew anxious. "This is nuclear power. It is evil. You must destroy it!" the resonant voice commanded, and then it fell silent. Immediately, I knew that the ten years I had spent working as an activist with Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers' movement had prepared me for this challenge.<sup>1</sup>

The next day I rested before catching a plane back to Miami. As I exited customs and walked through the crowded airport, I noticed the bold newspaper headlines that announced, "TMI Nuclear Accident." It was March 28, 1979. A coolant leak at the Three Mile Island nuclear

plant near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, had caused a partial reactor meltdown, forcing the governor to order an evacuation.

This unmistakable synchronicity, this encounter with a cosmic mind, led me to forsake my anthropological fascination with the Aztecs for the study of the antinuclear movement. But over the next thirty-five years, I never spoke openly about my soul-awakening experience in Negril. Not even to the curious students who, year after year, overflowed my Hallucinogens and Culture class. For decades, I took comfort in the justification that my academic and emerging political work on energy policy was simply too important to jeopardize with talk of personal experiences with psychedelics.<sup>2</sup>

Time and again, I have pondered the meaning of those ominous words “Today I am going to show you your death”—since I never actually saw my death that day in Negril and am obviously still very much alive. At the time, which was during the height of the Cold War, I thought it literally meant that humanity was going to be destroyed in a nuclear holocaust. Today, I believe it symbolically meant the process of ego death and spiritual rebirth—as my individual ego and personal aspirations were subsumed by the higher calling of working to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons and nuclear power.

At that time during the '70s, I had no inkling that these experiences were the prelude to the adventure of a lifetime. Eventually that adventure brought me to Boston University, the site of the Miracle of Marsh Chapel. It was here that I finally understood how my Jamaican mushroom experience was able to generate a soul awakening and a major life-turning point.

## The Good Friday Experiment

The most important experiment in the history of the scientific study of religion was conducted under the unpretentious Gothic spires of Boston University's Marsh Chapel. As Julie and I walked down the main aisle, passing under the vaulted, wood-beamed ceiling, and stood before the stained-glass rose window above the altar, I felt a deep sense of admiration for the landmark research that had taken place here, exactly a

half century ago. Well, not exactly here, but downstairs in the Robinson Chapel, a small meditation sanctuary. What transpired there created a unique and illuminating fusion of science and religion, definitively demonstrating that synthetic psilocybin (the psychoactive agent in María Sabina's sacred mushrooms) could generate authentic mystical experiences.

The Miracle of Marsh Chapel (also known as the Good Friday Experiment) was a psychedelic research experiment carried out by Walter N. Pahnke, who designed it under the auspices of Timothy Leary's Harvard Psilocybin Project.<sup>3\*</sup> Pahnke, who was already a physician and a minister, conducted this research for his Ph.D. in religion and society at Harvard University, with Leary serving as his principal academic advisor.

On Good Friday of 1962, Pahnke randomly divided twenty volunteer Protestant divinity students into two groups assembled in a small room in the basement of Marsh Chapel. In this controlled, double-blind study, half the students received capsules containing thirty milligrams of psilocybin, and the other half received a large dose of niacin (vitamin B<sub>3</sub>) as a placebo. The results were compelling. Almost all members of the group receiving psilocybin reported profound mystical experiences. This provided clinical proof for the then-controversial idea that psychedelic drugs could facilitate mystical experiences.

As Pahnke reports, "The persons who received psilocybin experienced to a greater extent than did the controls the phenomena described by our typology of mysticism."<sup>4</sup> He also built a follow-up survey into the research design, which found that six months after the experiment the psilocybin subjects reported persistent positive and virtually no negative changes in their attitude and behavior.

One of the participants in the experiment was Huston Smith, who went on to write several books about entheogenic plants and comparative religion. Smith later described his Marsh Chapel session as "the most powerful cosmic homecoming I have ever experienced."<sup>5</sup>

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\*This took place a few years before Harvard faculty members Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert (now Ram Dass), and Ralph Metzger were terminated by the university.



The Miracle of Marsh Chapel experiment has withstood the test of time and the rigorous scrutiny of independent reviewers. A twenty-five-year follow-up study conducted in 1987 by psychedelic researcher Rick Doblin found that “all seven psilocybin subjects participating in the long-term follow-up, but none of the controls, still considered their original experience to have had genuinely mystical elements and to have made a valuable contribution to their personal lives.”<sup>6</sup> Doblin also concluded that Pahnke’s research and his follow-up interviews “cast considerable doubt on the assertion that mystical experiences catalyzed by drugs are in any way inferior to nondrug mystical experiences.”<sup>7</sup>

These corroborating studies validated the glowing assessment of Pahnke’s research offered by Walter H. Clark, who in 1961 received the American Psychological Association’s award for contributions to the psychology of religion. Clark writes, “There are no experiments known to me in the history of the scientific study of religion better designed or clearer in their conclusion than this one.”<sup>8</sup>

## Mind Explorers

After leaving the chapel, Julie and I strolled along the banks of the Charles River, which runs between Cambridge and Boston. Here in the murky waters, Wasson’s field research on María Sabina, Pahnke’s experiment on divinity students, and my solitary vision quest in Jamaica all converged, creating questions about the impact of entheogens, in this case psilocybin, on the human mind.

“I am having trouble synthesizing all of this,” Julie said.

“Well,” I noted, “in the psychedelic literature they always stress the importance of ‘set and setting.’ The set is the mental state that a person brings to the experience. The setting is the physical and sociocultural environment in which the experience takes place.”

“Or, as they say in the Talmud,” Julie noted, “we do not see things as they are. We see things as we are.”

“Yes,” I replied. “In the three situations we’ve been talking about, there’s been a major awakening for the participants. For María Sabina, it was healing; for Huston Smith, it was mystical; for me, it was the gift

of a larger purpose. So this makes me think there's something going on that's much deeper than set and setting. This turning-point encounter with entheogens is widespread. I devote the entire second half of my course on Hallucinogens and Culture to the 'mind explorers,' scientists who've done major research on psychedelics in the twentieth century. Most of them had what you would call a 'soul awakening' during their initial experience with entheogens."

"Like who?" Julie asked.

"People like John Lilly, who immersed himself in a sensory deprivation chamber and took LSD-25 to explore the dimensions of the mind. Like Timothy Leary, who set up the Harvard Psilocybin Project after his first trip on mushrooms, which took place in Cuernavaca, Mexico. And, of course, Albert Hofmann, who was the first person to experience the psychedelic effects of LSD. There are many prominent researchers on this list. But the point is that each of them had a life-transforming experience with entheogens."

"Can you give me some specific examples?" Julie asked.

"Okay, let's start with Michael Harner and Stanislav Grof," I suggested, as we settled on a bench by the river.

## Michael Harner

### *The Way of the Shaman*

Anthropologist Michael Harner's initiation to shamanism took place among the Conibo Indians of the Ucayali River region of the Peruvian Amazon. He had been living for nearly a year among the Conibo, but all of his attempts to learn about their religion had been futile. Finally, the Conibo told him that if he really wanted to learn he must take the "shaman's sacred drink made of ayahuasca, the 'soul vine.'" The visionary experience that followed turned out to be Harner's initiation into shamanism.

About an hour after drinking ayahuasca, Harner found himself looking up at a gigantic crocodile from whose cavernous jaws gushed a torrential flood of water.<sup>9</sup> As the scene evolved, Harner became aware of two strange boats, swaying back and forth in the air, coming closer

and closer. At the same time, he noticed the most beautiful singing he had ever heard in his life, emanating from the voices on board the boat.

Harner tells us, "As I looked more closely at the deck, I could make out large numbers of people with the heads of blue jays and the bodies of humans, not unlike the bird-headed gods of the ancient Egyptian tomb paintings. At the same time, some energy-essence began to float from my chest up into the boat. Although I believed myself an atheist, I was completely certain that I was dying and that the bird-headed people had come to take my soul away in the boat."

With his entire body feeling like it was turning into solid concrete, Harner became convinced he was about to die. He was "told" that these new visions and information were being presented to him because he was dying, and it was therefore safe for him to receive these revelations. They came from a "giant reptilian creature reposing sluggishly at the lowermost depths of the back of my brain, where it met the top of the spinal column." These creatures had come to earth eons ago to escape an enemy and were the masters of humans, who were now their hosts and servants. Facing death, Harner struggled against returning to these ancient ones. He conjured up a guardian who could protect him against these alien creatures. Then, with unimaginable effort, he uttered the word "medicine" to his Conibo companions, who administered an antidote to the ayahuasca. Finally, he slept.

When Harner described his visions to a couple at the American evangelical mission nearby, they cited analogous passages from the Book of Revelation in the Bible, including "And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood. . . ." They were amazed that, by taking the drink of the "witch doctors," an atheistic anthropologist could have visions similar to those contained in their holy Book of Revelation. Later, as Harner related his visions to the most supernaturally informed of the Conibo, the blind shaman laughed and casually commented that all of the Conibo had met these pompous creatures who are "only the Masters of Outer Darkness." When Harner recounted his entire experience, the shaman told him that he knew of no one who had learned so much on his first ayahuasca journey. "You can surely be a master shaman," he told Harner.

This was the beginning of Harner's dedicated study and practice of shamanism and shamanic healing, which has been his path since 1961. Eventually Harner left his prestigious position at the New School in New York to found the Foundation for Shamanic Studies in Mill Valley, California.

## Stanislav Grof

### *Cosmic Consciousness*

During the 1950s, Stanislav Grof was training to become a psychoanalyst in Prague, then the capital of Czechoslovakia.<sup>10</sup> But the more immersed he became in psychoanalysis as a brilliant theory, the more disillusioned he became with it as a clinical therapy. He could not understand why psychotherapy could do so little to cure psychopathology in clients.

While Grof was struggling with this dilemma, he received a package from Albert Hofmann's Sandoz Laboratory in Basel, Switzerland, containing samples of an experimental drug called LSD-25. Sandoz was making the drug available to psychiatric researchers to determine its impact on human subjects and possible applications in psychiatry. Since the drug was said to have remarkable properties, Grof decided to first try it on himself.

The results were dramatic. As Grof reports, "My first LSD session radically changed both my personal and professional life. I experienced an extraordinary encounter with my unconscious and this experience overshadowed all my previous interest in Freudian psychoanalysis."<sup>11</sup> The insights coming out of this experience were so profound that Grof immediately realized that LSD was "the royal road into the unconscious" and decided to explore the promising possibilities of LSD-assisted psychotherapy.

As Grof tells it,

This thunderbolt of light catapulted me from my body. I lost all awareness of the research assistant, the laboratory, and any detail about my life as a student in Prague. My consciousness seemed to explode into cosmic dimensions. . . . There is no doubt in my mind

that what I was experiencing was very close to the experience of “cosmic consciousness” I had read about in the great mystical scriptures of the world.<sup>12</sup>

Grof’s initial experience and decades of systematic studies of human consciousness led to groundbreaking conclusions.

I now firmly believe that consciousness is more than an accidental by-product of the neurophysiological and biochemical processes taking place in the human brain. I see consciousness and the human psyche as expressions and reflections of a cosmic intelligence that permeates the entire universe and all of existence. We are not just highly evolved animals with biological computers embedded inside our skulls; we are also fields of consciousness without limits transcending time, space, matter, and linear causality.<sup>13</sup>

## Inner Sanctum of the Soul

We walked along the riverbank for a while before Julie broke the silence.

“Do you know why I’ve always preferred Carl Jung over Sigmund Freud?” Julie asked.

“Is this about sex?” I said.

“No, it’s not about sex, it’s about the soul,” Julie laughed. “Jung firmly believed in the existence of the soul, in the seminal importance of the soul to psychotherapy, to a psychology of wholeness rather than one of sickness and neurosis. That’s why Jung, and I am paraphrasing here, said that the dream is the hidden door to the inner sanctum of the soul, which exists far beyond the conscious ego.” Julie paused for a moment. “Well, if dreams are a door to the inner sanctum of the soul, so are entheogens.”

“This makes sense, but how does this relate to the life-transforming experiences we’ve been talking about—from the Mazatec to the mind explorers?” I asked, realizing we were quickly moving beyond anthropology into psychology.

Julie replied, “It is the same for everyone we’ve been talking about: for a shaman such as María Sabina, as well as for writers such as Huston Smith, Stanislav Grof, and Michael Harner. In every case, the entheogen—be it psilocybin, LSD, or the DMT in ayahuasca—plumbed the depths of their being and helped them become conscious of their soul’s journey. This is the real ‘miracle’ of Marsh Chapel, because this kind of soul awakening is always a deeply religious or spiritual experience. And this goes to the heart of the mysterious essence of entheogens: that somehow, by changing our brain chemistry, entheogens allow us to access what Grof calls ‘cosmic intelligence,’ and what Huston Smith and others call ‘God.’”

“How does this happen?” I asked.

“No one really knows,” Julie said. “This goes beyond anything we can explain from current models of biology, neurology, or even psychology. But let me give you a familiar example of souls awakening to their destiny. Do you remember when we met?”

“How could I ever forget?” I replied, thinking back to that magical night in Miami.

Julie recounted the story of how we met and fell in love.

### ***Our Time Will Come***

*Remember the first time I saw you? We were at a wedding and I saw you leaning against a column watching people dancing. Completely out of character for me, I walked up to you and asked you to dance. After a couple of minutes, you abruptly stopped dancing. I thanked you and turned and walked away. Suddenly, I turned around and walked back to you, looked into your soulful brown eyes, and with blind conviction whispered in your ear, “Don’t worry, our time will come.”*

*We were both in relationships at the time, but eventually we found our way back to each other. It was in Yosemite that we got to know each other, a week of very little talking and a lot of hiking in one of the most beautiful places on earth, enjoying the serenity and joy of each other’s company.*

*At the end of the week, I knew that it was our destiny to be together. You weren’t so sure. I watched in horror as you fell into indecision and old mind*

*games. Nothing I said could convince you that we were meant for each other. After an agonizingly difficult time, as you vacillated back and forth, having asthma attacks (you didn't even have asthma!) and dizzy spells, I finally told you to leave and see if you could live without me. Dejected, you went back to your home and went through "the dark night of the soul," a journey that can only be taken alone. I let you go. When I gave you the solitude you needed to feel your soul's longing for my soul, you came back to me.*

*But not for long. Again you became conflicted, confused, and fearful of getting hurt. I suggested we take LSD, the "truth serum." It had been ten years since I had taken LSD. I was ambivalent, because the last time I had tripped I saw the man I was living with as the devil, and it had been terrifying. This time, as we sat on my bed cross-legged, facing each other, our souls intertwined and ascended into the heavens. I watched in awe as your face filled with light, and we saw all of our faces—past, present, and future. Tears streamed down our cheeks, healing and cleansing us. We fell even more deeply in love and our hearts were bursting with recognition. When we married four months later, I heard the angels singing in a heavenly chorus. But now I realize it was our souls that were singing.*

## The First Religion

As light from the setting sun danced across the eddies on the Charles River, I realized that we had come full circle. What began with the accidental discovery of the Green Man at Rosslyn had culminated at Marsh Chapel with scientific proof that entheogens can generate authentic religious experiences.

In retracing Wasson's research, we had developed a deep appreciation for his seminal work in ethnomycology. We had immersed ourselves in Wasson's major investigations: of Soma in India, of the reindeer herders in Siberia, of the Eleusinian Mysteries in Greece, and of a living Mazatec mushroom cult in Mexico. With each case study, we became more convinced about the fundamental role of entheogens in shamanic religions.

This not only was due to Wasson's work but was based on numerous archaeological studies that document the presence of hallucinogens and altered states in human prehistory. In one such study of

488 societies, Spanish archaeologist Elisa Guerra-Doce found that 90 percent of these societies incorporated altered states into their fundamental belief system. Furthermore, she notes that “by drawing upon a number of examples from different regions worldwide, [the study] seeks to illustrate, first, the early date at which humans began to use psychoactive substances; and second, the connection between these substances and the earliest religious experiences.”<sup>14</sup>

Now, after comprehending the Miracle of Marsh Chapel and the mounting archaeological evidence, we concurred with Wasson’s controversial theory that religion itself was initially generated out of humanity’s early encounters with entheogens.

What begins as a mild hypothesis in *Soma* (1968) builds to a major theme in *The Road to Eleusis* (1978) and reaches a full crescendo in Wasson’s last major work, *Persephone’s Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion* (1986). There he writes:

At the point in his evolutionary progress where we first call him “Man” beyond a Doubt—*Homo sapiens sapiens*—and when he came to know, also beyond a Doubt, what awe and reverence were, he clearly felt that Soma was conferring on him mysterious sensations and powers, which seemed to him more than normal: at that point Religion was born. Religion pure and simple, free from Theology, free of Dogmatics, expressing itself in awe and reverence and in lowered voices mainly at night, when people would gather together to consume the Sacred Element. The first entheogenic experience could have been the first, and an authentic, perhaps the only authentic miracle. This was the beginning of the Age of Entheogens, long, long ago.<sup>15</sup>

Taken together, these impressive findings provided essential background for exploring our central question: *Did entheogens play a role in the origins of Christianity, even in the life and mission of Jesus?*

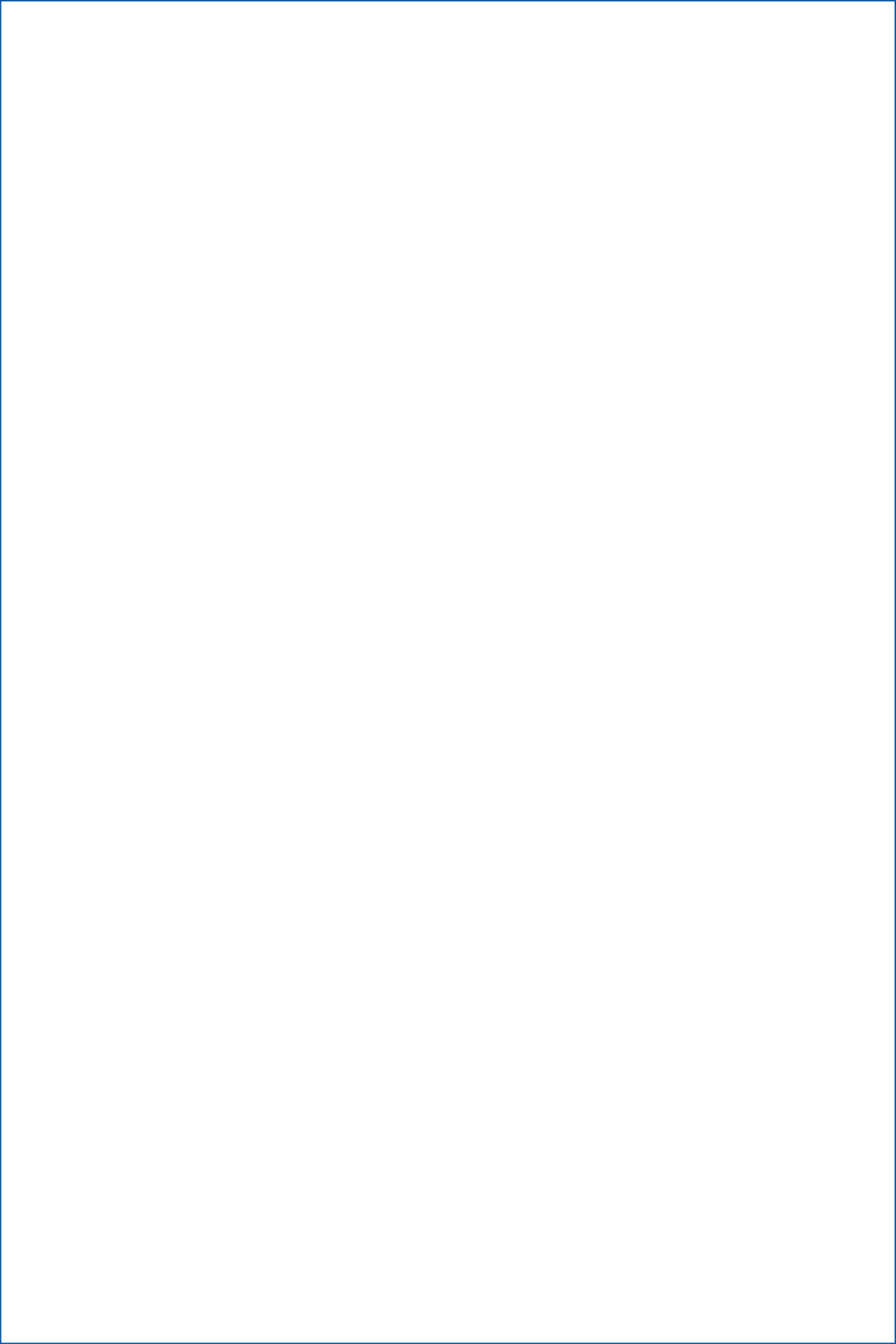
But in order to address this question, we would also have to solve Wasson’s greatest paradox: *the discrepancy between his zealous exploration of entheogens in early religion and his reluctance to pursue that theory*



*into the hallowed halls of Christianity.* Or, to put it another way, why did Wasson adamantly argue that his triumphantly proclaimed “Age of Entheogens” abruptly ended some thousand years before the birth of Christ in the Middle East?

As Julie and I prepared to travel to Europe to explore the churches and cathedrals of Christendom, we wondered how long it would take us to answer this question. Fortunately, at our very first stop at the Chapel of Plaincourault in central France, we found a remarkable piece of evidence.

This was the infamous Adam and Eve fresco that launched the vituperative “battle of the trees” between R. Gordon Wasson and John M. Allegro, author of one of the most controversial books of the twentieth century. The echoes of this epic battle have reverberated for more than half a century.





PART TWO  
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# Hidden in Plain Sight

*The eyes see only what the mind is prepared to comprehend.*

HENRI BERGSON



# 7

## Battle of the Trees

Mérigny, France—1291

I had waited nearly forty years to visit the Chapel of Plaincourault, located well off the beaten path near the village of Mérigny in the Indre District of central France. The object of my anticipation was the faded fresco depicting the original sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. I had first seen this controversial image of a large “mushroom-tree” planted in the center of Eden in 1974, when I read Wasson’s *Soma*, which presented a color drawing of the painting.<sup>1\*</sup> Ever since, I had dreamed of seeing this fresco in person.

As we drove down the tree-lined road leading to the chapel, a strange sensation came over me, and I slowed down. Looking about at the idyllic scene, I felt as if we had come to one of the few places in Europe where time had stood still since the Middle Ages. All was quiet except for the soft rustle of wind in the trees and the melodious sounds of birds chirping. We drove leisurely, almost respectfully. When

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\*The caption under this illustration reads “Fresco of Plaincourault. The Temptation in the Garden of Eden. Copied by Mme. Michelle Bory.”

Julie and I arrived, the heavy wooden doors of the chapel were locked. I knocked and knocked, but no one answered. I could barely contain my disappointment. This fresco was famous in the field of ethnomycology. The visit to Plaincourault was going to be the lodestar of our research in France.

“I’m trying to be Buddhist and let go, but I can’t. I’ve waited so long, and we’ve come so far,” I said despondently.

“Don’t worry,” Julie said trying to console me. “We’re not leaving here until we see this fresco. I noticed a sign on the roadside with a phone number. Let’s try it.”

The only café in Mérigny was closed, and there was not a soul to be seen on the streets. We drove back to Ingrandes, located just off the main route, and found a *tabac*, a store that sells cigarettes and sundries. When I explained in broken French that we had come all the way from the United States to see Plaincourault, the young man tending the store phoned the Regional Natural Park Brenne, which manages the chapel. The woman who answered informed us that the guide would meet us there at 2 p.m. the next day. We were elated! We decided to drive five miles west to visit the Abbey of Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe and stay overnight at a hotel. The next day, we pulled up to the chapel precisely at two o’clock. We waited and waited . . . and waited. We were crestfallen.

This time, the village café was open. The owner, an attractive, middle-aged French woman, was sitting at an outdoor table chatting with a friend. Neither spoke a word of English. Julie is precise when it comes to speaking French; she likes to form her words and sentences slowly, so as not to make mistakes. I know less French than Julie but due to my impatience tend to launch my words into the air like a trapeze artist operating without a safety net, hoping that somehow, through a combination of words and gestures, I will be understood. As soon as she grasped our plight, the proprietor picked up her cell phone and swung into action. She explained the situation in an authoritative voice that made it clear she was a person with whom one does not trifle. After the third call, she turned to us and with a self-satisfied smile announced that the guide was on his way.

We thanked her profusely and drove back to the chapel and waited.

My heart was pounding; my mouth was dry. Finally, an old station wagon zoomed up. A man jumped out and breathlessly introduced himself as Alain Crantelle. He apologized for keeping us waiting and explained that he had been 20 kilometers away when he received the call and had come as fast as he could. He had not received our phone message the day before. Alain walked briskly to the chapel and pulled out a large rusty key. He flung the doors open, giving us our first glimpse of the storied fresco on the far wall. Alain was a most amiable fellow. He had long, light-brown hair, a broad, open face, expressive blue eyes, and an easy smile. Speaking slowly in French, he opened his arms, inviting us to enter, and asked if we would like a guided tour.

*“Mais oui,”* I said. I looked at Julie with a sigh of relief. She smiled back at me. After nearly four decades, our visit to the Chapel of Plaincourault had begun—with a flourish.

## Mushrooms of Eden

Tina and Gordon Wasson visited Plaincourault on August 2, 1952. Julie and I entered the chapel on July 19, 2012, sixty years later. The chapel is situated close by the Plaincourault castle. Both were built in the second half of the twelfth century by the Knights of the Order of Malta\* upon their return from the Crusades. The small chapel is sixty feet long and twenty feet wide. It is architecturally simple, with a single nave (the main body of the church) that ends in a semicircular apse (the end of the chapel). Originally, the walls of the chapel were completely decorated with scenes from the Old and New Testament, interspersed with geometric and floral paintings.

In addition to the Temptation scene, the three other frescoes still recognizable today on the apse wall are the Virgin and Infant, the Scourging of Jesus, and the Crucifixion. In the vault of the apse is a painting of Christ Pantocrator (omnipotent ruler of the universe)

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\*Also known as the Order of the Knights of Saint John and the Knights Hospitaller. The Knights Hospitaller and Knights Templar were the most formidable Roman Catholic military orders in the Holy Land.

framed by a tetramorph. On the left wall of the nave (looking inward from the entrance) is a well-preserved scene of the legend of Saint Eligio, the patron saint of blacksmiths, under a faint inscription that was interpreted to say “We do not have the key.” The frescoes belong to a family of Romanesque wall paintings of central France that have been extensively cataloged by art historians.<sup>2</sup> As such they use the Romanesque palette of yellow, red, gray, white, and blue. The chapel was built in the twelfth century, and the Temptation fresco was painted in the late thirteenth century, circa 1291.

The most well-preserved fresco is the Temptation scene (the story of original sin from Genesis), depicting Adam and Eve and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, around which is coiled a snake offering Eve the fruit of the Tree.\* What is dramatic here is that the Tree is drawn in the shape of an enormous man-sized mushroom, with four smaller mushrooms protruding from the long stem of the central “mushroom-tree.” The presence of numerous small white spots covering the caps of these five mushrooms strongly identifies them as representations of *Amanita muscaria* (see plate 5).

“Look,” Julie pointed out, “Adam and Eve are covering themselves with what appear to be mushroom caps, not fig leaves.”

“That’s really interesting,” I replied. “In Genesis, Adam and Eve only became conscious of their nakedness *after* having defied God and eaten of the forbidden fruit. Perhaps this scene depicts both the Temptation and the original sin, because sometimes different moments in a biblical story are combined in Romanesque art.”

As an anthropologist, I always like to know how the natives, in this case the locals, interpret symbols. Writing around 1900, Abbot Rignoux described this fresco as a “mushroom-tree with several heads.” Soon afterward, a photograph of this fresco was presented at a meeting

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\*Samorini comments, “In the space between the tree (with the snake) and Eve, and in that on Eve’s right side there is a series of curvilinear vertical strokes—at least a dozen—whose convexity is opposite to the snake’s figure.” He speculates that these lines may represent the words the snake addressed to Eve to convince her to eat the forbidden fruit. However, close inspection of the fresco reveals these curvilinear strokes have been drawn throughout the fresco.<sup>3</sup>

of the Société Mycologique de France on October 6, 1910.<sup>4</sup> The gentleman who presented the fresco made what was then the sensational observation that “instead of the customary Tree, the artist had given us the fly-agaric.”<sup>5</sup> The official guide book, *Mérigny-Indre, Chapelle de Plaincourault*, published in 2000 makes note of the “tree of original sin, depicted as an enormous mushroom.”<sup>6</sup> Our guide, Alain Crantelle, explicitly described it as “a hallucinogenic mushroom.”

## R. Gordon Wasson vs. John Marco Allegro

It appears that locals and experts alike would all agree that the Plaincourault mushroom-tree represents an *Amanita muscaria*. Not so, claims amateur mushroom seeker, R. Gordon Wasson. Arguing that “the mycologists would have done well to consult art historians,” Wasson cites a 1952 letter he received from the eminent art historian Ervin Panofsky, who writes:

The plant in this fresco has nothing whatever to do with mushrooms . . . and the similarity with *Amanita muscaria* is purely fortuitous. The Plaincourault fresco is only one example—and, since the style is provincial, a particularly deceptive one—of a conventionalized tree type, prevalent in Romanesque and early Gothic art, which art historians actually refer to as a “mushroom-tree” or in German, *Pilzbaum*.<sup>7\*</sup>

In affirming that “Professor Panofsky gave expression to what I have found is the unanimous view of those competent in Romanesque art,” Wasson defers to the authority of art historians to close the door on the matter. In short, it is categorically not a mushroom.

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\*The letter continues: “It comes about by the gradual schematization of the impressionistically rendered Italian pine tree in Roman and Early Christian painting, and there are hundreds of instances exemplifying this development—unknown of course to mycologists. . . . What the mycologists have overlooked is that the mediæval artists hardly ever worked from nature but from classical prototypes, which in the course of repeated copying became quite unrecognizable.”



*Oh, yes, it is!* contends John Marco Allegro, noted scholar of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Writing in 1970, Allegro states:

The prime example of the relation between the serpent and the mushroom is, of course, in the Garden of Eden story of the Old Testament. The cunning reptile prevails upon Eve and her husband to eat of the tree, whose fruit “made them as gods, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4). The whole Eden story is mushroom-based mythology, not least in the identity of the “tree” as the sacred fungus, as we shall see. Even as late as the thirteenth century some recollection of the old tradition was known among Christians, to judge from a fresco painted on the wall of a ruined church in Plaincourault in France. There the *Amanita muscaria* is gloriously portrayed, entwined with a serpent, whilst Eve stands by holding her belly.<sup>8</sup>

“And so,” I announced to Julie, “began the furious ‘battle of the trees.’”

“But why is this so important?” Julie asked. “Sure, it’s fascinating to us and a handful of scholars, but who else is really going to care if there’s a psychoactive mushroom in a medieval fresco?”

“It’s monumental,” I replied, “because it was the catalyst for the seminal debate between Wasson and Allegro about the role of entheogens in Christianity.”

“If Wasson were right, then the Judeo-Christian use of entheogens, especially sacred mushrooms, ended with Genesis in the Old Testament. But if Allegro were right, then entheogens were integral to the origins of Judeo-Christianity, with their usage persisting at least into medieval times, as evidenced by the Plaincourault fresco, which was painted after 1000. This would require a reconsideration of the history of Christianity.”

“But we already know that Wasson’s theory prevailed and has dominated the discussion for nearly half a century,” Julie said. “So what happened to Allegro?”

“The firestorm that engulfed Allegro’s career resulted in the

proverbial throwing out the baby with the bathwater. In this case, the ‘baby’ was Allegro’s prolific research on the presence of psychoactive mushrooms in early religions, including Christianity. The ‘bathwater’ was his speculative theory that Jesus did not exist as a historical figure but was merely a symbol for the mushroom.”<sup>9</sup>

## Maverick of the Dead Sea Scrolls

The publication in 1970 of *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* shredded Allegro’s academic credibility. Until that time, he was well known as an eminent philologist and the most controversial member of the scholarly team studying the Dead Sea Scrolls, most of which were written in Hebrew and Aramaic.<sup>10</sup> The scrolls, which date from as early as 300 BCE, were found in Jordan between 1946 and 1956 in caves near the Dead Sea.

*The Sacred Mushroom* turned Allegro’s fleeting fame into infamy and, in some circles, even demonization as a radical who was out to destroy the Christian faith. The subtitle said it all: *A Study of the Nature and Origins of Christianity within the Fertility Cults of the Middle East*. As if suggesting that Jesus did not exist (the “ahistoricity of Jesus”) were not enough, Allegro argued that early Christianity was a fertility cult based on the ingestion of hallucinogenic mushrooms and that Jesus was merely a metaphor for the sacred mushroom. In fact, he postulated that the entire Bible was a “hoax,” based on an elaborate secret code woven throughout the story by cryptographers to disguise the mushroom cult.

Certainly, earlier scholars had recognized the significance of ancient religious cults, including those that used entheogens such as Soma to achieve a sense of continuity with the gods. Yet Allegro was the first scholar who had the audacity to relate these themes to Judaism and Christianity, tracing their roots linguistically back to the earliest written Sumerian and Semitic language groups.

As his biographer (and daughter) Judith Anne Brown points out, there were significant difficulties with *The Sacred Mushroom*. First, many of the archaic word derivations were highly speculative and

needed further verification, and the idea that much of the Old and New Testament was a secret code for a mushroom cult was simply too convoluted and improbable. Brown notes, “However vast the amount of philological evidence, Christians could not accept that the New Testament was little more than a cover-story for the drug-crazed followers of a fungus cult.”<sup>11</sup> “A sensationalist lunatic theory,” wrote *The Times* in 1971, reflecting the prevailing public opinion in England.<sup>12</sup>

But while the theory of the “Bible as a secret code for a fertility cult” was soon forgotten, the search for evidence of mushrooms in Christianity persisted. In fact, later evidence showed that they occurred in Christian art much more widely than Allegro had realized at the time, prompting Brown to observe that “evidence from the art world might have gone a long way to convince his critics that his ideas were reasonable.” However, the sole iconic evidence that Allegro presented was the Plaincourault fresco, which was printed both within the book and on the book jacket of the original edition of *The Sacred Mushroom*. This image, along with Allegro’s conclusion that “there the *Amanita muscaria* is gloriously portrayed,” directly challenged Wasson’s interpretation. But none of this survived the vehement rejection of *The Sacred Mushroom*. As Judith Brown confesses, “Instead, the book ruined his reputation. After it came out, very little he had said in the past or would say in the future was given any attention.”<sup>13</sup>

### “Thou Shalt Surely Die”

When Alain finished describing the presence of good and evil in the Temptation scene, I asked him why they had painted a hallucinogenic mushroom in the middle of the Garden of Eden. Without hesitation Alain replied, “Because it permits the elevation of the spirit to communicate with God. It is a representation of the Tree, but deliberately showing it as a mushroom to teach people that they need to elevate themselves spiritually.”<sup>14</sup>

As Alain turned his attention to an elderly woman with a cane who had just entered the chapel, Julie beckoned me to join her in front of the Temptation fresco. “So, Allegro was right,” she whispered. “Anyone can

see this is obviously a mushroom and not by any stretch of the imagination a pine tree.”

“Yes, but unfortunately he didn’t live long enough . . .” I began to say.

“Wait, Jer, look at Eve,” Julie interrupted. “She has no breasts, no skin, and her entire upper body, her arms, and chest are skeletonized, as is Adam’s if you look closely. The living Eve with her bones exposed! Could it be that what this fresco is depicting is that Adam and Eve have actually eaten of the Tree of Immortality, which is the mushroom-tree, and are skeletonized because they are awakening to eternal life?”

“As I recollect Genesis,” I added, “this may not be such a novel interpretation after all. Near the end of the section on the Temptation of Adam and Eve, God observes that man has become like us, to know good and evil, but what if he also eats of the Tree of Life and lives forever?\* I’ve always been curious about this passage. I mean, who is this ‘us’ that God is talking about, and what is the relationship between these two potent trees in Eden? In any case, your take on this Garden of Eden scene would certainly be a first, because, as far as I know, no one has ever looked at Plaincourault in this way before. This implies a complete reinterpretation of the Garden of Eden story in the Old Testament. But let’s stick with the facts in front of us: with the exposed bones of Adam and Eve.”

I knew that anthropologist Peter Furst points out that one of the most enduring aspects of shamanism is the idea that life is resident in the bones, which are the most durable part of the body, lasting up to fifty thousand years after death. Mircea Eliade, one of the world’s greatest authorities on shamanism, writes, “Bone represents the very source of life, both in humans and animals. To reduce oneself to the skeleton condition is equivalent to re-entering the womb of this primordial life, that is, to a complete renewal, mystical rebirth.”<sup>15</sup>

“You know,” I said, “I’ve been reading about Plaincourault for years,

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\*And the LORD God said, “Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Genesis 3:22).

and no one ever has commented on this obvious ‘skeletonization’ of Eve. That’s pretty amazing because ethnobotanists and art historians have been scrutinizing this fresco ever since Wasson reproduced it in *Soma* back in 1968. Maybe they thought it was an obvious reference to God creating Eve from Adam’s rib.”\*

“I think we’re on to something,” Julie agreed. “As soon as we get to the hotel, I want to jump on the Internet and find out what the Bible has to say about bones and skeletons.” That evening, Julie looked up from her iPad and reported, “Here’s what the apostle Paul said: ‘It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body and there is a spiritual body’ (1 Corinthians 15:44). And Paul correlates the human soul with the Messiah’s spiritual body when he says ‘For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones’ (Ephesians 5:30).”

“It looks,” she continued, “like the skeletal system symbolically represents the invisible soul, because the bones remain long after the flesh rots away. The long-lasting nature of bones symbolizes that the soul is immortal and will continue to exist after physical death.”

“That makes sense,” I added. “After all, medieval churches preserved the bones of saints as sacred relics, and great basilicas were erected on the resting places of the apostles.”

“Interesting,” Julie nodded. “Let’s keep this in the back of our mind as we visit other churches.”

### Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology*

“What also stands out here,” I said, “are the white speckles covering the entire cap of this giant mushroom, which are unique to *Amanita muscaria*. See how they’re all in neat little rows?”

“How did the painter make those dots?” Julie asked.

“That’s a great question. Assuming they were painted on dry plaster,” I explained, “they could have been made in one of three ways:

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\*Adam said: “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Genesis 23:23).

first, by painting the white dots on the red cap; second, by leaving the white of the plaster and painting around it; or third, and probably the most difficult, by scraping away the red pigment after painting the cap, thereby incising the dots into the cap.”

“In any case,” Julie noted, “these dots are a meticulous detail. I just don’t see how an art historian of Panofsky’s stature could have ignored them.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about that,” I replied. “Did I ever tell you I actually read Panofsky’s *Studies in Iconology* for a course in college? I recently brushed up on Panofsky’s three levels for understanding an archaic work of art, and I don’t think he even followed his own method at Plaincourault.”

“What do you mean?” Julie asked.

“First,” I explained, “Panofsky says you have to look at the natural subject matter, the work of art in its pure form, just the facts devoid of any cultural knowledge.”

“That’s easy,” Julie said. “What you have here is a naked man and woman and a large mushroom, or a mushroom-tree, with a snake wound around it.”

“Second, you need to add cultural insights to the painting, the ‘iconography.’ In this case, given that this painting is found in a medieval church, with a man and a woman standing next to some kind of tree, around which there is entwined a serpent offering something to the woman, well, it’s a pretty good bet that this is the Temptation scene from the Garden of Eden in Genesis.”

“So what’s Panofsky’s third level?” Julie asked.

“Now, here’s where the ‘iconology’ comes in,” I continued. “We need to look at this work of art as the product of a unique time period and ask, ‘Why did the artist choose to represent the Temptation in this way?’ This is where the art historian synthesizes everything and asks, ‘What does this all mean?’ And that, in my mind, is where Panofsky fails, even by his own standards, in not recognizing the care put into the dots on the cap and by not asking, ‘If this is a stylized Italian pine tree, then why are these dots there?’”

“Has anyone pointed this out before?” Julie asked.

“No, not to my knowledge,” I replied. “But several scholars have analyzed Plaincourault and a variety of mushroom-trees and Italian pines in Christian art and vigorously disputed Wasson and Panofsky.”

“Anyone credible?”

“Yes,” I said. “Both ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes and pharmacologist Albert Hofmann observed of Plaincourault that ‘the Tree of Knowledge, entwined by a serpent, bears an uncanny resemblance to the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom.’<sup>16</sup> Samorini, an Italian ethnobotanist, gathered multiple representations of mushroom-trees, all of which have umbrella-shaped foliage, and none of which resembles the uplifted branches of the Italian pine.<sup>17</sup> Then there’s researcher Michael Hoffman, who posted a photo gallery online showing the marked similarities between the mushroom-trees depicted in Christian art and actual mushrooms in nature.”<sup>18</sup>

## Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe

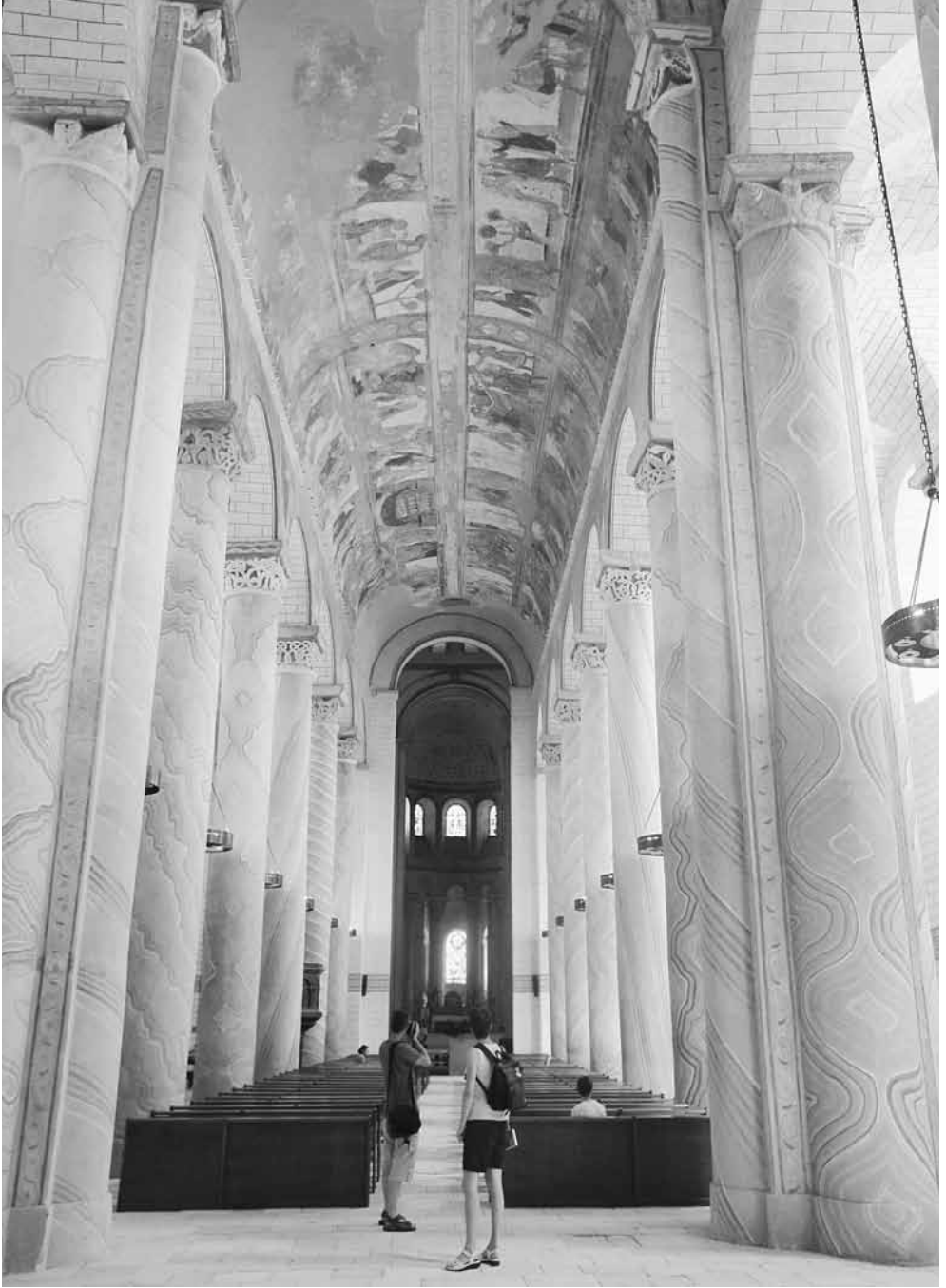
In a 1970 letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, Wasson publicly attacked Allegro’s interpretation of the Plaincourault mushroom-tree as an *Amanita muscaria*: “Presumably [Allegro] had read the footnote in which I dismissed the fresco on page 87 of *Mushrooms, Russia and History* and, more specifically, Panofsky’s letter reproduced on page 179 of *SOMA*. He chooses to ignore the interpretation put on this fresco by the most eminent art historians.”<sup>19</sup>

However, had Wasson simply traveled five miles west of Plaincourault to the Abbey of Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe, he might have reached a different conclusion. Propitiously, Julie and I had toured Saint-Savin on the day before we entered the Chapel of Plaincourault. There, painted fifty feet above the floor on the long, vaulted ceiling, which runs the length of the nave, is an elaborate series of sixty-one colorful frescoes that tell the story of the Old Testament.\* The biblical

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\*While most of these frescoes are still visible, some of them have faded over time, so that the biblical scenes they depicted are either not visible or only partially visible.





*Fig. 7.1. Abbey of Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe, frescoes on the vault of the nave, eleventh to twelfth century (Photo by Julie M. Brown)*





Fig. 7.2. The Creation of the Stars, *Abbey of Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe*  
(Photo by Julie M. Brown)

chronology begins in scene one with Genesis and ends with Exodus.\*

In scene three, *The Creation of the Stars*, God, wearing a cruciform halo, places the sun and the moon into the sky. Directly below the sun and the moon are two very different plants: one, an umbrella-shaped psilocybin mushroom with downswept cap; the other, an Italian pine with upswept branches.

\*Despite restoration, several of the Old Testament scenes are not visible, including scenes one and two. Scene three, *The Creation of the Stars*, is the first fully visible scene in the chronology.

“It’s almost as if the Benedictine monks of Saint-Savin wanted to instruct the faithful of the church on the difference between a mushroom and a pine tree,” Julie commented.

“I know,” I replied. “To me it is inconceivable, almost beyond belief, that Wasson, the father of ethnomycology, did not find time to stop and visit Saint-Savin.”

“Maybe Saint-Savin wasn’t discovered or well known in 1952, when the Wassons visited the region,” Julie suggested.

“No, that’s not true,” I replied, picking up the visitors’ guide we had purchased at the Abbey of Saint-Savin.<sup>20</sup> “Look, the initial restoration of the abbey was undertaken between 1843 and 1855, under Prosper Mérimée, the general of historical monuments for all of France. The restoration of Saint-Savin was the crowning achievement of his career.” In fact, the study of French Romanesque wall painting began in 1845 with Mérimée’s “album publications of the frescos at Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe, the only example of the genre then widely known.”<sup>21</sup> These frescoes are now considered “a masterpiece of the creative genius of man”—so much so that in 1983 the abbey church was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

“Yes, but didn’t Wasson also say that mycologists don’t speak with art historians?” Julie countered.

“Well, maybe so, but Wasson obviously did when he consulted Panofsky,” I replied. “But that’s not the main point. Wasson was an indefatigable researcher who left no stone unturned, including correctly identifying the Mayan ‘mushroom stones,’ which archaeologists found scattered throughout southern Mexico and Guatemala. The point is that Wasson studied the linguistic roots of ‘mushroom’ words in reindeer-herder languages. So why wouldn’t he apply the same rigor by looking around central France, by going beyond Plaincourault, in order to see if there were mushroom images in other church frescoes?”

“Did he ever mention Saint-Savin in any of his writings, or say that he had visited other churches in central France? Did he ever revisit the area after the publication of Allegro’s work?”

“No, not at all,” I replied.

“Well,” Julie said, “we know what Wasson did. He either left Plaincourault without stopping to visit the nearby Abbey of Saint-Savin or, if he did, he never wrote about it, probably because it would undermine his theory that there was no evidence of entheogen use in early Christianity.”

“Yes,” I replied, “we now know what Wasson did, but we don’t know why he did it.”

“Maybe it was to avoid the firestorm that engulfed Allegro,” Julie suggested.

“Possibly,” I said. “Whatever the reason, we’ve got to unravel Wasson’s paradox!”

“But how?” Julie wondered.

“I don’t know,” I replied.

While it would take us months and a visit to the imposing Vatican in Rome to solve Wasson’s riddle, it took us only one day and a visit to the modest Church of Saint Martin in France to find the inspiration for our theory of the Psychedelic Gospels.



# 8

## The Prophet Has Spoken

Nohant-Vic, France—1120

As Julie and I traveled east from Plaincourault, we drove by fields of golden sunflowers bordered by elegant rows of poplar trees. We loved everything about being on the road. The oh-so-rare feeling of absolute freedom, untethered from televisions and telephones, from grinding cycles of bad news. The unpredictability of changing plans at a moment's notice to chase down rumors of enigmatic frescoes. But most of all, we relished the adventure of traveling with a purpose. To be sure, it is liberating to put a knapsack on your back, to be a vagabond, wandering any way the wind blows. But for us it was much more rewarding to be on a quest, ears and eyes ever alert for clues, for a glimpse of angels in the architecture. At our next stop, we found angels and much more.

The Church of Saint Martin sat unpretentiously amid a cluster of modest two-story stone homes with pitched roofs; their terra-cotta tiles glistened with the light rain that had just stopped. A plaque in the small gravel parking lot described the murals as “the work of an artist of genius” that “portrays the theme of Redemption, from the Error of Adam to the Last Judgment.” A coarse stone cross was placed randomly on the ground in front of the church doors, which were painted a drab brown.

Stepping across the threshold was like having cataracts removed from your eyes and suddenly seeing clearly again in vibrant color and high definition. Here the rich red, ocher, and whites hues of the nativity scenes in the nave were a prelude to the panoply of powerful paintings that filled the choir in the adjoining room.

Once inside the resplendent choir, Julie and I were enchanted by the majestic visual feast of frescoes on the walls, guarded by rosy-cheeked seraphim. We found ourselves alone, enveloped in reverent silence, contemplating an illustrated Bible. The church bells began to peal, marking the hour, transporting us back to medieval times. Julie took my arm and turned me around to look at the wall-length panel of *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem*. "Do you see what I see?" she asked in amazement. There was no way I could miss the smooth caps of five psilocybin\* mushrooms.<sup>1</sup> The brown-and-white colored caps gracefully spread out over the heads of the three joyful youths welcoming Jesus into the city for his messianic date with destiny (see plate 6).

"Look how big these mushrooms are. They're as big as the heads of the young men," Julie noted.

"Size matters in Romanesque art," I replied. "At Plaincourault, the mushroom in the Temptation fresco is even larger than Eve. That's because the painter is calling our attention to its importance."

"Now step back and tell me exactly what you see," I said, inviting Julie to describe the sumptuous scene laid out before us. She spoke slowly, while rapidly clicking photos. It was almost as if she were rushing to capture these images before they could disappear, even though they had been here for nearly a thousand years.

"Starting from the left," Julie continued, "I see a man kneeling before a much larger robed figure, possibly an angel entering the scene from above, whose body is bathed in concentric circles of light. There is a hand coming out of the light. Between the thumb and index finger is a brown-and-white, roundish object, which is being offered to the man, who is looking up in awe."

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\*The genus *Psilocybe* contains forty known species of fungi and is found throughout northern Europe.

“Anything else?” I inquired.

“Yes, the robes of the angel and of the kneeling man and the border below them are painted sky blue, one of the few places where the artist uses this color in the church. This color also tints the robes of Jesus’s disciple. Look how it stands out, glowing iridescently in the light coming in from the window” (see plate 7).

## Jesus Enters Jerusalem

“Why do you think that’s Jesus?” I asked.

“Because he’s riding what looks like an ass, which is how the Bible depicts his entry into Jerusalem at Passover. Walking directly behind Jesus are two men, possibly disciples, holding their arms up in the gesture of standing in awe.”

“Okay, but just stick with the facts, with what you actually see in the fresco.”

“Sure. Jesus is sitting on an ass with his arms reaching out toward the youths who are greeting him. One of the youths is leaning forward, holding on to the stem of an oblong mushroom in his left hand, while offering Jesus three stems with his right hand, whose tops have been painted over or somehow obscured” (see plate 6).

“While the youth holding the mushroom is wearing a cape, the two youths below have taken off their capes, unfolding them to welcome Jesus as if rolling out a royal carpet. The furls in the capes extend all the way below the figure of Jesus and are repeated in the robes of the disciples, as well as in the robes of the kneeling man and the angel, visually tying both scenes together.”

Julie turned to the right and stared transfixed at the panel on the facing wall. “Jesus and his disciples are traveling toward the gates of Jerusalem, where a rotund man on top of the tower is using a long knife to cut through the stem of a mushroom. It’s the same shape and color as the mushrooms in the last scene. Fascinating . . . these towers are adjacent to the scene of the *Last Supper*, where Jesus and eleven of his disciples are gathered behind the table, while the twelfth disciple, probably Judas, is kneeling on the other side” (see plates 8 and 9).

“Jesus is extending a very long arm toward Judas’s mouth, holding something in his fingers out to Judas, similar to the way the angel is holding something out to the kneeling man. I can’t tell what it is. But look, there are four long knives on the table, just like the one used to cut down the mushrooms in the adjoining tower scene!”

“Isn’t the Last Supper supposed to be a Passover meal?” I asked.

“This is definitely not a Passover Seder, because there is no Pascal lamb or wine goblets on the table, only bowls and round objects,” Julie pointed out. “In fact, the mushroom caps being cut on top of the tower and the objects on the table share the same round form, size, and coloration. This repetition of mushroom caps and knives connects the scenes visually, and also suggests a sequence from the cutting of the mushroom caps to their later appearance on the table. On the table, the pairing of



*Fig. 8.1. Detail of Last Supper showing mushrooms in hem  
(Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

the knives and the round objects suggests that these objects have been cut, which is significant because if these were loaves of bread they would have been torn apart by hand. And look at the way in which the table itself is rotated forward so that it's parallel with the plane of the entire picture. In combining scale—the large size of the mushroom caps—and perspective, the artist is calling attention to the objects on the table.”

Before I could comment, Julie grabbed her camera, zoomed in on the *Last Supper*, and then passed the camera to me, telling me to look closely at the robes of the disciples seated to the left of Jesus. To my surprise, neatly drawn into the folds of their hems were four umbrella-shaped psilocybin mushroom caps whose stems were all linked together.

“Look!” I said. “There’s also a mushroom in the hem of the disciple directly to the right of Jesus, as well as two more at the tip of Judas’s robe. The artist painted the mushrooms into the folds as if trying to disguise them. Just like the dots on the *Amanita* at Plaincourault, these mushroom hems are neatly aligned because the artist is telling us how important they are. This is clearly a way of informing initiates that entheogens were present at the Last Supper.”

### “To Remain Blind”

“To see works of medieval art solely with the naked eye is to remain blind,” writes art historian Marcia Kupfer.<sup>2</sup> Nowhere is this more evident than in viewing the striking frescoes of Saint Martin.\* Ironically, Kupfer overlooks one of the most astounding features of these frescoes: the mushroom icons, which even her discerning eye could not see without a knowledge of ethnomycology.

The history of the small parish Church of Saint Martin has been extensively documented. It houses one of the three sets of Romanesque religious frescoes analyzed in depth by Kupfer in her erudite study *Romanesque Wall Painting in Central France*, which is why Julie and I chose to visit this church, despite its remote location well off the main roads. Saint Martin is located in the Indre District of central France

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\*Also known as Saint Martin de Vic or Saint Martin de Vicq.



in the village of Nohant-Vic, which has a population of fewer than five hundred people. In the eleventh century, the church belonged to the Benedictine Abbey of Déols. At that time it consisted of a simple nave and choir. At the beginning of the twelfth century a semicircular apse was built and an exceptional set of murals was painted, first uncovered in 1849. Restoration began in 1987 and was completed in 1991.

The interior is decorated with vivid murals depicting the public life of Jesus—a visual Christology. Typical of the fresco cycles observed in the medieval diocese of Bourges, the paintings at Saint Martin are the unique creation of a single workshop, usually consisting of a lone painter perhaps with an assistant to help with the plastering and preparation of pigments. Consequently, there are no artistic or religious reasons why images of sacred mushrooms found in one house of worship, such as Plaincourault or Saint-Savin, would be present in others throughout the region. But here they were, in living color.

## The Prophet Has Spoken

As Julie and I were contemplating the mural of the *Last Supper*, a middle-aged couple entered the choir through the arched passageway underneath the painting. As the only four people in the church on this damp afternoon, we nodded to each other in a gesture of friendliness, acknowledging our mutual interest in medieval churches. The couple quietly crossed the choir and turned to look at the mural. I realized they were speaking softly in German, and I strained to listen in on what they were saying, wondering if they could throw any light on what we were seeing. But to no avail.

Just then, Julie linked her arm with mine and guided me to the left of the passageway, where we came face-to-face with a robed and bearded figure holding a scroll. The painting was located on a side panel directly under the towers of Jerusalem.

“I haven’t been able to take my eyes off this man or the scroll he’s holding,” Julie said. “We’ve got to find out what it says.”

“They may know,” I replied tilting my head toward the couple.

“What makes you think that?” Julie inquired.



*Fig. 8.2. Biblical figure with Latin scroll, on the west wall of the choir at the Church of Saint Martin  
(Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

“Because educated Germans of their generation were required to study Greek or Latin. But I don’t want to bother them.”

“I think it would be okay,” Julie said. Turning to the couple, she politely inquired, “Excuse me, do either of you know Latin? We’re trying to figure out what this inscription says.”

Fortunately both the man, Johann, and the woman, Cristina, had taken nine years of Latin, which immediately precipitated a spat. Johann studied the fresco for a moment and confidently declared that it said “Dixit Propheta,” which he translated as “the Prophet Has Spoken.”

“Wait a minute, my dear,” Cristina spoke up in crisp, flawless English. “You are mistaken. I think it’s time you started wearing your glasses.”

“What do you mean?” Johann asked indignantly.

“In the first place, that’s not a letter ‘D’ at the beginning, but simply a curlicue painted into the parchment on which the letters are written. And, second, the next two letters are not an ‘I’ and ‘X’ but an ‘A’ and a ‘V.’ Therefore, the scroll actually reads ‘AVIT : PROPHETA.’”

At that, a vigorous discussion erupted between Johann and Cristina. They spoke rapidly, much too quickly for me to catch more than a word here or there. Finally, Johann turned toward us and conceded, “Go ahead, Cristina, you figured it out, so you tell them.”

“At first,” Cristina began, “I thought it meant ‘He went with the prophet.’ But then I realized that the verb AVIT is actually in the present tense, and if we take it as a nominative, which means that the prophet is the only one moving, then the scroll says ‘THE PROPHET GOES FORTH.’”<sup>3</sup>

I was just about to inquire about Latin verb declensions when Julie interrupted by asking a more important question: “If Jesus is the messiah who came to fulfill the prophecy, then who is the prophet?”

“Oh, Johann can tell you that,” Cristina said. “He’s a professor of theology and an expert on biblical prophets. I think he’s memorized half the passages in the Old Testament.”

“This is quite clear,” said Johann, who pointed to the scene with the angel and recited the following passage from Isaiah 6:6–7: “Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.”

“The prophet is definitely Isaiah,” Johann concluded. “But I am perplexed because what the seraphim is holding out to him is round and beige, not the fiery red nor even the glowing black one would expect of a burning coal. And he’s holding it not with tongs but between his fingers.”

Julie and I shared a knowing look. “But why Isaiah?” I asked, my curiosity piqued. “What does an Old Testament prophet know about the coming of Christ?”

“Isaiah foresaw more clearly than any of the other prophets the coming new religion of the Gospels,” Johann explained. “In many ways

he was more an evangelist than a prophet, because Isaiah described the mysteries of Christ so vividly you would think he was reporting the past rather than prophesying the future.”

When Johann finished speaking, I asked him and Cristina if they noticed anything “unusual” in this panel depicting Isaiah’s purification and Jesus’s entry.

“No, nothing at all, except what I’ve already mentioned about the coal and the angel,” Johann concluded, completely oblivious to the mushrooms in the upper right-hand corner of the fresco. I thanked Johann and Cristina and, after getting their phone number, bid them *auf wiedersehen* as they left the church.

### Purification of Isaiah’s Lips

Pope Gregory (540–604), known as the “Father of Christian Worship,” believed that paintings of Bible stories were an essential tool for the education of the faithful who could not read. In this way, Christian art and images became “the Bible of the illiterate.” In the case of medieval paintings they were directed at two audiences: the educated, mainly royal patrons and men of the church, and the uneducated believers.

It is in this context that Kupfer, who has studied Saint Martin extensively, points out that “the vital presence of rotund, ponderous figures, their exaggerated posturing, and their animated interaction, brings events to life.”<sup>4</sup> But at Saint Martin, the juxtaposition of events from different historical time periods in the Old Testament and the New Testament life of Christ does not focus on a simple chronological retelling of biblical history. Rather, according to Kupfer, “repeated breaks in narrative continuity disrupt the literal surface of the story to make available the spiritual lessons concealed within.”<sup>5</sup>

This is graphically illustrated in the side-by-side placement of the Old Testament scene of the *Purification of Isaiah’s Lips* (which we’ll call *Purification*) with *Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem* (which we’ll call the *Entry*). Although these two scenes have no historical connection, they collide pictorially. According to Kupfer, *Entry* is split into two stages. In the first, as Christ rides the ass, followed by his dis-

ciples, “several youths excitedly *clamor up trees to break off branches*, while others unfurl their mantles at his feet. The second phase of the episode on the west wall isolates the walled city of Jerusalem. . . . Youths, their mouths open in song, crowd the gates; others within the city drape the walls or *cut away at the treetops*”<sup>6</sup> [emphasis added].

The essential themes of this visual sequence are purification and prophecy as preconditions for spiritual passage and entry into the kingdom of heaven. Kupfer sees the luminous coal as a manifestation of Christ that reveals the inner spiritual meaning of the *Entry*: “If the radiance of the coal symbolizes the mystery of the Incarnation, it’s perfectly round shape may further suggest the form in which this mystery is materially embodied on earth. The particular gesture with which the angel displays the coal appears visually to identify the small disk with the Eucharistic host.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, just as Isaiah feels the coal’s purifying touch on his lips, so the Christian believer receives the sacred host of the Eucharist in his mouth.

## The Psychedelic Gospels

As the late afternoon sunlight filled the choir, we felt as if the frescoes were coming alive and speaking to us. It was then that Julie and I had the “aha” moment. Here at Saint Martin, these frescoes were revealing an alternative history of Judeo-Christianity, a Psychedelic Gospel inspired by entheogenic mushrooms.

We contemplated the incontrovertible facts portrayed in the wall paintings before us: the pictorial fusion of Jesus entering Jerusalem with the purification of Isaiah; Jesus with arms outstretched toward the large psilocybin mushrooms in the *Entry*; the joyful youth cutting down mushrooms with a long knife on the towers of Jerusalem over the scene of *Last Supper*; the otherworldly expressions of Jesus and his disciple leaning on the table; and the orderly row of mushrooms cleverly hidden in the hems of the disciples.

We reflected on our interpretation of what these frescoes were saying: that the angel was purifying Isaiah’s lips with a holy mushroom, which inspired his prophetic visions and which was also the key

to Christ's elevated state of consciousness; that the inscription "The Prophet Goes Forth" refers to the flight of Isaiah's soul after ingesting entheogens; that the Last Supper and the First Eucharist that Jesus was sharing with his disciples was actually a meal of sacred mushrooms as indicated by the long knives on the table and by the expression on Jesus's face.

If our theory of the Psychedelic Gospels was right, it would lead to the far-reaching conclusion that early and medieval Christians experienced divinity and immortality by means of sacred plants.

### "Live the Questions Now"

Julie and I stood silently in the fading light, reluctant to let go of this moment of illumination, moved by feelings of awe and anxiety: awe at what we had discovered, anxiety over the implications. I thought back on discovering the mushroom embedded in the forehead of the Green Man of Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland. But this find in the Church of Saint Martin in France was more significant. It was a revelation. This was evidence that spoke for itself.

It never ceases to amaze me how the answer to one question invariably opens the door to a multiplicity of other questions. Back in Scotland, the primary question was: *Would we find evidence of entheogens in Christian art?* Now that we'd found extraordinary evidence, the new questions were: *What did these images mean? For Wasson's theories, for art history and ethnomycology? For the origins and history of Christianity?*

Kupfer suggests that, for medieval audiences, looking at these religious frescoes "engaged the entire person" at all levels—intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. In the broadest sense, "images gathered in with the eyes, visually ingested, so to speak, demanded to be spiritually consumed and digested. Vision meant incorporation and eventual self-transformation."<sup>8</sup> But when it comes to interpreting the frescoes at Saint Martin and elsewhere, the art historians are the ones who "remain blind"—who, due to their lack of knowledge of ethnomycology, mistake psychoactive mushrooms for trees and branches—and, as a result,

sometimes err in their interpretation of Romanesque religious paintings.

The iconic images at Saint Martin suggest that the initiates of medieval audiences were not simply transformed metaphorically, but were transformed literally through entheogens that were consumed physically.

I recalled the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love *the questions themselves*, like locked rooms, like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. . . . *Live* the questions now. Perhaps then you will gradually, without noticing it, live your way into the answer, one distant day in the future.”<sup>9</sup>

Today, all we could do was embrace the questions.

“Where does this leave us?” Julie asked. “Without more evidence, why would anyone accept our interpretation of the frescoes at Saint Martin as anything more than that, as an informed interpretation, as a plausible speculation?”

“Based on what we’ve seen today,” I replied, “we have to keep searching in order to build a compelling case that will convince the skeptics. Because no matter what they believe, they cannot ignore these paintings of sacred plants in Christian art.”

Reflecting on our recent visits to Plaincourault and Saint-Savin and now to Saint Martin, we wondered if these mushroom icons could simply be the eccentric creations of a heretical religious cult living deep in the forests of central France far from the control of church and king. With this in mind, we decided to travel north to the grand cathedrals of Canterbury in England and Chartres in France to see what we would find in the high places of medieval Christendom.





# 9

## Down the Rabbit Hole

Rennes le Château, France–1891

“I had another dream about Rennes le Château,” Julie told me over breakfast on the morning after our visit to Saint Martin. “I just can’t let go. Before driving north, I think we should head south to check out Rennes.”

“Oh no, not again,” I said. “How many times do we have to go over this? That place is a magnet for conspiracy theorists.”

“I know,” Julie confessed, “but I still feel like there’s something there. Remember, years ago in Miami, when we had let go of researching this book for the umpteenth time? It was the middle of the night, and I couldn’t sleep. I was flipping through the channels when I came upon a National Geographic documentary on Rennes. Something made me check out the name and I found out that, in English, ‘Rennes le Château’ means ‘House of the Reindeer’! I mean, why would they name a tiny hilltop village in southern France after reindeer?”

“This is such a long shot,” I said.

“Yes, it is. But if we don’t go, I will always regret it. Who knows when we’ll ever be this close to Rennes again? We can stay at a bed-



and-breakfast in Axat, in the foothills of the Pyrenees, just half an hour away from Rennes. The reviews say the food is great. Besides, the area is beautiful, and we can take a day or so to relax,” Julie said, making the side trip sound irresistible.

## It’s Just Flunch

After breakfast, we packed our bags and doubled back to Argenton-sur-Creuse. From there we turned south on route A61 and headed toward Toulouse. It was early afternoon when we arrived—hot and hungry. As we drove around looking for a place to eat, I noticed a large red sign on a restaurant that said “FLUNCH.”

“Now there’s a *sign* for you,” I joked to Julie.

“What do you think it means?” she asked.

“Well, it’s certainly not a poster for the French version of ‘It’s Just Lunch.’ The French would never demean lunch that way, by turning it into a speed-dating event the way we do. After all, food is an art form just like painting and sculpture. Wait a minute, I’ve got it: it means ‘F\*\*k Lunch—Let’s wait for dinner.’”

“Great,” Julie said, “but I’m famished, so what should we do?”

It was still a two-hour drive from Toulouse to Axat. We called ahead and asked Paul, a British ex-pat and the proprietor of the Aux Quatre Saisons B&B, if we should stop for dinner on the way.

“Heavens no,” Paul replied. “I am preparing a four-course welcome meal for you and two other couples. You’ll be our guests tonight. So please arrive hungry. And drive carefully! The road is windy as you climb into the mountains. Cheers.”

As I’ve learned only too well after years of marriage, a hungry Julie is a cranky Julie. Rather than waiting hours until dinner, we decided to stop for lunch and had a delicious smoked duck salad at a restaurant across the street from the central train station in Toulouse.

When Paul checked us in, he announced that dinner would be ready in an hour. The garden behind our private cottage bordered on a rushing river and looked up at a majestic mountain. “See, I told you it would be beautiful,” Julie reminded me as we drank in the scenery.

*An English cook in France—this could be bad*, I thought. Little did I know we had just arrived in gourmand heaven. As Julie and I entered the dining room, Paul introduced us to a Belgian couple who had been hiking the Pyrenees for a month, mainly camping but sometimes checking in to B&Bs, and an ex-pat Danish couple who had come by for dinner. On our first night at Aux Quatre Saisons, we enjoyed a banquet that reminded me of the film *Babette's Feast*. I am not a drinker, but on this magical night of gastronomic delight, I tried everything on the menu, including a sip (or two) of each wine. The highlights were blinis with smoked salmon and prawns, beef bourguignon with scalloped potatoes, and chocolate soufflé with crème.

Chef Paul Bridgestock proudly announced each course as he carried it out of the hot kitchen into the candlelit dining room—all the while regaling us with staccato bursts of ribald humor. Paul is tall, slender, and suave in a Hugh Grant sort of way. He sat at the head of the long wooden table, eating nothing, drinking constantly, talking up a storm. His wife, Val, sat at the other end, eating everything, saying nothing, with a serene smile on her lovely face.

Paul's jokes were interspersed with Alexis de Tocqueville-like insights: "America is the only nation that has gone from barbarism to decadence without passing through civilization," followed by witticisms about Winston Churchill, a man never at a loss for words. As Paul told us, when a dinner guest attacked Churchill by saying, "If I were married to you, I would put poison in your drink," he immediately replied, "Madam, if I were married to you, I would drink it."

It was a delightful evening. Julie and I fell fast asleep, content and tipsy. We awoke refreshed and ready to investigate a mystery. In reality, we were about to be sucked down a rabbit hole of speculation.

## The Mysteries of Rennes le Château

Rennes le Château plays a seminal role in two works by religious historian Michael Baigent that propose a controversial narrative about the life and death of Jesus. In the first, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (1982), Baigent and his coauthors Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln lay out an

alternative history of Christianity based on a royal bloodline originating with the children of the historical Jesus and his wife Mary Magdalene. After the crucifixion of Jesus, these children or their descendants immigrated to southern France.<sup>1</sup> Baigent's book provides the basic premise of Dan Brown's mystery novel, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), which during the height of its popularity attracted tens of thousands of visitors annually to Rennes le Château. In the second book, *The Jesus Papers* (2006), written twenty-four years later, Baigent develops the even more remarkable thesis that Jesus survived the crucifixion and accompanied Mary Magdalene initially to Egypt and ultimately to France, thus solidifying the royal bloodline theory while expanding on claims about a Merovingian dynasty founded on this bloodline and the clandestine Priory of Sion sworn to protect its descendants.

The central mystery of Rennes le Château revolves around a treasure left behind by "the good curé," Abbé Béranger Saunière (1852–1917), who, according to Baigent, was appointed the village priest in 1885 with an annual income of about ten dollars.

He gained a notoriety that has lasted until the present day by obtaining in the early 1890s, from mysterious sources, for equally mysterious reasons, considerable wealth. The key to his wealth was a discovery he made while restoring the church in 1891. But the "treasure" he found . . . was not the glittering deposit we had first supposed (perhaps the lost treasure of the Temple in Jerusalem), but something far more extraordinary—some documents concerning Jesus and therefore the very basis of Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

*Holy Blood, Holy Grail* claims that Saunière had discovered proof that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and that the source of his wealth may have involved blackmailing the Vatican to keep this information secret, as it would undermine belief in the divinity of Christ.

Adding to the mystery was Saunière's discovery of a Visigoth pillar inside the altar that contained two coded parchments. When deciphered, one of the parchments revealed this enigmatic message: SHEPHERDESS, NO TEMPTATION. THAT POUSSIN, TENIERS, HOLD THE KEY; PEACE

681. BY THE CROSS AND THIS HORSE OF GOD, I COMPLETE—OR DESTROY—THIS DAEMON OF THE GUARDIAN AT NOON. BLUE APPLES.<sup>3</sup>

With this in mind, we walked up a steep stone street, finally reaching the Church of Saint Mary Magdalene. The church is adjacent to the Tour Magdala (“Magdalene Tower”) that Saunière had built to house his extensive library and the Villa Bethania, which was to serve as a residence for retired priests. Sitting some fifteen hundred feet above sea level, the complex has a commanding view of the surrounding countryside. Immediately upon entering the church, we came face-to-face with a statue of the devil holding up the holy water stoup, a rare feature for a French church. According to one interpretation, this is the demon Asmodeus, who symbolizes hidden treasure (see plate 10).

“Look!” Julie said, pointing directly above the holy water. “That looks like a blue mushroom, sitting on top of a pine cone. It’s flanked by two dragons, under a red circle inside a gold border with the initials ‘B. S.’ in the middle. And there’s an inscription in French that reads: PAR CE SIGNE TU LE VAINCRAS” (see plate 11).

“The initials have to stand for the priest, Béranger Saunière,” I noted, “who obviously was not a modest man. But what does the inscription say?” I asked Julie, who had lived in Paris many years ago.

Julie reflected and then turned to me and said, “It means ‘By this sign, you shall conquer.’”<sup>\*</sup> We fell silent, taking in this new information. Then, after looking around to confirm we were alone in this small church, Julie spoke up, asking, “What are you thinking?”

“Well,” I replied, “unlike Saint Martin, there’s no distinguishing shape to the mushroom. And we have no context here in which to place this little blue mushroom—if it really is a mushroom—that is suspended over the holy water. There’s no biblical story or imagery to relate it to and nothing about the life of Christ.”

“Okay, I get the point,” Julie conceded, reining in her enthusiasm over a possible entheogenic explanation for the mystery. “Let’s see what else we can find here. Maybe there are other clues.”

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<sup>\*</sup>As the verb *vaincras* is in the conditional, this could be translated as “you would conquer it.” However, there is no conditional phrase preceding the inscription.

But there were none—only enigmas wrapped in puzzles giving rise to riddles. Saunière had redecorated the church with mysterious and brightly colored features, turning it into a rococo fantasy. Especially puzzling are the plaster reliefs of the Stations of the Cross on the walls, which Saunière commissioned to be painted in a most curious manner. In one station, Saint Joseph and Saint Mary are each carrying a child, implying that Jesus had a brother. In another, a woman with a child is standing next to Jesus; the child is wrapped in a Scottish plaid. What Baigent calls “the most curious of all” is Station XIV, which traditionally describes Jesus being placed in the tomb prior to his resurrection.



*Fig. 9.1. Station of the Cross XIV, Church of Saint Mary Magdalene, Rennes le Château (Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

Julie noticed that there was a wound on the right side of Jesus's body, a wound recorded neither in the Bible nor in other paintings of the crucifixion.

In the text accompanying this image, Baigent writes,

This image is adorned in an eccentric and enigmatic manner: the moon is shown as having risen, night has fallen, the Passover has begun. No one of the Jewish faith would be handling a dead body at this time. This image then is depicting Jesus, still living, being carried out of his tomb rather than into it. What great secret was the priest of this church, the Abbé Béranger Saunière, revealing?<sup>4</sup>

Baigent concludes that, by this image, Saunière appears to be telling us that Jesus survived the crucifixion and that this was the heretical knowledge the priest had discovered high in the hills of southern France.

## Le Dragon de Rhedae

Puzzled, we walked down from the church to a restaurant called Le Dragon de Rhedae. It was late in the afternoon, and lunch service was just ending. But the waitress, who spoke flawless English with a sultry French accent, immediately felt a rapport with Julie and invited us to stay, locking the front gate behind us. How Julie does it is a mystery to me, but the fact is undeniable: wherever we go, women are drawn to her. Perhaps it is because Julie is a therapist. Perhaps, and most likely, it is because she exudes kindness to everyone she meets. So it was with Simone, our waitress, an attractive young woman with short dark hair and piercing green eyes. She was in her late twenties, but despite her youth, there was a world weariness about her.

After the pleasantries of “where are you from” (Simone had come to Rennes from Paris two years ago) were exchanged, Julie ventured a question: “Why is this restaurant named after a dragon, and why are there two dragons over the holy water in the church?”

*Why are you bothering to ask a waitress?* I thought to myself as I studied a map of the region that I'd purchased at the local bookstore. But as soon as she began speaking, Simone had my full attention.

She smiled a sad smile of resignation, as if she'd been asked this question a hundred times before, then politely replied, "Oh, that's one of the many fabrications that surround Rennes le Château. One writer claims that this was once the capital of the Visigoths, called Rhedae, but the actual capital was Narbonne. In addition, there is the issue of the 'red serpent' that figures in the fictional Priory of Sion story, as well as a connection to Poussin's painting *The Shepherds of Arcadia*, in which the tombstone bears the inscription *JESUS, KING OF RHEDAE, HIDDEN IN ARQUES.*"

"How do you know this?" I asked, barely concealing my surprise.

"Oh," Simone replied with a shrug, "I was studying for my doctorate in art history and archaeology at the Sorbonne when I became intrigued, perhaps I should say obsessed, with Rennes le Château during a vacation in the Pyrenees. I became so fascinated with the mystery of this place that I took a leave from my studies and spent the last two years reading everything ever written on the subject in French, English, and German and searching every square inch of this village and the surrounding countryside, to the point that I've run out of funds and cannot complete my degree."

"You must have learned a lot," said Julie.

"Oh yes," Simone agreed sarcastically. "I've learned, to my deep regret, that everything about this mysterious village is fiction and fantasy. I've learned that I've wasted the last two years of my life."

"Well, what about the treasure of Saunière?" I inquired, now fully engaged in the conversation.

"Which treasure are you talking about?" Simone returned the question. "Would you like to talk about the secret treasure hoards of the Merovingian kings or the Visigoths or the heretical Cathars—who despite being devout Catholics were obliterated by the Vatican during the Albigensian Crusade? Or perhaps you are referring to the lost treasure that the Knights Templar brought back from the Holy Land?"



“Well, to any treasure that was ever found here,” I said. “Could this have been the source of Saunière’s sudden wealth?”

“I am sorry, but no buried treasure was ever found. In fact a year-long investigation by a scientific society from Carcassonne found absolutely no evidence to support the claim that any group had concealed a treasure in this area. The only enduring treasure of Rennes is tourism. How did your Marshall McLuhan put it: ‘the media is the message’? Well, here, ‘the mystery is the message.’ Look around! This town is a haven for treasure hunters who are the source of its booming economy. *N’est ce pas?*”

“Well, what about the idea that Mary Magdalene and Jesus traveled to this region and founded a royal bloodline perpetuated by the Merovingian kings?” Julie asked.

“That is even a bigger fraud, the one about the Priory of Sion, fabricated by Pierre Plantard, who planted false documents about the secret history of the Priory in the Bibliothèque nationale during the 1960s. This story was popularized in the pseudo-historical book [*Holy Blood, Holy Grail*] by Michael Baigent and in the fictional novel [*The Da Vinci Code*] by Dan Brown.”

“We know that,” I said.

“Then you should also know that humanity needs its fantasy in order to escape what is too often a boring reality. And that’s exactly what Rennes offers for devotees of unexplained mysteries. Look,” Simone concluded, “no theory about this place has ever been proven, so one lead gives rise to another until the lines of inquiry crisscross and double back on each other, eventually fading away.”

“When did you realize this?” Julie asked.

“About six months ago, when I first learned that the ‘parchments’ were a complete fraud and that Henry Lincoln, one of the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, had become so disenchanted that he was telling audiences to believe nothing that he said.”

“Why were the parchments so important to you?” Julie asked, more curious than ever.

“As a student of art history,” Simone answered, “I became very intrigued by their reference to Poussin and his painting *Les Bergers de*





Fig. 9.2. Nicolas Poussin, *L'Automne*, 1664, courtesy of the Louvre Museum, Paris (Photo by Julie M. Brown)

*Arcadie*, or, as you say, *The Shepherds of Arcadia*. This painting, which hangs in the Louvre, depicts a group of shepherds exploring a tomb that, according to the inscription, was possibly the burial place of Jesus. They say that Poussin painted this from an actual landscape nearby, that it is a depiction of a real tomb in the nearby village of Arques accurate down to the rendering of the mountains and skyline. Unfortunately, I could not visit the tomb because it was mysteriously demolished sometime during the 1980s, after the BBC documentaries on Rennes attracted hordes of curious visitors. So I turned my attention to other paintings by Poussin, including his interpretation of *Autumn*, which portrays two peasants carrying a bunch of giant blue grapes and huge golden apples. I thought perhaps that there could be some link to the ‘blue apples’ of the parchment.”

My ears perked up at the mention of “blue apples.” I was about to bring up the topic of entheogens and ask Simone if she had ever noticed

the mushroom above the demon in the church. Julie sensed this and gently but firmly put her hand over mine to stop me.

“What were you about to say?” Simone inquired.

“Well,” I said, pausing to gather my thoughts, “you said the parchments were fake, which means so is the reference to Poussin and the blue apples. Why did you pursue this?”

“What can I say?” replied Simone. “After two years I had nothing to show for my efforts, but I was still seduced by the idea of solving ‘the mystery,’ so I kept going and going, until the last path I traveled turned into a dead end.”

“So the entire idea of Jesus and Mary Magdalene coming here is a myth,” Julie declared.

“No, oh no! I did not say that,” Simone shook her head.

“What do you mean? Isn’t that the point of all you’ve just told us, that everything about the mystery of Rennes le Château is a lie?” I asked.

“Well, no,” Simone replied. “What I’ve told you is that nothing about this place has ever been proven. That without the Priory of Sion there is no mystery. But this does not mean they were not here. That’s another story.” Simone sat back in her chair, staring straight at us, awaiting our reactions.

Julie reached across the table and touched her hand. “Please, tell us,” she asked.

Simone glanced around the restaurant to make sure that we were still alone. “If you really want to know the truth about Jesus and Mary Magdalene, you must go to Le Carol,” she said in a whisper.

“What’s that?” Julie inquired. “I’d read a lot about Rennes le Château but never heard of Le Carol before.”

“Only a few people know about Le Carol. It’s an abandoned church, or should I say a grotto, up in the Pyrenees. It’s off the main roads, and there are no signs. I’ll draw you a map.” Simone proceeded to sketch a map on the napkin and handed it to me.

“What will we find there?” I asked.

“You must go and see for yourself. That’s all I can say. *C’est tout*,” Simone answered. At that, she stood up and bid us goodbye.

## Le Carol

Driving slowly over rural roads, it took two hours to travel from Axat to Baulou, home to the former monastery of Carol (Le Carol). We traveled westward, passing picturesque farming villages, emerald-green fields, and long-abandoned Cathar castles before climbing into the foothills of the Pyrenees, whose peaks soar higher than eleven thousand feet.

Le Carol was the magnum opus of Abbé Louis de Coma (1822–1911), a priest whose life had intriguing similarities to that of Béranger Saunière.<sup>5</sup> Using funds provided by the Comtesse de Chambord (who was married to Henry V), the devout de Coma turned his family estate into a sprawling religious center during the 1860s. The center included a monastery, gardens with springs and ponds, paths leading to large chapels with the Stations of the Cross, and a regal church modeled after Lourdes.

At the core of de Coma's work was his devotion to Mary Magdalene. While no pictures remain of the inside of the original church, the underground grotto church and burial chambers he built for Mary Magdalene are still there. For reasons that have never been explained, in 1956 the Catholic diocese had the entire monastery complex leveled with dynamite. Today, all that remains is a two-story stone building housing a cozy vacation apartment.

Even with Simone's hand-drawn map, we missed the unmarked exit to Le Carol twice before finally turning down the one-lane, tree-lined road that descended to the building. The lodgers were a vacationing German couple who had never heard of Le Carol. But the local caretaker knew it well. She called her two boys to show us the way. After they led us through a cow pasture, we cautiously made our way down a hill and through dense underbrush until we arrived at the cave-like opening to what had once been the grotto church.

It was dark and dank and difficult to see as we entered the grotto. We had brought a flashlight with us, and as we shined the light around we caught sight of two life-size figures carved in stone. As our eyes became accustomed to the dim light, we realized we were looking at the most arresting statues of Jesus and Mary Magdalene we had ever seen. Down one short passage was the figure of a middle-aged, full-bearded Jesus, nestled in

a niche in the grotto wall. He was sitting with legs folded underneath, his right hand extended downward with the palm facing out and his left hand placed over his heart. His head was tilted upward in a gesture of mourning or prayer. Underneath the statue were two child-sized graves.

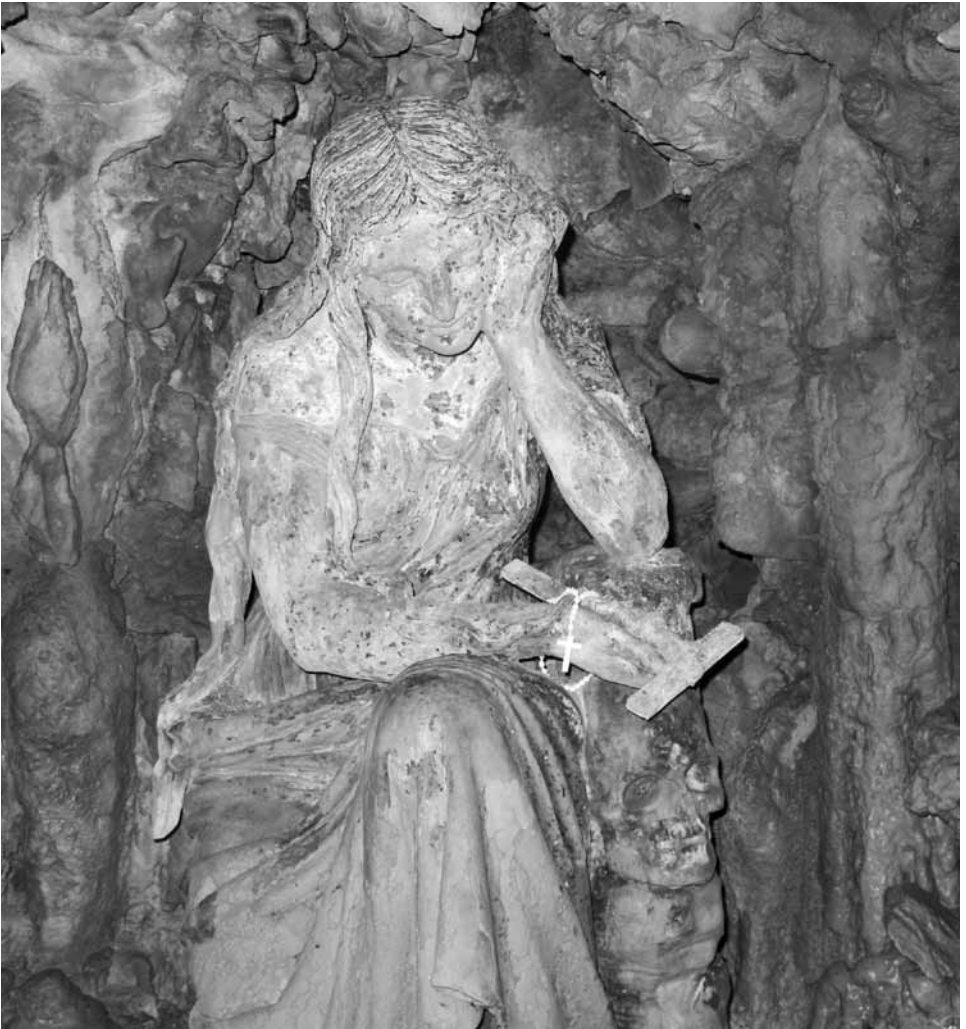
Nearby, surrounded by stalagmites and stalactites, we found the sculpture of a seated, Semitic-looking Mary Magdalene with long hair. Her downcast head was cradled in her left hand, while her right hand



*Fig. 9.3. Statue of Jesus, grotto church of Le Carol, France  
(Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

covered a cross that rested on top of a human skull. This crestfallen figure exuded an air of pious mourning.

The feeling of trepidation Julie and I felt on entering this dimly lit cavern was soon replaced with an overwhelming sense of the surreal. The figures of Jesus and Mary Magdalene were not the stereotypical icons that usually decorate churches. These were so life-like, evoking powerful feelings, as if they had actually posed for the artist.



*Fig. 9.4. Statue of Mary Magdalene, grotto church of Le Carol, France  
(Photo by Julie M. Brown)*



We stood silently and reverently in the dank grotto, oblivious to the passage of time. Finally, Julie turned to me and said, “This feels real. I’ve always sensed that they came to this region, ever since I first learned about Rennes le Château. Now I know. I feel it in my bones.”


### *Schadenfreude*

The next day, we returned to Rennes le Château hoping to see Simone again, to share our experience of Le Carol, and most of all to find out what else she might know about the earth-shattering possibility that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had lived in this area, had walked these hills, and had performed baptisms in the nearby village of Rennes-les-Bains. To our dismay, Simone was off that day.

The only bookstore in town, the Atelier Empreinte, was a repository of many of the more than one hundred books written about the enduring mystery of this hilltop village: books on the Merovingian kings, Priory of Sion, Cathars, Temple of Solomon, sacred geometry, occult symbolism, and the life of the town’s most famous celebrity, Béranger Saunière. There was something here to whet the appetite of the most esoteric seeker. In essence, Rennes le Château was a veritable Disneyland for treasure hunters, a tantalizing magic kingdom that existed in an ethereal realm between myth and reality, the creation of the restless human need for the unknown.

Mystery is a harsh mistress. As we drove away, I kept thinking of the concept of *schadenfreude*, which means taking delight in the misfortunes of others. Although I felt compassion for the path Simone had taken, I took no joy in her pathos. But I did feel a sense of relief in knowing that we would not repeat her mistakes. For there was simply no way to interpret the delicate blue mushroom symbol sculpted over the holy water bowl in the Church of Saint Mary Magdalene as a compelling entheogenic explanation for the mystery of Rennes le Château.

Julie and I at last turned north to visit the grand cathedrals of Canterbury in England and Chartres in France. We decided to first cross the English Channel to Canterbury, birthplace of the most notorious illuminated manuscript in all of Christendom.



# 10

## Canterbury Tales

Canterbury Cathedral, England—1180

If Chartres Cathedral is one of the high holy places of Christendom, then the Great Canterbury Psalter is one of its high holy books. This psalter is a magnificent illuminated manuscript (nineteen inches high by thirteen inches wide) originally bound in leather covered with precious gems. It is described by one art historian as “a peerless masterpiece.”<sup>1</sup> Given the splendor of this manuscript, it may have been commissioned by King Henry II of England or King Louis VII of France.

The psalter opens with eight stunning folios (pages), each containing twelve lavishly colored, gold-embellished miniature paintings. These opening folios depict the history of the world according to the Scriptures, from the Creation to the life of Jesus. While the biblical narrative is traditional, offering psalms, songs, and prayers, the illustrations are exceptional.

Numerous red, blue, orange, and tan stylized mushrooms dot the first hundred pages, including a picture showing God as the creator of plants, or more specifically, as the creator of sacred mushrooms (see plate 12). The red mushroom with white speckles on the right is *Amanita muscaria*. The next to appear is blue, attesting to *Psilocybe* mushrooms. While several authors have identified the following plant as a Syrian rue (*Peganum harmala*) pod, careful inspection reveals that

it bears no resemblance.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the color, shape, and fringes of the eight tiny mushroom images embedded in the cap suggest *Panaeolus*, a psilocybin-containing mushroom found in England and northern Europe. While others have described the plant on the far left as “an Opium Poppy in the shape of a mushroom,” again, there is little resemblance either to the flower or the pod of the opium plant. Instead, this appears to be another mushroom of the genus *Psilocybe*.

Much like the huge *Amanita muscaria* in the Temptation fresco at Plaincourault, this dramatic illustration in the Great Canterbury Psalter, depicting God as lord of psychoactive plants on the third day of Creation, is an iconic image in the field of ethnomycology. It can be found on multiple websites and graces the covers of several books on sacred mushrooms.<sup>3</sup> Like the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre, the Great Canterbury Psalter is tantalizing and pleasing to the eye. But getting up close and personal—actually touching and photographing it—well, that’s another story.

## Saint Francis of the Animals

Initially, while still in France, Julie and I had hoped to examine the original Great Canterbury Psalter at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, where Napoleon had placed it in 1873, and where it remains today. We quickly abandoned this idea after learning we would not be able to see, much less touch or photograph, the original manuscript but would only be permitted to view a colored microfilm of it.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, an Internet search revealed that exact replicas of the psalter were available in England at Canterbury Christ Church University and at Cambridge University. They were available because in 2004 M. Moleiro, a Barcelona publisher of rare religious books, brought forth an exact reproduction of the Great Canterbury Psalter.<sup>5</sup> In the companion commentary volume, Nigel Morgan, a distinguished professor of art history at Cambridge University, authored several essays on the creation of the psalter.

Curiously, the Great Canterbury Psalter encompasses two masterpieces executed in two different places and at different times. The



first and oldest part, which presents the entheogenic images, was produced between 1180 and 1200 in the Christ Church scriptorium in Canterbury, one of the most important workshops for making illuminated Bibles in England.<sup>6</sup> Then, after mysteriously disappearing for more than a century, the unfinished psalter traveled to Catalonia, where it was completed between 1340 and 1350 by acclaimed artist Ferrer Bassa.

Speeding under the English Channel via the Chunnel, the Eurostar train whisked us from the Gare du Nord in Paris to Saint Pancras station in London in just over two hours. Upon arriving, we wheeled our luggage across a busy thoroughfare to nearby Kings Cross railway station and took the next available train to Cambridge. After settling in at our Edwardian bed-and-breakfast, we decided to stroll along the banks of the River Cam, which languidly winds its way through the historic university town.

We walked and walked, passing punts, rowing sculls, and colorfully decorated houseboats until we came to a large meadow with walking paths. There we encountered a herd of English cows idling around a water trough. These were a breed of small cows, no taller than chest high. Enthralled by the sight of these cute creatures, Julie ran off to pet the nearest one.

“Careful, Julie,” I cried with some alarm in my voice.

“Don’t worry,” she laughed. “Remember, I’m Saint Francis of the animals. They love me.”

As Julie put her hand out to pet a brown-and-white cow, he lowered his head and butted her in the thigh. Then, as she turned to run away, he followed and gave her a quick jab in the butt. Fortunately, his horns were small.

Following Julie as she beat a hasty retreat back down the path, I laughed. “Come back, Saint Francis, you’re safe now. I never knew you could run like the wind.”

“I can when I am being chased by a mad cow,” replied a chastened Julie.

“This has never happened to you before. Do you think it’s a sign that things will go awry for us here in Cambridge?” I asked.

“Probably,” Julie answered, trying to catch her breath.  
And so they did.

## Evil Elf Librarian

A cocoon of pompous pretension surrounds the shire of Cambridge. As the residents never tire of telling you, there are thirty-one colleges at Cambridge, including Trinity College, founded in 1546, where the Wren Library is located with its treasured collection of early manuscripts. The main entrance to the college bears an elaborate coat of arms.

There a man in a black suit and bowler hat officiously informed us, “The College is closed to visitors.” When I told him we had a reading appointment at the Wren Library, he became deferential and pointed diagonally across the large courtyard to a small opening. “Go through the cloisters and you’ll find the Wren Library.”

Passing beneath ancient turrets, we entered through a small wooden door and were directed to the second floor. The decor of the Wren Library had not changed much since the Renaissance. The bookcases held large leather- and clothbound volumes. The center aisle was lined with marble busts of famous scientists, thinkers, and writers through the ages, including Sir Isaac Newton and John Milton, whose original works are here.

Just beyond a life-size statue of Lord Byron, we noticed a comical-looking balding man, with long wisps of hair and a scruffy beard. He was sitting behind a large desk on a raised dais, quizzically peering down at us through thick spectacles as we approached. He reminded me of the malevolent elves I had read about in European fairy tales. Like them, this librarian was cantankerous, but he also possessed magical powers: in our case, the power to find rare books. Julie and I nicknamed him the “Evil Elf Librarian.”

Perpendicular to the desk was a long reading table with overhead lights and wide wooden stands with thick cushions for holding heavy manuscripts. A young, red-haired, ruddy-cheeked scholar was sitting at the table, his head buried in a large tome. The evil elf smiled a dia-

bolical smile that revealed yellow-stained teeth. After we explained the purpose of our visit, he silently motioned for us to sit. Our hopes were quickly dashed as the first large book he brought was not the Great Canterbury Psalter we sought. Rather, it turned out to be the famous Eadwine Psalter. Let the Evil Elf Librarian games begin!

I patiently explained that the Wren reference person, whom I originally called, told me that what we are looking for is shelved under W H.16.18. The evil elf rubbed his hands together, bowed in an exaggerated manner, and proceeded to extract an oversize volume from a metal vault behind a walled-off area. As soon as I looked at the cover and began turning the pages, I got a sinking feeling in my stomach. "This is not the book," I told him.

"Oh, yes it is," he replied, exuding a supercilious attitude that silently proclaimed *gotcha*.

"This is beginning to resemble *Brazil*," Julie said to me, referring to an absurdist 1980s British movie we once saw about a man trapped in a heartless bureaucracy.

"Shhh!" hissed the Evil Elf. "*This* is the Wren Library."

It felt as if I were in a surreal scene straight out of a Monty Python movie. In desperation, I engaged the young scholar in the conversation. The scholar and the elf exchanged words, consulted catalogs, and exchanged words again. They drew near. The elf reeked of body odor. The young man told me, "We do not have that volume here." Julie looked exasperated.

Running out of options, I inflated myself like a puffer fish and stated in my most professorial voice that the head reference librarian had personally informed me it was there. They were both very impressed but replied that there must be some misunderstanding, for certainly the head librarian cannot be wrong.

"Indeed, there must be," I insisted. "I have been communicating by e-mail with the Wren reference librarian, whom I specifically asked for this book, and who told me it would be available, here, today.

"There must have been a miscommunication," the young man repeated.

The elf smirked.

“We’ve come all the way from America to see this. How could this be happening?” Julie bemoaned, on the verge of despair.

“Shhh!” hissed the elf. “You are in the Wren Library.”

“Perhaps it is in one of the other college libraries. But how would I search for it?” I asked.

The elf obsequiously brought me a thick volume with an index of all 1,250 illuminated manuscripts housed in Cambridge libraries and museums.<sup>7</sup> But he had only volume one, and I immediately saw from the contents that the section on English manuscripts would be in volume four. I asked for volume four. The elf picked up the receiver of the vintage telephone and called the central librarian, leering at us while he methodically dialed each number.

He turned to me and intoned, “We do not have that volume. It will not be published until next year. Perhaps you can return then.” The elf grinned, barely able to contain his delight.

At last the young scholar took pity on us. We engaged in a rapid-fire conversation, during which I told him we were looking for the replica of the Great Canterbury Psalter, published in Barcelona by Moleiro.

“Oh, you want the *replica*,” he exhaled. “We thought you wanted to see the original Great Canterbury Psalter, which is definitely not here.” With this, he smiled, jotted down the information, and headed off to consult a nearby computer terminal.

He returned a few minutes later, striding confidently between the stacks. I asked if he brought good tidings.

“Mixed,” he replied. “We do not have it here, but the rare books room at the Cambridge University Library does have a copy,” he said, giving me the call number.

*Curses, foiled again*, the evil elf seemed to say to himself while scowling at us, as Julie and I nodded goodbye and triumphantly exited the Wren Library.

## The Great Canterbury Psalter

In contrast to the archaic Wren Library, the Rare Books Reading Room at the main Cambridge University Library is contemporary, spacious,

and filled with natural light. Julie and I were beside ourselves with anticipation as the librarian handed us our prize: the Great Canterbury Psalter. The oversize book was so heavy that it accidentally slid out of its brown leather case as I went to place it on the reading table. Julie lurched forward to prevent it from falling on the floor, only to deflect this limited-edition replica, which Moleiro sells for ten thousand dollars, onto the table, where it landed with a resounding thud. As everyone in the room turned and stared at us, I nodded apologetically and heard the evil elf's admonition ringing in my ears.

I slowly turned the luxurious parchment pages back to the opening folio (f. 1r), which contains twelve scenes from Genesis, bordered by phrases from the Old Testament in the Vulgate, the Catholic Church's official Latin translation of the Bible. The first panel depicts the Creation (God creating light, *Fiat lux: dixit Deus, et facta est lux*). Following the Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, the last panel shows God's rejection of Cain's offering. I called Julie's attention to panel 3, showing God creating plants. Nearly touching the page, and speaking in a barely audible whisper, I pointed out each of the mind-altering mushrooms in the panel (*Amanita muscaria*, *Panaeolus*, and two varieties of *Psilocybe*).

"There's more here," Julie interjected. "In panel 4, at the beginning of the second row down from the top, where God is placing the sun and moon in the sky, green plants appear next to the mushrooms that first appeared in panel 3. Like the fresco painters of Saint-Savin, this artist wanted to show the difference between fungi and plants" (see plate 13).

## Jesus Heals the Leper

According to the Gospels, the dipping of Jesus in the Jordan River by John the Baptist was the charismatic initiation of his ministry. As Jesus rose out of the waters, the Spirit of God descended from heaven in the form of a dove, affirming him as the chosen Messiah descended from the line of King David. The third folio (f. 3r) of the Great Canterbury Psalter depicts a series of scenes from the life of Christ as he goes forth from Jordan to fulfill his mission. These scenes include the baptism by

John, changing water to wine, forty days alone in the desert, and the triple temptations of Satan.

In the tenth panel of this folio, under the title *Healing of the Leper* (*De curatione leprosi*), we see Jesus laying hands on a leper and performing a healing ceremony (see plate 14). The scroll in the leper's left hand translates as "Master, if you want, you may cleanse me."<sup>8</sup> Curiously, the scroll is not directed toward Jesus but points to and merges with the stem of the tan mushroom at the base of the panel. In turn, Jesus is holding a scroll in his left hand that extends to the back of the leper, saying "I want to: Be cleansed." Here, the artist is making a direct link between Jesus's healing ministry and the curing power of sacred mushrooms.

Throughout the psalter, there are numerous images of Jesus in association with mushrooms. At times, entheogens are found in significant scenes such as those shown in the pictures just mentioned or in dramatic events involving encounters with angels, demons, and demigods. The fact that the illustrators of the Great Canterbury Psalter sometimes juxtapose naturalist or stylized mushrooms with trees or plants that have foliage indicates that they clearly knew the difference between the two.<sup>9</sup>

### "I Never Noticed That"

Curious what art historians would say about these mushroom images, I called Professor Morgan at Cambridge University; the receptionist told me he was not in the office. Next I phoned Charles Insley, senior lecturer in medieval history and keeper of the Great Canterbury Psalter replica at Christ Church University in Canterbury. When I informed Insley about the presence of entheogenic mushrooms in the psalter, he was not at all surprised and acknowledged that such practices could, indeed, have been perpetuated by the clergy. However, he quickly added that, since the Catholic Church was far from omnipotent during the Middle Ages, it frequently had to accommodate the customs and beliefs of the "pagan royalty."

"Professor Insley," I asked pointedly, "what do you think about the silence of the art historians and theologians on these sacred psychoac-

tive images in the Great Canterbury Psalter? Or in Christian art in general, for that matter?"

"Well, in my view," he replied, carefully choosing his words, "it's not that they are purposely ignoring them, as some might think. Rather I believe that most art historians and theologians are simply not aware of them."

"Really?" I said, feigning surprise, because I was curious what he would say next in support of this view.

"There's no doubt in my mind," Insley affirmed. "In fact, if you want definitive confirmation, I suggest you call Professor Nigel Morgan at Cambridge. He coauthored the commentary that Moleiro published with the psalter."

"I called his office the other day, but he wasn't in," I replied.

"Well, I suggest you keep trying," Insley said, underscoring the importance of Morgan's opinion on the matter.

A few days later, I was finally able to reach Professor Morgan by phone. After introducing myself as an anthropologist and inquiring about the history of the Great Canterbury Psalter, I asked Morgan if he'd ever noticed the colorful mushroom shapes in the scenes from Genesis. A few moments of silence followed, which ended when Morgan asked if I would mind waiting while he consulted his copy of the psalter. When Morgan spoke again, his tone had changed from collegial to cold, as if the topic made him uncomfortable.

"Professor Brown," Morgan said in a crisp British accent, "I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't know a mushroom if I saw one." With that, he excused himself and ended the conversation.

## Medieval Magicians

As Chartres Cathedral custodian Etienne Houvet writes in *Chartres: Guide of the Cathedral*,

There one walks as if clad in a garment of gems which fall from our unrivalled windows . . . as if the walls were strewn with golden dust.

Did some medieval magicians want to carry us away to dreamland? No, artists merely tried to represent what the mystic city is, in which man's soul can meet with God.<sup>10</sup>

As Julie and I entered Chartres Cathedral, we were swept away, suddenly moving within a vast kaleidoscope, through a symphony in glass and stone. Each step we took down the south aisle of the nave flooded our senses with shifting patterns of multicolored light, which came streaming through elegant stained-glass windows that soared more than one hundred feet above the cathedral floor (see plate 15).

Our Lady of Chartres is one of the finest examples of French Gothic architecture. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the destination of one of the Catholic Church's most popular pilgrimages in honor of the Virgin Mary. The cathedral is massive. Its spires rise 375 feet above the city streets. But due to its perfect proportions and airy stained-glass windows, it does not feel heavy or imposing. Lattice-like flying buttresses allowed for the opening up of the walls to accommodate two tiers of windows.

The current cathedral is one of at least five that have occupied the site since the fourth century. After a catastrophic fire the cathedral, as it now stands, was reconstructed between 1194 and 1220. What makes this cathedral special is its exceptional state of preservation. The majority of the original windows have survived intact from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Describing the rapid reconstruction of Chartres at the beginning of the thirteenth century, Malcom B. Miller, a distinguished English guide to the cathedral, explains that "the remarkable speed was made possible through the funds that poured in, as well as the voluntary physical assistance of thousands who gathered in the quarries at Berchères praying and chanting and dragged carts laden with stone five miles to the building site."<sup>11</sup> Forty-four of the thirteenth-century windows contain the coat of arms of their royal or aristocratic donors. Other windows were donated by citizens of French cities and by artisan guilds such as bakers, carpenters, and wine merchants.

Due to this royal patronage, religious blessing, and municipal





*Fig. 10.1. Chartres Cathedral, Chartres, France  
(Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

endorsement, Julie and I did not expect to find evidence of entheogens among the stained-glass windows of Chartres. No, not in this holy seat of bishops ordained by the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, we used binoculars to examine each and every panel in the cathedral's 176 stained-glass windows. Many of the panels depict scenes from the Bible story portrayed by the window (i.e., Adam and Eve, the life of Mary, the Last Judgment).

## Saint Martin Window

In contrast to the small parish church of Saint Martin, trying to take photographs in an immense cathedral turned out to be a grueling undertaking. After passing through the nave, we paused in front of the window dedicated to Saint Martin.

“Isn’t this the same Saint Martin whose church we visited in Vicq?” Julie asked.

“Yes,” I replied, scanning the window from bottom to top. “Look, there, about one-third of the way up! There’s Saint Martin and his companion contemplating a bright red mushroom with white markings” (see plate 16).

“Not so fast,” said Julie, pointing to the story of St. Martin in the guidebook we had purchased at the entrance. “First of all, the guide states that, in panels 13, 14, and 15, Martin ‘is consecrated the Bishop of Tours.’ Secondly, in the central panel 14, where Martin is actually being ordained as bishop, there is a red halo around his head—the same red halo Martin is wearing in every panel that depicts him. So, the person gazing at the mushroom in panel 13 is definitely not Saint Martin.”

“You’re right,” I conceded, disconcerted but nevertheless convinced by the perspicacity of Julie’s insights.

Since the guidebook conveniently provided a number and description for each panel in every stained-glass window in the entire cathedral, it was possible to follow the Bible stories scene by scene. Finding our first clear evidence of an *Amanita muscaria* at Chartres was exciting. To our surprise, we discovered mushrooms in many important Bible stories, such as the Assumption and the parable of the Good Samaritan, and in the window depicting the Passion and the Resurrection.

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\*For an in-depth analysis of this Saint Martin window, see Hatsis, “The Mushroom in Mommy Fortuna’s Midnight Carnival.”

## Story of Mary Magdalene

“We’ve got to scrutinize every window in the cathedral,” I said.

“Okay,” said Julie, somewhat reluctantly, “but only if you promise that we can first stop for lunch.”

After a delicious stew at Le Pichet restaurant, we reentered the cathedral through the main entrance, reinvigorated for the task ahead. After passing under the West Rose and Lancet windows, we entered the south aisle of the nave and quickly arrived at the lower window dedicated to Mary Magdalene (window 5; see plate 17).<sup>12</sup>

Here in the central roundel of the window (starting from the bottom left panel and moving counterclockwise), as Mary Magdalene enters the holy sepulcher, an angel points to the shroud that had covered Jesus, now draped over a ledge in the empty tomb (panel 11). In the next panel (12), the risen Jesus first appears to Mary Magdalene holding a cross, with his back to two large mushrooms. When Mary Magdalene recognizes Jesus and reaches to touch him, Jesus signals for her to stay back and says, “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father” (John 20:17).

Written down some seventy years after Jesus’s death, the stories surrounding the Resurrection in the Gospels have undoubtedly been embellished over time. As scholars point out, we cannot know the truth about what transpired in the holy sepulchre. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the Catholic Church is built upon the transformational moment of the Resurrection. As events unfolded following the discovery of the empty tomb, the despondency of the disciples gave way to elation. In overcoming death, as Jesus said he would, he fulfilled the prophecies. From the perspective of the Psychedelic Gospels, it is significant that Jesus’s ascendance to the Kingdom of Heaven (depicted in panel 12) is facilitated by psychoactive mushrooms. As he turns to take leave of Mary Magdalene, who is surrounded by two foliated trees on the earthly plane, Jesus will enter into heaven by passing through a mystic portal between two sacred mushrooms.

“Julie!” I exclaimed. “You’re never going to believe what the guidebook says about Mary Magdalene in the next panel.” Julie stopped

taking pictures and turned to look at me. “It claims that, according to legend, along with her brother Lazarus, her sister Martha, Saint Maximin, and other Christians, she was put to sea and abandoned in a boat by infidels. Specifically, it states that according to legend ‘the Magdalene is shown (15) disembarking in Provence from a boat which has sails and even a pilot holding an oar. . . . Having become a hermit on the Sainte-Baume, a mountain near Marseille, Mary Magdalene died there (18).’”<sup>13</sup>

“See, I told you she went to France!” Julie said. “Maybe Simone, the woman we met in Rennes le Château, was on to something she simply could not prove. Perhaps this was the real treasure that the priest Béranger Saunière found.”

We continued taking pictures throughout the afternoon, stopping only when the light began to fade. We spent the night at a nearby hotel and worked all the next day before driving back to Paris in the car we had rented at the Gare du Nord. All in all, we documented at least thirteen Old and New Testament stories showing mushroom images, including several stories related to the life of Jesus. The Old Testament stories included that of the Zodiac Window, showing the cycle of the “labors of the months,” along with the stories of Adam and Eve, Joseph, and Noah.

Representative of these New Testament stories is the Saint Eustace Window (62). The opening panels of this window show Placidus (the future Saint Eustace) hunting stag on horseback, surrounded by hunting horns, huntsmen, and hounds (panels 6–10). Next, in panel 11 (see plate 18) we see the conversion of Placidus to Saint Eustace. Flanked by sacred mushrooms, he kneels and prays before the crucifix, which appears between the antlers of a stag standing regally before him.

As in the fresco of the *Purification of Isaiah’s Lips* in Saint Martin’s Church, entering this Saint Eustace scene from the top are multicolored concentric rings, from which an angelic hand emerges to anoint Saint Eustace’s head with red rays of uncircumscribable light. This scene strongly suggests that entheogens played a seminal role in Saint Eustace’s awakening, conversion, and entrance into Christ consciousness.

## City of Lights

Back in Paris, Julie and I settled into a cozy apartment in Montmartre for a few days to write up our notes and label the hundreds of pictures we had taken at Chartres. One sunny afternoon, we climbed the steep city streets leading to the Basilica of the Sacred Heart (Sacré Cœur), a church built on the highest point in all of Paris. When we arrived at a grassy knoll in front of the basilica, we spread out a blanket and enjoyed a picnic.

With a panoramic view of the City of Lights before us, Julie and I reflected on the many mushroom images we had seen over the past week in the illuminations of the Great Canterbury Psalter in England and in the stained-glass windows of Chartres Cathedral in France. The ubiquitous presence of these entheogenic icons in the high holy places of Christianity dispelled any notion that what we had seen earlier in rural France was an anomaly or the unique creation of a renegade religious cult.

Julie and I wondered who had placed these sacred mushroom images in the stained-glass windows of Chartres Cathedral. Was it the royalty and aristocrats who financed the reconstruction of the cathedral in the thirteenth century? The bishops and monks who supervised the rebuilding project over decades? The master glaziers and artisans who designed the stained-glass windows? Or all of them, collaborating together?

And how could these entheogens exist in plain sight for centuries without attracting the notice of clergymen, art historians, medievalists, theologians, and multitudes of tourists? Two days later, Julie and I found answers to these questions in a rare painting of the Jesse Tree on the ceiling of Saint Michael's Church in Germany.



# 11

## Saint Bernward's Secret

Hildesheim, Germany—1015

As a college student in 1963—the year President Kennedy was assassinated—I spent a year abroad at Tübingen University in Germany. My return, a half century later, brought back many memories. Making our way along the platform of the Gare du Nord toward our train and the first-class passenger cars, I recalled those pleasant, carefree days—full of lively cafés, beer cellars, and classical music concerts. I was startled out of my reverie when a German conductor (the train from Paris to Karlsruhe had an all-German crew) blocked our path. Large and threatening, he said, “Go to vagon twelf!” His voice was harsh as he pointed toward the middle of the train. Julie and I looked at each other without speaking, and read in each other’s eyes our mutual fear. When Julie took my hand, I could tell she was thinking of those millions of Jews who were herded into cattle cars and taken to concentration camps. Auschwitz, Treblinka, Dachau—those horrific names were burned into the memory of every Jewish-American kid raised in the decades following World War II, the long-ago but still vivid 1940s and 1950s.

When the train at last pulled away from the station, Julie turned to

me and asked, "Whatever made you go to Germany to study?"

I could understand her dismay, and I explained that I'd had an inspiring high-school German teacher and had fallen in love with German literature and the German language itself. "I found Goethe and Rilke captivating, but I never realized until I actually lived in this country that both writers felt alienated from its authoritarian culture. Would you like to hear about my time in Germany?"

"Um," said Julie, hesitating, "maybe some other time. I can't get that conductor's threatening manner out of my mind, so I'd rather talk about something else."

After a day of traveling, we'd planned to spend the night in Karlsruhe, just over the French-German border, before taking a train to Munich in southeastern Germany. Once there, we would rent a car and drive north to the Abbey of Eichstätt to view a tapestry dedicated to Saint Walburga\* (710–779), a revered Benedictine nun. Her relics, which had been buried in a rocky niche, began to exude a miraculous healing oil a hundred years after she died, which has drawn pilgrims to the abbey for more than one thousand years.

The caption under a photo of the tapestry that I brought with me read, "St. Valburga is depicted holding a distinct *Amanita muscaria* in its young bulbous state of development, complete with white spots—the key to 'feast' celebrations. The background is red with white floral decorations."<sup>1</sup> Looking closely at the photo, Julie disagreed with this description (see plate 19).

"Jer," she said, calling me to the hotel room window to examine the photo in the light. "Look closely, there at the bottom. That's a straight edge, not the round bulb of an *Amanita*. And furthermore, this white 'bulb' is serrated all over with regular grooves. That's not a mushroom she's carrying, but a white vial with a red top, probably holding her healing oil."

An Internet search turned up other photos of Saint Walburga holding mainly vials made of bronze or brass. "You're right," I agreed. "It looks like you just saved us from traveling to the wrong place."

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\*"Saint Walburga" is sometimes spelled as "Saint Valburga."

“Great,” Julie replied. “But what are we going to do now? We’ve got a few days here before we go to Italy, and we don’t want to waste them. Do you know if there are any other churches in Germany that could have entheogenic art?”

I recalled once seeing a dramatic Garden of Eden scene painted over a huge *Amanita muscaria* cap. A Google image search revealed that it was painted on the ceiling of the Church of St. Michael in Hildesheim, Germany. I showed the image to Julie.

“That’s magnificent! How long would it take us to drive there, if we rent a car first thing in the morning?” Julie asked.

I consulted our map. After initially confusing Hildesheim with Hidelsheim, I concluded that the church was located just south of Hanover in northern Germany, about a four-hour drive from us.

“It’s quarter to five. Why don’t you find us a hotel while I call the nearest car rental before it closes?” I suggested.

Even though we were tired, we swung into action. The next morning, we sped down the Autobahn toward Hildesheim to see a thousand-year-old church that we’d never planned to visit. What we found there made a valuable contribution to our research.

## Jewish Cathedral Builder

Surprisingly, Saint Michael’s Church in Hildesheim was resurrected and rebuilt from the flames of World War II with the financial help of an American Jew, Bernard R. Armour. After occupying this site for a millennium, the church was completely destroyed, along with the historic center of Hildesheim, by Allied incendiary bombs on March 22, 1945.

By 1947, Armour, who was president of a chemical company originally founded in Germany, had reached a decision to assist financially in rebuilding Saint Michael’s. He wrote these words to Hildesheim: “I consider it a privilege, indeed, to be able to help in the rebuilding of Saint Michael and I, in turn, am grateful to the Almighty that He has chosen me to render such partial help as I am capable of giving you.”<sup>2</sup>

The reconstruction of Saint Michael’s began in 1950 and was com-



pleted in 1957. In 1985, UNESCO recognized the church as a World Heritage Site. A memorial plaque names Armour a “son of the persecuted people,” just as he requested.

## Millennial Bishop

Shortly before his death in 1022, Bishop Bernward smiled serenely as he surveyed the stately contours of Saint Michael's. He felt a deep sense of gratitude that he had lived long enough to fulfill his dream of creating a church that was “an image of God's order and perfection turned into stone.” In words written for All Saint's Day in 1019, Bernward tells us, “When I became bishop of Hildesheim Church, I wanted to put into practice what I had long secretly planned . . . which is that I built churches . . . and bequeathed all my possessions to the Lord.”<sup>3</sup>

But Bernward had another secret, one that he did not express in Latin but in bronze. A secret revealed in sacred art and shared only among the monastic brotherhood and other initiates among the faithful. To preserve this secret for posterity, Bernward had applied his considerable talents as an architect, metallurgist, and mathematician to enshrine the sacramental mushroom in his two masterpieces: a massive bronze door (the “Door of Salvation”) and column (the “Christ Column”), creating an entheogenic “Bible in bronze.”

In 993, when the urbane but mystical Bernward (960–1022) became the thirteenth bishop of the Holy See of Hildesheim at the age of thirty-three, “he was given a splinter of the Holy Cross by Emperor Otto III, whose teacher he had been for a long time.”<sup>4</sup> In honor of this relic he inaugurated a chapel and planned a monastery on a hill on the outskirts of the city. The foundation of Saint Michael's Church (Michaeliskirche), the church for the monastery, was laid in 1010. The church was consecrated on Saint Michael's Day (September 29) in 1033.

To commemorate the millennium and the highly anticipated Second Coming of the Lord, in 1015 Bernward cast the bronze door featuring Old and New Testament scenes in high relief. As a companion piece,

Bernward designed a tall bronze column depicting the life of Christ, which he placed prominently behind the altar, for all to see.\* The column was completed in 1020, just two years before his death.

After Bernward's canonization as Saint Bernward in 1192, the church was further adorned with a spectacular ceiling that runs the length of the nave. Designed and painted by Benedictine monks, the wooden ceiling was completed in 1240. All the ceiling boards were removed and stored for safekeeping during World War II. Afterward, the ceiling was restored and maintained in a remarkable state of preservation that, according to church records, is "true to the original."

Each work of art has a distinctive biblical theme. For the bronze door, it is the Fall and the Resurrection; for the column, it is the life of Jesus; and for the ceiling, it is the Tree of Jesse (Jessebaum). Viewed as a unified body of work, the column, doors, and ceiling represent an entheogenic legacy—created by a saint of the Catholic Church and his monastic descendants.

In the fourth panel on the left wing of the Door of Salvation, Bernward portrayed the tree in the Fall of Man as a mushroom-tree. Here, having eaten of the forbidden fruit, Adam, who is standing before an angry Lord, is pointing at a cowering Eve. Eve in turn is blaming the winged serpent coiled at her feet, the incarnation of the Tempter. Bernward left no doubt that one of the three mushrooms had already been eaten by Adam and Eve, as indicated by the broken branch springing from the lower part of the mushroom-tree.

In casting the door, Bernward took special care to precisely identify the species of psychoactive mushroom in his bronze bas-relief.<sup>5</sup> As ethnobotanist Giorgio Samorini observes, "The mushroom-tree is realistically rendered with a precision not far short of anatomical accuracy and can be identified as one of the most common Germanic and European psilocybian mushroom, *P. semilanceata*."<sup>6</sup> Botanically speaking, the mushroom-tree between Adam and Eve sprouts two bell-shaped mushrooms with pointed, nipple-like tops (papillae) and furrowed (striated) caps.

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\*When the authors visited Hildesheim in summer 2012, Bernward's bronze column stood in the church, while Bernward's door was on display in the Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum.



*Fig. 11.1. Coauthor Jerry B. Brown at Bernward's Door of Salvation, St. Michael's Church, Hildesheim, Germany, 1015  
(Photo by Julie M. Brown)*



*Fig. 11.2. Panel 4, Adam and Eve, Bernward's Door of Salvation,  
St. Michael's Church, Hildesheim, Germany, 1015  
(Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

## Christ Column

The tall bronze Christ Column, which Bernward personally cast in 1020, stands more than twelve feet tall and is nearly two feet in diameter. Ascending from the base in a coiling helix are twenty-eight scenes from the life of Jesus, starting with his baptism and ending with his entering Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> To instruct the initiates in the “holy of holies,” Bernward had strategically placed the trifold mushroom-tree, similar in every detail to the one in Eden on the door, in five of the seminal episodes of the life of Jesus, including the transfiguration.\*

In the transfiguration, the apostles Peter, James, and John go with

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\*According to Brandt (in his book *Bernwards Säule*), these seminal scenes on Bernward's column are #6, Jesus cleansing a leper; #7, recognition of Jesus as the Messiah by Peter; #16, the transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor; #20, Jesus and Zacchaeus (the tax collector); and #22, Jesus healing two blind men in Galilee.



*Fig. 11.3. Drawing of scene 16, transfiguration of Jesus, Christ Column, 1020, Saint Michael's Church (Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

Jesus to Mount Tabor, where the Old Testament prophets Moses and Elias appeared. There Jesus transforms before their eyes so that “his face did shine as the sun.” According to Matthew 17:5, “While [Peter] yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.”

Bernward's portrayal of the sacred mushroom-tree in the transfiguration of Jesus is of particular significance for the Psychedelic Gospels, given that the transfiguration is one of the main miracles attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. Unlike other miracles that were performed *by* Jesus, this one happened *to* Jesus, reaffirming, as did the baptism by John, his divinely chosen role as the son of God. Thus, the transfiguration is the pivotal moment of the New Testament where humanity first intersects with God. As Bernward implies artistically, access to the divine is mediated through the sacred sacrament of the psychoactive mushroom.





*Fig. 11.4. Scene 16, transfiguration of Jesus, Christ Column, 1020, Saint Michael's Church (Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

## Tree of Jesse

The entheogenic intention represented by Bernward's inclusion of the psychoactive sacrament on the bronze door and column was passed down generation after generation by the monks of the monastery. As a result, Bernward's monastic successors completed work on a painted wooden ceiling, which was finished in 1240, more than two centuries after his death and nearly half a century after his canonization as a Catholic saint.

The theme of the painting, which runs almost the full length of the nave, is the Tree of Jesse (Jessebaum), which is the medieval genealogy of Christ.<sup>8</sup> Here (in the second panel of the painting) Jesse of Bethlehem has a vision of the Messiah. A tree grows from Jesse, founder of the lineage of the major kings of Israel (David, Solomon, Hezekiah, and Josiah), from whose tribe the Messiah was to be born.<sup>9</sup>

The two uppermost panels show the Virgin Mary and, overlooking



*Fig. 11.5. Jesse panel, ceiling painting of the Jesse Tree, Saint Michael's Church, Hildesheim, Germany, 1240 (Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

the altar, the Savior enthroned as the Pantocrator, the Almighty. Jesse reposes at the base of the tree, enraptured in an entheogen-inspired vision, as evidenced by the psychoactive mushroom in the Eden panel (see fig. 11.5) from whose spores the Jesse Tree sprouts, as well as by the stylized mushroom shapes encrypted in Jesse's robes.\*

\*While the "mushroom hems" shown in the Last Supper scene at Saint Martin's Church are clear and easily distinguishable images, this is unusual. In most cases, these "mushroom hems" are skillfully disguised mostly in the folds of robes, but also in drapery. "The drapery in medieval illuminations often suggests a fungal configuration that once seen, is hard to dispel," observes Ruck (*Effluents of Deity*, 201).

Nowhere in the vast panorama of Romanesque and Gothic art do we find a Jesse Tree that is similar to the one in Saint Michael's Church in Hildesheim. It is without precedent to incorporate the Jesse Tree into the architectural design of a church. It is also unique to begin the Jesse Tree not with the figure of Jesse as its base, but with the Temptation scene from the Garden of Eden set against the background of a resplendent red-and-gold *Amanita muscaria* mushroom cap. As the mature mushrooms are known to turn a glistening golden color, they have sometimes been referred to as "golden apples."<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that one of the crowned kings in the upper left-hand corner is pointing to a red disk spotted with white, which could well be the cap of an *Amanita muscaria*. He holds the disk in his other hand, which is covered with his raised cloak, as if there were some reason not to touch the sacred object with his bare fingers. Other versions of this disk occur throughout the ceiling, sometimes held similarly in the folds of cloaks, which is the traditional way of holding the Torah.

Julie and I gazed at the sumptuous beauty and vibrant colors of the Jesse Tree as we slowly walked down the ninety-foot length of the nave. Seeing the story of the Jesse Tree unfold—from the Temptation of Eden to its culmination in the Christ panel—we were struck by this impressive illustration of the Psychedelic Gospels.

In this interpretation, the Eden Tree represents an entheogenic seed (in this case, a mushroom spore) planted in the Garden of Eden that grows into the Tree of Jesse. Symbolically, the Saint Michael's Jesse Tree invites the ritual celebrants to embrace Bernward's secret by drinking the juice of the sacred mushroom (the "living waters" flowing out of the trees of Eden) as the initiation into their journey toward transcendence and union with God.<sup>11</sup>

When we returned to the east side of the nave to examine the Eden panel more closely, Julie said, "This is interesting. Did you notice that Eve is holding a 'golden apple' in her left hand?"

Given that these entheogenic images were created by a Christian saint and his monastic descendants, their presence in Saint Michael's Church dispels the claim, popular in some circles, that the Catholic Church in Europe was actively suppressing "Christian mushroom



cults” during the High Middle Ages. The presence of psychedelic images in the high holy places of England, France, and Germany suggests that the use of entheogens was widespread among the Catholic religious elite.

We emphasize the fact that, whereas these mushroom images were used to instruct initiates, they remained indecipherable to the majority of the faithful. It is important to note that secrecy does not necessarily imply suppression but in this context reflects the clandestine manner in which holy rites were practiced by indigenous and classical cultures through the ages.

## Dinner at Dachau

While visiting Saint Michael's, I said, “I wish we had someone who could translate these Latin inscriptions.”

Julie asked, “Do you still have the phone number of the Germans we met at Saint Martin's? The couple who translated the scroll about the prophet? When we told them we were planning to stop in Munich, they asked us to call them.”

After locating Johann and Cristina's phone number, I checked the train schedule. We decided to spend two days in Munich and called them when we arrived at our hotel. Johann was pleased to hear from us. He told us they would pick us up the next afternoon and had a surprise for us. The surprise was a visit to a small medieval church surrounded by farmland in the rolling hills of the Bavarian countryside. As the church was nondescript, Cristina suggested we go to a nearby café famous for its apple strudel, which lifted everyone's spirits. As we settled onto the wooden benches of the outdoor table, Johann ordered four strudels each with a scoop of vanilla ice cream and coffee. From the first bite, I knew that Julie would not like it. The apples were too mushy and the flaky crust was soggy.

“How do you like it?” Cristina asked as she wolfed down the pie.

Julie nodded as she forced down another bite.

Johann smiled. “And we have another surprise. We are taking you to dinner in Dachau.”

At that, Julie began choking. As I patted her on the back, Johann called the waitress to bring water.

“Are you alright?” Cristina asked with concern in her voice.

“Cristina,” I said, wondering just how to put this, “We’re Jewish. We can’t possibly go to Dachau for dinner.”

“Why not?” asked Cristina. “It’s a lovely little town.”

Johann understood immediately. “Cristina,” he said in German, “*es war ein Konzentrationslager.*” (It was a concentration camp.)

An uncomfortable silence followed. Finally, Christina said, “I am so, so sorry. I did not realize. You see, I’ve never met a Jew before. How can you ever forgive us for what we’ve done?”

“Yes,” Johann added. “We Germans will carry this shame forever.”

“But surely you are not to blame for what happened during the war,” I said.

“Oh, yes we are. This is a guilt passed down from our fathers’ generation, a blight on German history that nothing can ever erase.”

“No,” I replied. “While we can never forgive the Nazis or forget what happened, we can certainly forgive you.” Johann and Cristina were visibly relieved, as if a burden had been lifted.

“But you don’t look Jewish, or even American,” Cristina blurted out. “We Germans are very aware of nationality. Jerry, I would take you for Italian. Julie, you look French, and that’s a compliment.”

“Thank you,” said Julie, who had recovered her composure. “We are both descended from Russian Jews, although you’re right about Jerry. He has an Italian grandfather on his mother’s side.

“But why, then, are you so interested in churches?” asked Johann.

Taken aback by this question, several thoughts came to mind at once. I thought about our promise not to discuss our research with people we did not know well—especially after our misadventure in Greece. I thought about Armour, the Jew who had helped rebuild Saint Michael’s Church. I thought about the heartfelt compassion that Johann and Cristina had expressed for the atrocities of World War II. Finally, I thought that this moment of genuine reconciliation, which we were sharing with our German hosts, provided an authentic opening.

At times like this Julie always seems to know what I am thinking. I looked at her, and she nodded ever so slightly.

Turning back to Johann and Cristina, I asked, "Do you remember when we met in Saint Martin's Church in France and you translated the Latin scroll for us?"

At this pleasant memory, Cristina's face lit up and she said, "Of course."

"Well, Julie and I were impressed with Johann's ability to identify the man kneeling before the angel as Isaiah," I continued. "After that I asked if you noticed anything unusual about the fresco."

"I remember quite clearly," Johann replied. "I found it strange that the angel was holding a tan object, rather than a glowing coal."

"Exactly," I said. "But you did not notice the giant mushrooms over the heads of the youths welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem."

The jovial mood was broken as Johann and Cristina suddenly looked confused. "We don't understand," said Johann.

"The mushrooms in the fresco are psychedelic mushrooms, what we scientifically call 'entheogens' or 'God-generating-within' plants that can connect a person to the divine."

At that Cristina's mouth tightened, and she glared at us suspiciously. Johann became apprehensive. "What exactly are you saying?" he asked pointedly.

I explained that I am an anthropologist who studies religion. "What Julie and I are doing is documenting the presence of entheogens in Christian art, mainly in medieval frescoes."

"How can you be so sure that these are 'entheogens,' as you call them, and not the palm leaves the Bible refers to when describing Jesus's entry into Jerusalem?" Johann asked.

"Because of their tan color and convex shape, which is different from the flat palm fronds that one of the youths is cutting with a scythe, and because on the tower over Jerusalem, another youth is cutting through the stem of a mushroom with a long knife, exactly the same as the knives on the table in the adjoining fresco of the *Last Supper*."

As Johann realized what I was saying, he became agitated, as if I had transgressed some invisible yet inviolable line. "Are you saying that our

Savior consumed psychedelic mushrooms at the Last Supper?” Johann asked with dismay.

“That’s what the evidence suggests. We think these mushroom images reveal an alternative Bible story, one that has been overlooked for centuries, and . . .” I began to explain. But the damage had already been done.

At that, Johann said something to Cristina in a Bavarian dialect that I could not understand. Then he abruptly stood up. “Please excuse us,” Johann said, his face flushed. “We need to use the toilet.” Cristina followed him.

After a while, Johann returned alone. Speaking in a cold voice, he informed us that Cristina was very upset and not feeling well. He had to take her home immediately, and we would have to find another way back to the hotel. “Goodbye,” he said formally and left. We were distraught by the sudden turn of events.

On the long taxi ride back to the hotel, Julie said, “It looks like you went too far.”

“I guess they won’t be doing any more Latin translations for us,” I replied, trying to make light of the situation. But deep down, I felt badly—very badly.

## Spiritual Principles

The next day, Julie and I barely noticed the breathtaking views of the Italian Alps as we traveled by train to Venice. We were too engrossed in talking about how we had hurt Johann and Cristina.

“I guess we should have stuck with our vow of silence,” I said remorsefully.

“Maybe,” Julie replied. “In any case we have an obligation to present our research in the most sensitive and positive way possible without offending people’s faith . . . and only if people are open to hearing about it. If they are, we have to be spiritual in our approach.”

“What does being spiritual mean in this context?” I asked.

“It means,” Julie said, “applying the same precepts by which we ideally try to live our lives. I’ve distilled what I’ve learned about spirituality

down to five principles: love, compassion, forgiveness, acceptance, and wisdom. For example, by opening your heart to Johann and Christina, by loving them, then you have to ask yourself if sharing this information will serve them, if it will support their well-being. If it does not serve them, then compassion dictates that, as soon as you became aware that they were uncomfortable with what you were saying, you would have stopped and delicately changed the subject.”

“You nodded, and I thought it was okay to continue,” I said.

“True. I am not trying to blame you. I was also responsible. Which brings us to acceptance, which means that you have to take responsibility for what you did, understand the lesson you need to learn, and most of all forgive and accept yourself and move on, so you can do better next time.

“Okay, I understand all of this. But you haven't said anything about wisdom.”

“That's the last and most difficult part: developing the wisdom to know when you need to apply these spiritual principles.”

We left Germany humbler and wiser, heading for the heart of Italy. Our ultimate stop was the Vatican, where we would finally resolve Wasson's riddle.






PART THREE  
.....

# Cosmic Consciousness

*Neither shall they say, Lo here! Or lo there! for, behold,  
the Kingdom of God is within you.*

JESUS (LUKE 17:20–21)



# 12

## The Pope's Banker

Aquileia, Italy—330

What do Saint George the dragon slayer and the fifteenth-century witch hunts have in common? Nothing at all, you might assume. But historically the myth of Saint George and the Dragon and, as we shall soon see, the Catholic Church's Inquisition against heresy and paganism are linked through the gruesome nexus of the Black Death, the "most lethal disaster in human history," which killed up to 60 percent of the population of Europe from 1347 to 1352. According to historian Barbara Tuchman, this was "a violent, tormented, bewildered, suffering and disintegrating age, a time, as many thought, of Satan triumphant."<sup>1</sup>

This horrific time was the catalyst for the witch-hunt craze, when the horned god of shamanism became the horned devil of Christianity. The height of the witch-hunt craze took place between 1550 and 1650, as the village sorcerers and folk healers of pastoral Europe were condemned as "satanic witches" and burned at the stake by the tens of thousands. This calamitous age was also the reason why entheogens virtually disappeared from Christian art after the High Middle Ages.

Julie and I first became aware of this curious connection between Saint George and the witches during an earlier visit to Prague back in 2006. There, in an antique shop near the Prague Castle, we con-



nected the dots between the myth of Saint George and the Catholic Church's campaign against paganism. As these events took place several years prior to our current quest, it is best to recount them by citing the entries from Julie's journal, beginning on July 8, 2006.

*First time at Prague Castle, the "largest ancient castle in the world." Did not go in, lines too long. Next day, we went to an antique store near the castle. Hanging on the wall, Jerry saw an old painting on a wood panel of Saint George on horseback killing a dragon with his lance. Suddenly Jerry realized, "There he is killing the dragon—who is both the symbol of Satan in Christianity and a universal symbol of rebirth and healing. There he is: Saint George, stamping out paganism."*

*We entered the castle and bought a guidebook. We walked past the wrought-iron witch's cage where they kept condemned witches before covering them with pig fat and burning them at the stake. We entered a courtyard and suddenly came upon a large bronze statue of Saint George slaying the dragon. At the base of the statue, surrounding the dragon's feet, were multiple Amanita muscaria mushrooms covered with prominent raised dots. Synchronicity strikes again!*

*The next morning, Jerry woke up early. Reading the castle guidebook, he found out that the Saint George statue we saw was a copy and that the original was in the National Gallery. Because of our discovery of mushrooms at the base, we had to find the original Saint George statue to make sure it was exactly the same.*

*Jerry asked the receptionist at our hotel where the National Gallery was. She said it was on the side of the Valtava River by the funicular. I hadn't slept well, so Jerry went alone to check it out. The National Gallery wasn't by the river. Back in our hotel room Jerry looked through our Rick Steve guidebook on Prague, which said that the National Gallery was by the Old Town Square.*

*The next day, we packed up because we had to catch a plane home to Miami. It was leaving in the afternoon. We walked to the Old Town Square, excited to see the original Saint George statue.*

*At first, the attendant told Jerry in German that it was not here in the National Gallery. Then, the security guard who spoke English sent us to the director's office. The director's receptionist told us it was here, but we couldn't see it. When Jerry explained that he was a professor and asked if she could kindly request permission to see it, she said she would call the director and told us to wait outside her office. Finally, she came out and told us that the director said it was not there in the National Gallery but actually at the Old Royal Palace in the castle.*

*With time running short, we jumped into a taxi and paid the driver extra to rush back to the castle, now for the third time. In the Old Royal Palace, we were directed to what turned out to be a big empty hall. We started to wonder what was going on. Were they trying to hide something? Confused and running out of time, we ran out into the main courtyard, where Jerry asked three*



*Fig. 12.1. Statue of Saint George (replica), Prague Castle, 1373  
(Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

*different tour guides about the statue, one in Spanish, another in German, and finally one who spoke English who was standing near the Saint George statue. She directed us to the Basilica of Saint George across the courtyard. There we showed the attendant the guidebook picture of the statue, and she said "It's not in the Old Royal Palace, it's under the palace."*

*Getting desperate. It felt like we were in The Amazing Race. We were constantly checking the time, because we had to leave for the airport by 1:30 p.m. sharp to catch our plane. I was anxious, concerned that we would not make it. "Take some deep breaths and calm down," Jerry told me. "We're almost there."*

*We rushed down a long sloping corridor into the underground portion of the Old Royal Palace. FINALLY, THERE IT WAS! Exactly like the replica in the courtyard. Saint George and the two-headed dragon with Amanita muscaria mushrooms all around the base.*

## Legend of Saint George

This equestrian statue of Saint George was cast in 1373, most likely by iron masters George and Martin of Cluj.\* It is considered to be the oldest freestanding Gothic statue in central Europe. The real Saint George (ca. 275–303) was a highly regarded Roman soldier who later became venerated as a Christian martyr after refusing to renounce his faith in Jesus Christ. In the popular version of the myth of Saint George, a dragon guards the spring that provides water to the city of Silene. In order to dislodge the dragon to draw water, the citizens must offer the dragon a maiden who is selected by lottery. When it is the king's daughter's turn to be sacrificed, Saint George appears on horseback. Protecting himself with the sign of the cross, Saint George saves the princess, subdues the dragon, and brings it to the city, where the townsfolk cower in fear. Saint George promises to slay the dragon if the populace,

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\*Other sources believe it is more likely to be the work of the construction and sculpture ironworks of Petr Parléf, who worked for the emperor Charles the Fourth on the construction of Saint Vitus Cathedral.

including the king, agrees to be baptized and convert to Christianity. After cutting off the dragon's head, Saint George rides away, bidding the king to "take good care of God's churches, honor the clergy, and have pity on the poor."

If we read the message of the Saint George statue and legend allegorically, they represent the suppression of paganism, including the rituals involving sacred mushrooms. It is no coincidence that this statue was cast in the fourteenth century, in the era of the Black Plague (a.k.a. the Black Death or Bubonic Plague), which first struck England and the Continent between 1347 and 1350. After this initial catastrophe, multiple outbreaks of plague continued to occur. In the following century the church's Inquisition against heresy and paganism was expanded to include witches. Along with the Jews, the witches were blamed for causing the plague and were killed as scapegoats for a devastating disease against which the Catholic Church was utterly helpless.

It was this insight into the growing reach of the Catholic Inquisition that provided the context for understanding the lack of entheogens in the vast collection of Christian art on display at the Vatican Museums in Rome. But, before traveling to Rome, we stopped first at the Basilica of Aquileia, located northeast of Venice.

## Mosaics of Aquileia

Beginning as a small Jewish sect in Palestine in the early first century, over the next three hundred years Christianity spread rapidly to Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. Ultimately, with the Edict of Tesselonica in 380, Emperor Theodosius I made Nicene Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Yet, due to its humble beginnings and centuries of persecution, early Christians had little opportunity to express their faith in images.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, there are only a few archaeological traces of the earliest Christians. Jeffrey Spier, author of *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, observes that "no churches, decorated tombs, nor indeed Christian works of art of any kind datable before the third century are known."<sup>3</sup> In this context, the ancient Basilica of Aquileia provides

rare insight into the early years of Christian art. Here, in one of the first Christian churches, dating back to before 330, we found colorful mosaics depicting psychoactive mushrooms and edible snails in close proximity. They were located in a hall believed to be dedicated to the celebration of the Eucharist.

Aquileia sits in the far northeastern corner of Italy near the seaport of Trieste, next to the border with Slovenia. It was founded by the Romans in 181 BCE. By the fourth century Aquileia had emerged as the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire, ranking only behind Rome, Milan, and Capua. During this period of its greatest prosperity and splendor, the city served as an important metropolis and spiritual center at the crossroads between Asia Minor, the Mediterranean world, and the European continent.

Once the Edict of Milan, issued by Emperor Constantine in 313,



*Fig. 12.2. Mosaic floor, Basilica of Aquileia, Italy, circa 330  
(Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

granted freedom of worship to Christians, the populace of Aquileia embraced the faith with great fervor. Until then, Christians had met and prayed in private homes. The first public place of worship was constructed by Bishop Theodore, who served as bishop of Aquileia from 308 to 319. A Latin inscription embedded in the mosaics in the earliest part of the church reads, “Here, oh Blessed Theodore, here you grew up blessed.”<sup>4</sup>

After an hour’s drive on the autostrada from Venice to Aquileia, Julie and I arrived at the stone basilica on a hot, sun-drenched afternoon. As we walked through the main entrance of the church, we were impressed by the expansive feeling of the main sanctuary, which measured 121 by 66 feet. The high ceiling was supported by two rows of elegant columns running the length of the nave. Once inside, a visual feast spread out before us.

The floor mosaics were exceptionally well preserved. This was



*Fig. 12.3. Mosaic of a six-pointed star, Basilica of Aquileia, Italy, circa 330  
(Photo by Julie M. Brown)*



because in the late fourth century these original mosaics had been covered by pavement for a new church floor, which remained in place for the next fifteen hundred years. After fragments of the ancient mosaics were uncovered, the entire pavement was removed between 1909 and 1915 so that the original artwork could be preserved and brought back to light. Designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1998 and protected by the Fondazione Aquileia, these mosaics can now be viewed by visitors from the vantage point of a sturdy Plexiglas walkway that circumnavigates the nave, offering close-up views of the biblical scenes, whimsical depictions of nature, and portraits of the patrons.

## Mushrooms and Snails

In the second bay of the northern hall of the “Crypt of Excavations,” the most ancient part of the church, the floor mosaics depict a variety of geometric symbols and animals, including two sultan chickens with azure plumage made of blue glass paste. Unique among these images are two baskets: one holding eight red-capped mushrooms (see plate 21), the other holding seven snails plus two more snails outside the basket.

“This is intriguing,” Julie said. “We’ve seen lots of mushroom-trees, but this is one of the few direct portrayals of mushrooms. And we’ve never seen this rare combination of mushrooms side-by-side with snails.

I agreed. “The fact that the mushrooms have red caps means that they are mature *Amanitas* and the basket suggests they were consumed ceremoniously. Do you see how the undersides of the mushroom caps are white, just like the gills of fly agarics?”<sup>5</sup>

“Yes, but what’s with the snails?” Julie asked.

“They’re in a basket too, so they were apparently eaten along with the mushrooms.”

“Why would they do that?” Julie asked.

“Snails were a common food, and the Romans were sophisticated when it came to breeding snails, but since the consumption of *Amanita muscaria* can cause nausea, instead of eating the mushrooms directly, the Romans and early Christians first fed the mushrooms to the snails and then ate the snails,” I said. “In this way, they would avoid the



*Fig. 12.4. Mosaic, basket of snails, Basilica of Aquileia, Italy, circa 330  
(Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

unpleasant side effects. We've seen this before among Siberian reindeer herders who have visions after consuming the meat of reindeer that have gorged on psychoactive mushrooms."<sup>6</sup>

"Any way you look at it," I continued, "this is our first significant evidence coming from before the Middle Ages, and in an ancient church no less! This strongly suggests that some early Christians consumed psychoactive sacraments to achieve direct mystical union with God."

"How widespread was this?" Julie asked.

"Given the lack of early Christian images, I don't know if there's any way to answer this question. But in order to try, I suggest we go to Rome. They say 'all roads lead to Rome,' but as far as our research is concerned I would say that 'all roads lead to the Vatican.'"



## Church Triumphant

Our visit to the Vatican Museums, where the painting collections date back only to the twelfth century, shed no light on early Christian art. However, the Vatican visit helped us understand the reason for the sharp drop in entheogenic images that took place after the High Middle Ages from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries. Founded in 1506, the Vatican Museums today houses the greatest collection of Christian art in the world. But even though this magnificent collection dates back to the Middle Ages, to the best of our knowledge, we found no explicit—or implicit—entheogenic images here. Not even after carefully searching through all fifty-four galleries of the Vatican Museums, which contain paintings, sculptures, and tapestries primarily from Christian Europe.

What we were witnessing now came into sharp historical focus. The complete absence of sacred plants in the Vatican Museum was the culmination of a centuries-long effort by the Roman Catholic Church to consolidate its political power by marginalizing all alternative interpretations of Christianity along with individual pathways to the divine. This historical march of the Orthodox Church was officially affirmed by the Council of Nicea in the fourth century and the adoption of the four canonical Gospels. In the West, the Church Triumphant ultimately consolidated its political and military power by means of the Papal Inquisition of the thirteenth century, which over time branded all those who deviated from the True Faith (Catholic Cathars, Knights Templar, witches, and others) as heretics subject to torture and death at the stake. It was in 1231 that Pope Gregory IX began the Medieval Inquisition.

As the presence of psychoactive mushroom images in Aquileia indicates, we know that early Christians consumed hallucinogens. This is confirmed by historical documents as well. Roman authorities frequently accused Christians of practicing sorcery through the use of hallucinogens. In addition, Irenaeus (130–200), the bishop of Lyon, argued that only the heretical churches, including the Gnostic churches, made use of hallucinogens in their secret rites.<sup>7</sup>

However, with the coming of the Inquisition, we see a dramatic decline in entheogenic images in Christian art after the High Middle Ages (1000–1200).<sup>8</sup> This is understandable, as the influence of the Inquisition expanded across Europe, receiving formal sanction for wider witch hunts in the fifteenth century when Pope Innocent VIII issued a papal bull (*Summis desiderantes affectibus*, 1484) authorizing the “correcting, imprisoning, punishing, and chastising” of devil worshippers.<sup>9</sup> He did so at the urging of Inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, who published the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*), which became highly influential in secular witchcraft trials.<sup>10</sup>

It is worth noting that the canonization of Bishop Bernward’s successors in Hildesheim was done under caution due to “the demonic illusions that frequently occurred in God’s church.”<sup>11</sup> Under the increased scrutiny of the Inquisition, over time Roman Church authorities became aware of the entheogenic images displayed at Saint Michael’s Church and in other churches as well throughout Europe. While the Inquisition could not remove what was already enshrined in many religious works, it certainly sent a chilling message that future “demonic” and “heretical” works of art would not be tolerated.

## Gordon Wasson

### *The Pope’s Banker*

No tour of the Vatican would be complete without a visit to the Sistine Chapel. As I craned my head back to view Michelangelo’s masterpiece, the ceiling painting of God creating Adam, Julie leaned over and whispered into my ear, “I’ve got something important to show you back at the hotel.” During the short walk back to the Hotel Spring House, located only a few blocks away from the massive walls of Vatican City, try as I might I could not pry it out of her. On arriving, Julie sat down on the bed and patted the blanket for me to join her.

Julie opened the search engine on her iPad and typed in two words: “Wasson, Vatican.” To my surprise, several Google listings popped up immediately, including one from Gnostic Media titled “The Secret

History of Magic Mushrooms,”\* which states that “*Wasson* was an account manager to the Pope and *Vatican* for J. P. Morgan.”<sup>12</sup>

“How did you find this?” I asked.

“Going to the Vatican this morning inspired me to check and see if Wasson had any Vatican connections, and voilà.”

Early on, we had learned that Wasson joined J. P. Morgan in 1934, where he helped develop the new field of banking public relations. He was promoted to vice president in 1943 and retired in 1963, having served as an international banker for twenty years. Now, searching more rigorously, we found out that Wasson’s direct financial involvement with the Vatican was officially confirmed in a casual remark made to Thomas J. Riedlinger, editor of *The Sacred Mushroom Seeker*, a book of essays in tribute to Wasson published after his death.

In his essay titled “A Latecomer’s View of R. Gordon Wasson,” Riedlinger notes that “the very idea that executives at Morgan bank, a highly respectable institution, would have tolerated, let alone applauded, Gordon’s efforts in exploring hallucinogens surprised me.”<sup>13</sup> To satisfy his curiosity, Riedlinger phoned two of Wasson’s former bank colleagues to inquire about this, including DeWitt Peterkin, a retired vice president who joined the company in 1937.

“Unbeknownst to most people, we for many years were one of the bankers for the Vatican,” Peterkin said. “And Gordon used to have private audiences with the Pope.”<sup>14</sup> Perhaps even more surprising than this discovery is the fact that Wasson never mentions his role as the Vatican’s banker, not once, not in any of his books or articles.

Julie and I were flabbergasted. At last, we had resolved Wasson’s greatest contradiction. We had uncovered a clear financial motive for his reluctance to explore entheogens in Christian art. Wasson’s life-long cover-up of his pecuniary ties to the Vatican was unethical. This refusal to provide full disclosure of such a significant conflict of interest was especially damaging because of Wasson’s preeminent position as

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\*This article argues that Wasson had multiple links to the CIA and a possible role in promoting the psychedelic revolution as part of an “elitist agenda” for mind control, including the CIA/ARMY/MK-Ultra experiments with LSD.

*the* leading authority on the study of entheogens and religion. To suggest an appropriate analogy: it is as if it were suddenly revealed that the foremost climate change denier of our day—a scientist whose research was highly respected and widely reported—had for decades been on the payroll of ExxonMobil.

The unmasking of the Wasson-Vatican connection calls into question everything Wasson ever wrote to justify his position on the absence of entheogens in the Judeo-Christian tradition after 1000 BCE, including his ardent refusal to publicly acknowledge that the “mushroom-tree” in the Eden fresco at Plaincourault is indeed an *Amanita muscaria*. It was this refusal that provided the motivation for Wasson’s insidious personal attacks on Allegro, the scholar of the Dead Sea Scrolls who expanded the theory on the role of entheogens in religion to encompass the origins of Christianity. For example, in an unsolicited letter that appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* on August 21, 1970, Wasson stated, “Mr. Allegro is not a mycologist but, if anything, a cultural historian.” As J. R. Irvin notes in his in-depth analysis of the Wasson-Allegro schism, “Wasson doesn’t just say Allegro is not a mycologist, the likes of which he’s just put down, but includes the caveat ‘if anything,’ purely as an insult to Allegro. Wasson himself was a banker and not a professional mycologist or art historian. Allegro, contrary to the image that Wasson wants to portray of him, was an eminent cultural historian, theologian, and philologist.”<sup>15</sup>

For decades Wasson’s views were unequivocally accepted in academic and theological circles, creating what has been for the most part an unbridgeable chasm between art historians and biblical scholars on one hand and a handful of ethnobotanists on the other. It is one thing to place personal self-interest above professional ethics and the rigorous pursuit of science. It is a far more serious matter when that self-interest brings an entire field of inquiry to a screeching halt, in effect stymying the truth about entheogens and Christianity for more than half a century. Combined with Wasson’s immoral treatment of María Sabina, this abject failure of ethical judgment creates an indelible stain on Wasson’s brilliant career.

In the years that followed Wasson’s demise in 1986, a growing

number of anthropologists, classicists, ethnobotanists, and religious researchers have uncovered numerous images documenting the presence of sacred mushrooms in Christian art (which will be discussed in the next chapter). Julie and I knew that above all “Gordon Wasson did not like to be wrong.”<sup>16</sup> We wondered how Wasson, the father of ethnomycology, would have responded to this growing gallery of psychedelic images. We wished that Wasson, who had so eloquently introduced the magic mushroom to the modern world, were alive today to address these questions.

Over the next months, Julie and I were able to add to this growing gallery by examining medieval Christian frescoes in the Middle East. Our next stop was the Dark Church of Cappadocia in Turkey.



# 13

## The Dark Church

Cappadocia, Turkey—1050

The Anatolia area of central Turkey has the double distinction of being called the “cradle of civilization” and the “cradle of Christianity.” It was here in the city of Antioch that Jesus’s followers were first called Christians by Roman authorities. Soon after the Crucifixion in 33, in order to escape persecution by the Romans, Christians fled to Anatolia. Some settled in ancient cities such as Antioch and Ephesus. Others took refuge in cave dwellings or in underground cities, built centuries ago throughout the region of Cappadocia.

The reasons for this hurried flight were not hard to fathom. The letters of early church leaders describe the torments to which the faithful were subjected. For those martyrs who refused to renounce their faith in Jesus Christ or to sacrifice to the pagan Roman gods, the punishments were dreadful: torture and death by various means—fire, whips, swords, stoning, the rack, wild animals, and crucifixion—all guaranteed to cause unimaginable suffering. As Tertullian (ca. 155–240), an early church father, wrote, “Now we are in the midst of an intense heat, the very dogstar of persecution . . . the fire and the sword have tried some Christians, and the beasts have tried others; others are in prison, longing for martyrdoms, which they have tasted already, having been beaten by clubs and tortured.”<sup>1</sup>



*Fig. 13.1. Former cave dwellings, Cappadocia, Turkey  
(Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

For Julie and me, the idea of having to flee for our lives was beyond comprehension. That was . . . until we met Behrooz, a gay student who had taken flight from Iran to Turkey.\*

## The Dreaded Salafi

It was a rainy October afternoon in Göreme, an ancient city in Cappadocia. Göreme is famous for its fantastical “fairy chimney” rock formations and cave churches, carved into the soft sandstone by ascetics and monks. Walking down a main street, Julie and I ducked into a sterile-looking restaurant to escape the rain and get a snack.

From the moment our waiter arrived, we were intrigued by his clothes, his looks, and the elegant way in which he carried himself. He

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\*We are not using this young man’s real name in order to protect him as well as his family and friends in the Middle East.

introduced himself with pronounced graciousness and asked what we would like to order. Behrooz was fine-featured and tall with dark hair and black-framed glasses. He wore a dark suit with a white shirt open at the collar, which made him look more like a businessman than a waiter. While Behrooz commanded an excellent English vocabulary, his sentence structure was unusual, which made us wonder where he was from. He spoke quickly, exuding anxiety.

When Behrooz found out we were American and not European, his demeanor changed. He glanced around the room to make sure no one was listening, then spoke in a hushed tone, taking us into his confidence. Behrooz explained, "I came to Turkey nearly two years ago and am in limbo, working in this horrible restaurant."

"Why are you in limbo?" I asked.

"I don't have any country right now and am in a squalor life condition. The United Nations classified me a refugee two years ago but I am still waiting for U.S. visa, while your security systems keeps me on arduous watch for any news. It has desponded me and especially deteriorated my depression."

I glanced over at Julie, who was listening intently.

"Why did you have to leave your country?" I asked.

Behrooz took a deep breath and, after looking around again, replied, "We can't talk here. Can you come back in half an hour when I have a break? Then we can talk."

When we left the restaurant, I asked Julie if she thought it was safe to meet him again. I was concerned that helping him might land us in trouble with the authorities.

"Don't worry," Julie replied. "I don't sense any danger. He just seems desperate and needs someone to confide in."

As we walked toward the park in the center of town, Behrooz became nervous. "I have something to tell you, but you may not like me."

Julie stopped in the middle of the street. Looking directly into Behrooz's eyes, she said, "I'm a psychotherapist who's heard just about everything a person could confess. And Jerry is a professor. We're open-minded people who will not judge you."



“This is my secret, but you cannot tell anyone. I am a gay man,” Behrooz announced.

“Oh, we already knew that,” Julie said casually.

Behrooz was stunned by our easy acceptance of his homosexuality, as being gay was an abomination in Iran. Realizing that we did not reject him, he began to tell his tragic story, his words tumbling out between tears.

“I am Kurdish, born in Iraq. My parents were killed by Saddam Hussein when I was one year old. I went to live with my uncle and his wife in Iranian Kurdistan. I realized I was gay in my teens but took pains to hide it for fear of being exposed, of harassment—or worse.”

“What could be worse?” Julie asked.

“The suicide of Ramin, my lover of three years. He could no longer take the constant beatings of his father. One day Ramin’s mother called me to come urgently to the house. He was on the floor, dead, a knife through his heart. I was completely devastated. His father gestured me with his finger, saying that ‘we know what to do with people like you.’ He hated me, blamed me for his son’s homosexuality and now his suicide. In his eyes, I was *fahsed*, perverted.”

“None of this was your fault,” I objected. “It was his father’s fault that Ramin killed himself.”

“No matter in Iran. His father went to the university where I was studying engineering. He denounced me as an enemy of God and a sodomite. I was brought before the discipline committee. With Ramin’s father in the room, I was expelled from the university. It did not matter that I was an excellent student who won many awards.”

“So you left Iran to finish your education in America?” I asked, trying to make sense of the situation.

“No, because of what happened next. Soon after a member of the Salafis [an ultra-conservative, fundamentalist movement in Sunni Islam] approached and said I should apologize for what I have done against Islam. I should make a *toba* asking apology from God and go to a Koran course. I must also give information on all homosexuals I knew. When I said I would not do that, the man became enraged. He

crushed a light bulb before me, ate the powdered glass, and said, ‘I am healthy only because of Allah.’”

Julie was on the edge of her seat, her emotions palpable.

“Then came the worst. Posing as police, two Salafis made me get into a car where they knocked me unconscious. They held me without food and water in a cold, moldy room. They tortured me for three days, kicking me in the stomach, beating me until I bled internally, and pouring perfume in my eyes. And they did other horrible things. I still have scars all over my body. Finally my torturers told me that they were going to release me. I had ten days to turn over the names they wanted, or they would come for me again. It was then I decided to flee to Turkey, leaving everything behind.”

Julie and I were stunned. It was one thing to read about torture in a Human Rights Watch newsletter. It was another to sit face-to-face with a young man who had been brutalized.

I promised to send Behrooz’s information to our Florida congresswoman, asking her to expedite his request for a visa. Behrooz shook my hand and thanked me for my kindness. He then hugged Julie, holding on to her for a long time. We exchanged e-mail addresses and parted. Behrooz turned and walked away without looking back.

We were shaken by Behrooz’s story. As we walked back to our hotel, I was overcome with a rare feeling of helplessness, with compassion for Behrooz’s vulnerability, and with an acute awareness of the dangers faced by dissidents and nonconformists in the Middle East.

## The Dark Church

Our first impression of the city of Göreme was one of amazement. This was one of the few places on earth where we could truly say we’d never seen anything like it before. The cone-shaped rock formations, honeycombed with homes and hotels that dotted the city, created the feeling of an alien landscape. The next morning, we awoke as the sun was rising to witness the surreal scene of dozens of tourist-filled air balloons rising above the cityscape. It was a sight to behold.

With its geologically unique and timeworn fairy chimneys that har-



*Fig. 13.2. Air balloons over Göreme, Cappadocia, Turkey, 2012  
(Photo by Julie M. Brown)*

bor dozens of rock-cut churches, Göreme was one of the most important centers of Christianity between the fourth and ninth centuries. The three major cave churches found in today's Open Air Museum in Göreme are Karanlık Kilise (widely known by its English name, the Dark Church), Elmali Kilise (Apple Church), and Çarikli Kilise (Sandals Church). These monasteries and churches were carved out of the soft tufa rock and decorated with elaborate frescoes. The most spectacular of these are found in the Dark Church, which is thought to have been decorated by three master painters from Constantinople (now Istanbul) around 1050.<sup>2</sup> The Dark Church is situated in a natural amphitheater overlooking the Göreme Valley. The church's name comes from the fact it does not have any windows except for one small opening near the entrance. This is why, today, the colors of the frescoes remain in an excellent state of preservation (see plate 22).

Due to the scope and quality of the paintings, the frescoes in the Dark Church required multiple donors, whose munificence is acknowledged in the murals. Essentially, these churches were primarily monastic retreats accessible to the public only during religious services. The small number of monks who inhabited them lived ascetic lives. They took vows of poverty and chastity, slept on cold stone floors, and exercised rigorous self-control in food and drink—all in order to grow closer to God. Moving clockwise around the walls while facing the entrance of the church, the frescoes depict scenes and mysteries from the life of Christ, including the Last Supper and the Crucifixion.

### Sponge of the Crucifixion

In the upper register of the sixth bay in the Dark Church is a beautiful painting of the Crucifixion. Christ's head is bowed, his eyes are closed, and he appears to be at peace. The naked lower half of his body is covered with a thin wash of white, a rendering of transparency not found anywhere else in Cappadocia (see plate 23).

After describing the other personages surrounding Christ on the cross, a book on paintings of the Dark Church notes, "To the right an older man named Esopus carries the bucket of vinegar or wine in one hand and holds a reed or a stalk of *hysso*p with the sponge in the other."<sup>3</sup>

As Julie was photographing this scene, she looked closely at the "sponge" and did a double take. "That doesn't look like a sponge. It's red-with-white speckles," she said, zooming in to get a closer look. "That looks exactly like a round *Amanita* mushroom on top of the stalk!" she whispered, clicking the camera (see plate 24).

At this point, we began to speculate. Given the long-term persecution faced by Christians in ancient Turkey, what if, in contrast to the clear images of psychoactive mushrooms we'd seen throughout Europe, the monks of Cappadocia were clandestinely depicting the role of entheogens in the life of Christ? *We wondered: Was there anything else in these frescoes that would support this theory?* Yes there was. For

example, the water (rather than blood) gushing from the wound on Jesus's right side suggests that he is still alive.<sup>4\*</sup> Esopus, the old man, is not holding the "sponge" up to Jesus's mouth or to his lips as reported in John (19:29) but to his side. Jesus's left side is skeletonized, similar to that of Eve's body in the Plaincourault Temptation fresco (see plate 5). This painting implies that Jesus is in an entheogenic state of consciousness. If this *Amanita muscaria* find in the Dark Church were confirmed, it would be a significant new discovery. It would increase the possibility that entheogenic images were as prevalent in Byzantium (Eastern Catholic Church) as they were in Europe (Western Catholic Church) after the fall of the Roman Empire.

## A Desperate Threat

After our visit to the Dark Church, we returned to the Aydinli Cave House Hotel, where the rooms were carved out of sandstone. I opened my computer and found this disturbing e-mail from Behrooz:

**Sent:** *Friday, October 19, 2012 1:40 PM*

**To:** *Jerry Brown*

*DEAR my Kind Jerry*

*Thanks for your concern and your kindness about me.*

*I sent that letter to the secretary in 7/9/2012 and I didn't have any respond.*

*Please apologize me that I respond your e-mail late because I work most of the time and I couldn't find time to check my e-mail but today I fainted when I was working due to my heart pain and I broke some dishes which caused me the nervousness and anger of my boss and I don't work more in that haunted restaurant because they didn't understand me.*

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\*Hugh Schonfeld argues that Jesus plotted his own arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection and therefore was drugged, perhaps by the "sponge," to survive the cross. Baigent further suggests that the sponge could have been soaked with a mixture of opium, belladonna, and hashish, which would have served as "a good anesthetic." *Amanita muscaria* can also serve as a powerful anesthetic.

*By the way my dear friend. I made the best decision today when I was so sad and I think no one can do anything about my immigration and I think the US government never allow me to come to the state, so I don't want to continue this damn life. I hope I can terminate this damn life in next few months.*

*I thank you because of your efforts and I ask you to forgive me because of making troubles for you.*

Upon reading this, I was torn by conflicting feelings. On the one hand, I understood that Behrooz was reaching out. On the other, I felt manipulated by this suicide threat. I asked Julie what she would do if she received an e-mail like this from a therapy client.

“I’ve seen this before in people who are so distraught they cannot find the strength to go on. You have to appreciate how desperate he must be to write this. And at the same time you need to urge him to have hope and to keep going.”

I crafted an e-mail to Behrooz urging him to have faith. A few days later, on October 23rd, I received this reply.

*Dear Mr. Jerry*

*How are you? Please forgive me that sometimes I reach the stalemate because of this damn Bi-polar depression that affected me for long time. I promise not to repeat that statements about terminating my life . . . I really request you to understand my despondency. . . .*

*So my friends in the Sanfrancisco approached the office of congresswoman Nancy Pelocy [sic] and they also recorded a video from me and edited some parted of that and they want to advocate my case through that office. . . .*

*Say my hello to you kind Wife and I wish the best for both of you.*

We were excited by this news. Here at last was a glimmer of hope that something positive could happen, something that could turn Behrooz’s life around.

## Angels of Ihlara Valley

While in Cappadocia, we rented a car and drove to the Ihlara Valley, southwest of Göreme, home to some one hundred richly painted cave churches carved into the soft rock. After arriving at the visitor center located on the valley rim, we descended some five hundred feet by means of a long, winding wooden staircase. There we explored these hidden churches dug into the steep cliffs rising up from the river bed. While it was often difficult climbing up to the rock entrances, we persevered, stopping frequently to catch our breath.

The Ihlara Valley was formed thousands of years ago by the swift-flowing Melendiz River. Due to its secluded location and plentiful water supply, the valley became what is considered to be the first settlement of the first Christians who were seeking refuge from Roman soldiers. At one time the valley was inhabited by some eighty thousand people living in four thousand rock-cut dwellings and underground cities throughout the canyon.

For centuries, this area was inhabited mainly by Greek-speaking Christians who were forced to leave Turkey in the mass exodus in 1923 as part of the population exchange between Greece and Turkey in the aftermath of World War I. Unfortunately, shortly afterward most of the frescoes in the Ihlara Valley were defaced.\* What we saw in the half-dozen cave churches we visited was intriguing. In the Sümbüllü Church we found a fresco of Jesus entering Jerusalem with what appear to be four large *Amanita muscaria* growing in the foreground under the legs of the ass he is riding, reminiscent of the *Jesus Enters Jerusalem* scene in Saint Martin's Church in France. Unfortunately, the extensive defacement of the frescoes in most of these cave churches made the identification of people and plants difficult (see plate 25).

In the Yilanli Church, we found two tall archangels (one labeled "Gabriel") painted on the walls near an image of Jesus. Each angel is

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\*During our visit we learned that an extensive restoration project of cave church paintings in the Ihlara Valley was under way. However, we have not been able to determine the status of this project.

holding what appears to be a large *Amanita muscaria* mushroom by the stem in his upturned hand (see plate 26).

This fresco of Christ and angels, which was painted during the ninth or tenth century, is a popular theme in churches throughout the Ihlara Valley and is characteristic of a painting style found in Byzantine and Coptic art.

If we had one regret during this research, it was not being able to spend more time in the Ihlara Valley. Obviously a vibrant Christian community had thrived here for centuries in a region blessed with fertile soil, evergreen forests, and plentiful rainfall—a region well suited for *Amanita muscaria* and other species of psychoactive fungi. We hoped to return one day, after the restoration of the cave churches had been completed, in order to further explore this intriguing area.

### “Jesus Said to Them, ‘My Wife . . .’”

In September 2012, Karen King, Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard, created a major brouhaha at the quadrennial meeting of International Congress of Coptic Studies in Rome.<sup>5</sup> The furor was caused by her paper, “A New Coptic Gospel Fragment,” which contained the phrase, “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife. . . .’” The next line said, “She will be able to be my disciple.” And following two lines later were the words, “I dwell with her.” King’s controversial paper had been accepted for publication in the prestigious *Harvard Theological Review*.

The evidence for this shocking claim was a scrap of papyrus only the size of a business card, with ink on both sides indicating it was part of a scroll. It was written in black script in the Egyptian Coptic language, into which many Christian texts were translated from the Greek in the third and fourth centuries. This was the first and only evidence from antiquity ever to depict Jesus Christ as married, most likely to Mary Magdalene according to King’s interpretation. King emphasized that while the fragment did not in any way prove that Jesus was actually married, it did indicate that the Christian community of that time was discussing the topics of marriage and female discipleship in a way that



undermined the church's long-standing position on the celibacy of Jesus.

The reaction to King's paper was quick; the criticism was withering. Scholars denounced the fragment as not meeting the basic criteria of sound archaeological evidence: it was not scientifically dated by either carbon dating or chemical analysis of the ink; the authenticity of the fragment had not been verified; the provenance (origin) of the fragment could not be determined, as there was no record of ownership; and, finally, there was no information on the context in which the fragment had been found. At this point, King's "Gospel of Jesus's Wife" had failed every archaeological test regarding date, authenticity, provenance, and context. Due to these critiques the *Harvard Theological Review* withdrew the paper from publication\* pending further investigation.<sup>6</sup>

While King's presentation of this new Gospel fragment *initially* failed every test of archaeological validity, our survey of Christian art passed every test. In most cases we knew the approximate date, authenticity, provenance, and context of the images. And in the case of the massive bronze door and column in Saint Michael's Church in Germany we also knew the identity and biography of Bishop Bernward, who cast these entheogenic icons. King's work challenges the "master story" of Christianity by reevaluating the role of women, a well-established area of study. Our research challenges this master story of Christianity in another way by exploring the role of entheogens—an area of study only recently revived after decades of neglect due to Wasson's biased pronouncements.

## Spate of New Evidence

Since the publication of Wasson's *Soma* (1968) and Allegro's *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (1970), a spate of new evidence has emerged on websites<sup>7</sup> and in articles<sup>8</sup> and books, documenting the presence of sacred mushrooms in Christian art. Several of these books, published

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\*After multiple scientific tests determined that the fragment was most likely authentic, the paper was published in 2014.

during the last decade, are J. R. Irvin's *The Holy Mushroom: Evidence of Mushrooms in Judeo-Christianity* (2008); Carl A. P. Ruck and Mark A. Hoffman's *The Effluents of Deity* (2012); and John A. Rush's *The Mushroom in Christian Art: The Identity of Jesus and the Development of Christianity* (2011).<sup>9</sup>

However, the evidence presented by Irvin and Rush in defense of "the holy mushroom" has been roundly criticized by historians of religion. For one, Thomas Hatsis argues that, when placed under the microscope of historical analysis, images that Irvin and Rush describe as mushrooms "were never intended to represent mushrooms at all."<sup>10</sup> Hatsis also takes strong exception to Irvin and Rush's penchant for claiming that "if something looks like a mushroom, it is a mushroom—a weak methodology that we shall see has many problems, the first of which lets a self-fulfilling prophet see whatever he wishes."<sup>11</sup>

In our opinion, these and other significant methodological concerns would be best addressed by the establishment of an interdisciplinary committee on the Psychedelic Gospels (which we call for in chapter 15). In the appendix to this book, we describe the rationale, composition, and mission of such a committee. These concerns notwithstanding, the growing gallery of entheogenic images significantly expands the data base well beyond the nine churches and cathedrals we visited in France, England, Germany, Italy, and Turkey, creating a mushrooming body of evidence in support of the theory of the Psychedelic Gospels.\*

## Coming to America

A few months after our visit to Cappadocia, I received another e-mail from Behrooz expressing a mixture of brief hope followed by deepening despondency.

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\*Specifically, these are Chapel of Plaincourault, Abbey of Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe, Church of Saint Martin, Church of Mary Magdalene, Chartes Cathedral, Canterbury Cathedral, Saint Michael's Church, Basilica of Aquileia, and the Dark Church.

**Sent:** *Thursday, December 6, 2012, 7:02 PM*

**To:** *Jerry Brown*

**Subject:** *Dear My Kind Friend*

*Dear My Kind friend,*

*I hope you and your kind wife Julia be healthy and happy. When I heard from the US Government about my clearance I went for medical test at 5<sup>th</sup> of last month and all of refugees who I acquainted there received flight date and they travel to the states soon, but when I called they informed me about another new security checks that I need to pass . . .*

*I still in the condition that I lose my all precious times and my life and I think I need to make decision about long years of difficulties in this damn mid-east and Islamic world in future. I am so sorry that I was not so brave to have a grave in vicinity of my boyfriend's grave and I endured all gruesome and dangerous experiences with no result and outcome except of depression and loneliness.*

Finally, it happened. In March 2013, the U.S. government approved Behrooz's application for a visa to come to the United States. He moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, where he would continue his education in electrical engineering and computer science and rebuild his life from the tattered shreds he carried out of Iran. Julie and I were elated. We felt so proud of America, so grateful to be living in "the land of the free," to know that the Statue of Liberty, the Mother of Exiles, was still welcoming the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free" with open arms. Homeless and tempest-tossed, Behrooz was coming to America.


## Tyranny of Belief

In an article that appeared in *Atlantic Monthly*, Jack Beatty observes, "Historically, and with lethal passion in the twentieth century, belief systems have driven tolerance out of politics. . . . Above all, the totalitarian movements and states exploited the propensity of anxious human

beings to accept one truth, one way, one path to salvation, from which it is error, heresy, treason, or ideological deviation to dissent.”<sup>12</sup>

During our research and travels, it was disturbing to witness how pervasively throughout history the demand for unquestioning loyalty to one god has provided the “tinder of persecution” and “bred the tyranny of rectitude.” This demand has produced horrendous crimes against humanity—as examples, crimes against the early Christians in the first and second centuries by the Romans; crimes against the wise women healers by the Catholic Inquisition during the Middle Ages; and crimes against Behrooz by religious fanatics in contemporary Iran.

In searching for evidence of entheogens in the time of Jesus and the apostles, we would have to explore the iconoclastic beliefs of another group who was persecuted by the early Orthodox Church: the Gnostic Christians. For that, we would have to travel back in time to ancient Egypt to examine the Gnostic Gospels, which remained buried beside the Nile River for more than a thousand years before their accidental discovery in the mid-twentieth century.



# 14

## Kingdom of Heaven

Jerusalem—30

In 1945, an Arab villager found a unique archaeological treasure near the town of Nag Hammadi, located on the Nile River in Upper Egypt. For three decades rumors swirled around the details of this discovery, until Muhammad ‘Ali al-Samman stepped forward to tell what had happened. He and his brother had accidentally struck a large earthen jar while digging for soft soil to be used as fertilizer. Hoping it might contain gold, he smashed the sealed jar open with his mattock and found thirteen leather-bound papyrus manuscripts inside. Returning home, he dumped them on the straw by the oven, where his mother later burned many of the papyri to kindle fire.

What was lost in those flames, we will never know. Eventually several of these manuscripts made their way through the black market to antiquities dealers and eventually to the Coptic Museum in Cairo, where they were identified as Gnostic texts. In time, scholars realized that, while these texts contained sayings similar to those found in the New Testament, they also presented passages completely different from any known Christian tradition, passages that claimed to contain the secret gospel and the true teachings of the “living Jesus.”

The fifty-two remaining texts of the Gnostic Gospels, as they came to be known, offer a dramatically different perspective on the teachings

of Jesus from the one portrayed in the canonical Gospels of the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> According to these Gnostic teachings, the self and the divine are one; the kingdom of heaven is hidden within; and Jesus did not come to save humanity from sin but to teach enlightenment. This disparity between early Gnostic Christians and Orthodox Christians made us wonder how Orthodoxy came to prevail over Gnosticism. How did the theological concepts of original sin, resurrection, and salvation win out over those of esoteric self-knowledge, spiritual guidance, and enlightenment?<sup>2</sup>

What was indisputable is that by the year 200 the Orthodox Church had emerged as an established institution that denounced the Gnostics as heretics, banned their teachings, and burned their books. These surviving Nag Hammadi texts that had escaped the flames were originally written in Greek between 50 and 150 and later translated into Coptic, the language of the Egyptian Christian Church, around 350 to 400. Today, these Gnostic scriptures are available in English in various translations, such as J. M. Robinson's *Nag Hammadi Library*.<sup>3</sup>

## Gnostic Gospels

Due to the absence of Christian art before 200, if Julie and I were going to find any evidence of entheogens from the early Christian era, we would have to look to the written word, to the texts produced by the earliest Christian communities. Here we turned to both the New Testament and the Gnostic Gospels, several of which may have been composed as early as the second half of the first century—that is, “as early as, or earlier, than Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John.”<sup>4</sup> The early Christians who composed these heretical texts were called “Gnostics,” which refers to those who possess “knowledge,” particularly esoteric knowledge of spiritual matters. Even more significant than this unique discovery at Nag Hammadi are the striking differences between the Gnostic Gospels and the four canonical Gospels of the New Testament, which became the official doctrine of the Catholic Church in the West during the fourth century.<sup>5</sup>

Elaine Pagels, professor of religion at Princeton, summarizes these dramatic differences.<sup>6</sup> First, while Orthodox Christians believe that God is wholly “other” than humanity, the Gnostics contradict this fundamental theological premise: “self-knowledge is knowledge of God; the self and the divine are identical.” Second, unlike Orthodox Christians, the Gnostics contend that Jesus did not come to save humanity from sin; he came to serve as a guide who shows the way to spiritual enlightenment. Third, Orthodox Christians believe that Jesus Christ is uniquely the Almighty, the Son of God, and the Savior, and therefore distinct from the humanity he came to save. Conversely, the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas holds that once Thomas has achieved gnosis, Jesus tells Thomas that “they have both received their being from the same source.” In other words, “when the disciple attains enlightenment, Jesus no longer serves as his spiritual master: the two have become equal—even identical.”

At this point Pagels asks, “Does not such teaching—the identity of the divine and human, the concern with illusion and enlightenment, the founder who is presented not as Lord, but as spiritual guide—sound more Eastern than Western?”<sup>7</sup> Very possibly, for some sources believe that, during the “silent years,” Jesus traveled to India, where the plant-god Soma was exalted in the *Rigveda*. However, close analysis of key Gnostic texts indicates that these teachings may also have been inspired by entheogens, which were widely known in ancient Egypt, where the Gnostic Gospels originated.

### “I Am That Bread of Life”

Up until the discovery at Nag Hammadi, all of our information about Gnostic Christians came from the writings of Orthodox Christians, who denounced the Gnostics as “full of blasphemy.”<sup>8</sup> But now, for the first time in nearly two millennia, the Gnostics had emerged from the swirling sands of Egypt to speak for themselves, in their own words.

In 2014 I coauthored “Sacred Plants and the Gnostic Church,” an article for the *Journal of Ancient History*, which included a review

of the Gnostic Gospels for evidence of entheogens.<sup>9</sup> While there was significant evidence in the fifty-two texts, Julie and I were particularly intrigued by the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Philip, because they both strongly suggested the presence of entheogens.\*

In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus tells Thomas that they have both received knowledge from the same source:

Jesus said to his disciples, “Compare me to someone and tell me whom I am like. . . . Thomas said to him, “Master, my mouth is wholly incapable of saying whom you are like. Jesus said, “I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring which I have measured out. . . . He who will drink from my mouth will become like me. I shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him.”<sup>10</sup>

Upon reading this passage Julie said, “This sounds like the effects of a drink that Jesus has given Thomas and the other disciples. They’re obviously not drunk on wine. And the fact that Jesus has measured out the drink suggests that he knows the amount that should be taken.”

I agreed. “Under the influence of this drink, it appears that Jesus and Thomas have achieved a level of awareness wherein they are literally sharing consciousness—an expanded state that Thomas cannot describe in words. And words alone could not create such a powerful transpersonal experience.”

“But wait!” Julie said. “This reminds me of something we’ve seen before—that passage from Esdras in the Old Testament. Let me get it.” Julie turned to Esdras 2 and read a portion of it aloud: “Then opened I my mouth, and behold, he reached me a full cup, which was full as it were with water, but the colour of it was like fire.”

“In the *Rigveda*, Soma is sometimes described as or compared to

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\*As with the canonical gospels, the gnostic gospels of Thomas and Philip are anonymous documents.



Agni, the Hindu god of fire,” I said.<sup>11</sup> “I wonder if there is anything in these Gnostic scriptures that would identify this drink that Jesus measured out as also coming from Soma?”

“I think there is,” Julie said. Reading further on in the Gospel of Thomas, she came across one of the few botanical descriptions found in the Gnostic Gospels. “By the way, in this passage ‘stones’ refers to stories,” Julie explained as she read aloud:

Jesus said, “If you become my disciples and listen to my words, these stones will minister to you. For there are five trees for you in Paradise, which remain undisturbed summer and winter, and whose leaves do not fall. Whoever becomes acquainted with them will not experience death.”<sup>12</sup>

“Jesus is referring to conifer trees,” I said, “evergreens like the pine, the cedar, and the spruce that never lose their leaves. In fact, conifers are one of the main hosts of *Amanita muscaria*, whose invisible spores germinate in the humus of fallen pine needles.”

“But,” Julie said, “*Amanitas* don’t grow near sea level around the Mediterranean or in the hills surrounding Judea or Jerusalem.”

“Yes,” I replied, “but they do grow in the higher latitudes of the Middle East and could have been found under the cedar trees of Lebanon two thousand years ago.\* Or even on Mt. Horeb, where Moses encountered the burning bush, in a remote region where *Amanita muscaria* are found for several months of the year after the rains come. But proving that *Amanita* grows in the Middle East is beside the point, because these psychoactive mushrooms can be dried, transported, and consumed later on.”

“Are there any other sacred plants that fit these descriptions from the Gnostic Gospels?” Julie asked.

“I don’t think so,” I replied. “There are several other psychoactive candidates that are found in the region, such as DMT, ergot, psilocybin,

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\*2 Chronicles 2:8 states, “Send me also cedar trees, fir trees, and algum trees, out of Lebanon: for I know that thy servants can skill to cut timber in Lebanon.”

and cannabis.\* But none of them fits the descriptions found in these Gnostic Gospel passages as completely as *Amanita muscaria* does.”

This was further confirmed in the Gnostic Gospel of Philip, where we learned that Jesus worked through a mysterious initiation that involved anointing the initiate with chrism, a consecrated oil:

And it is because of the chrism that “the Christ” has his name. For the father anointed the son, and the son anointed the apostles, and the apostles anointed us. He who has been anointed possesses everything. He possesses the resurrection, the light, the cross, the holy spirit. The father gave him this in the bridal chamber; he merely accepted [the gift]. . . . This is the kingdom of heaven.<sup>13</sup>

This refers to a secret initiation, which was conducted in five stages. “The Lord did everything in a mystery: a baptism and a chrism and a eucharist and a redemption and a bridal chamber.”<sup>14</sup> The entire initiation is referred to as the “bridal chamber” to symbolize the initiate’s union with the divine. In this ritual Jesus initiated disciples with an anointing oil that was warm and the color of fire and subsequently consecrated the bread and the cup of the Eucharist, the sacrament of the Holy Communion. The consecrated bread is “bread from heaven.” To partake of the bread and the cup is to receive “the flesh and blood of Jesus.” Here the Gnostic Gospel of Philip states, “He who shall not eat my flesh and drink my blood has not life in him,”<sup>15</sup> mirroring the enigmatic passage from the New Testament Gospel of John (6:51–56) in which Jesus says:

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\*Shanon (“Biblical Entheogens”) discusses DMT produced from species of the acacia tree and the *Peganum harmala* bush found on Mount Sinai and in southern Israel. Ergot, similar to that used in the Eleusinian Mysteries, which grows on barley and rye, is claimed by Merkur (*Mystery of Manna*) to be the manna mentioned in Exodus. McKenna (*Food of the Gods*) argues on behalf of psilocybin, which is found in mushrooms that sprout in the dung of wild and domestic animals, including cattle and horses. And Bennet (“Kaneh Bosm”) makes the case for cannabis, which from the time of Moses until the prophet Samuel was used as a holy anointing oil to allow worshippers to receive the “revelations of the Lord.”

I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. . . . (51)

Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. (54)

He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. (56)

In the entheogenic interpretation of these passages from the Gnostic Gospels, “bread” and “wine” are code words for the “flesh” and “blood,” not of the physical body of Christ, but of the sacred substance consumed as food and drink, and also applied as an ointment, during initiation. Literally eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus would have been an act of cannibalism and blasphemy repugnant to Jews and Romans alike. Rather, the Eucharist is an entheogenic substance, which when ingested allows the initiate to merge with the divine (“He . . . dwelleth in me, and I in him,” John 6:56).

The interpretation is further supported by the Gospel of John in the New Testament in which Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman at the well: “Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:13–14).

There is only one psychoactive substance that corresponds to the descriptions found in the Gnostic Gospels and the qualities described in the New Testament (bread and wine, flesh and blood): *Amanita muscaria*.<sup>16</sup> The color of the cap is red or crimson, the color of blood. When the cap is dried before consumption, it turns a tawny golden color and takes on a supple texture and shape similar to that of a round loaf of bread. When the dried mushrooms are put in water, the water turns a deep amber, which appears red when reflecting light, as if infused with blood (“the water was made wine,” John 2:9). Last, in addition to eating the body of the mushroom or drinking its juice, if the juice is concentrated and mixed with olive oil into an anointing ointment, it can be

applied and absorbed through the skin. In summary, the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom can be consumed as food (bread) and drink (blood) and also applied as anointing oil (chrism).

## Christ Consciousness

Furthermore, the richness of the Gnostic Gospels and the New Testament allows us to move beyond these botanical descriptions of sacred plants and to explore the expanded state of consciousness generated by these entheogens. The New Testament Sermon on the Mount is an eloquent manifestation of Christ consciousness, which is similar in many ways to the higher consciousness and wisdom achieved by modern mind explorers through entheogens and by spiritual sages throughout the ages through meditation.<sup>17</sup> Here, according to Matthew (5:38–39, 43–44), Jesus says:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. (38)

But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. . . . (39)

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. (43)

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. (44)

The Sermon on the Mount was a radical departure from the teachings of the Old Testament, which portrayed a vengeful God who demanded “an eye for an eye.” Where, then, could Jesus have developed this expanded sense of consciousness, this universal compassion for humanity, this otherworldly philosophy of the Kingdom of Heaven? For the answer to this question, we must look to ancient Egypt.

## Kingdom of Heaven

The road of historical research rarely runs straight. In our case it was interrupted by several false starts before Julie and I decided to undertake this journey. As we passed the point of no return we realized that this road would eventually lead to Egypt. After our initial encounter with the Green Man of Rosslyn Chapel in 2006, we had put the research idea on the back burner and returned to our everyday lives. In part we were dissuaded from undertaking this international investigation by our son, who had recently entered law school. “You’ll never find a smoking gun to prove your case, so why bother?” he argued.

Then, in the fall of 2011, I picked up a copy of *The Jesus Papers* by Michael Baigent, which, based on more than twenty years of research, claimed to present “evidence that Jesus Christ survived the crucifixion.”<sup>18</sup> While I was impressed by Baigent’s perseverance, I was even more intrigued by his conclusions. Baigent cogently argues that, prior to the Crucifixion and Resurrection in 33, Jesus spent the missing years in Egypt, where he was initiated into the secret rituals of traveling to the other world, called the “the Far-World,” and returning—while alive! It was in Egypt that Jesus learned the healing arts and how to cast out demons. It was in Egypt that he received the knowledge of the Kingdom of Heaven. I realized that Baigent’s descriptions of these secret rituals were similar to the flights of the soul induced by sacred plants.

The essence of Baigent’s argument regarding the Kingdom of Heaven can be summarized as follows: First, Jesus rejected the rebellious Jewish Zealots’ plans that he would become the high priest and king who would physically rule over an independent Judea after Roman rule was overthrown. Second, in turning away from the Zealots, Jesus boldly announced his faith in the otherworldly Kingdom of Heaven. In speaking to his disciples, who asked why he spoke in parables to the masses, Jesus revealed that for them he had a deeper truth. “He answered and said unto them, ‘Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given’ (Matthew 13:11). Third, the Kingdom of Heaven, whose mystery can

only be revealed to the initiated, is to be found within. As Jesus said, “Neither shall they say, Lo here! Or lo there! For, behold, the kingdom of god is within you” (Luke 17:20–21).

Fourth, and most speculative, the Kingdom of Heaven is the name that Jesus used for the Far-World, the land of the dead to which the Egyptian initiates traveled and returned—a secret ritual that Jesus mastered while living in Egypt during the missing years between the ages of twelve and thirty.\* How does one travel within to reveal this mystery? “This much,” Baigent writes, “we know: by entering the silence. Jesus has returned us to the concept of incubation and the still dark, silent underground crypts and caves where the seeker can be initiated into the world where the dead live—the Far-World.”<sup>19</sup>

It was this esoteric quality of Egyptian religion that gave Judaism in Egypt and the Christianity that emerged afterward what Baigent describes as “a distinctively mystical quality.” For it was here in Egypt where contemplative Jewish communities such as the Therapeutae flourished; where Christian monasticism first began; where the Gnostic texts were discovered; and where for millennia pharaohs worshipping in secluded underground chambers sought mystical union with Ra, the sun god. It was also here where Jesus, drawing on Egyptian religion, Judaic apocalyptic literature, and Hellenic mystery cults, could have developed his teachings about a day of judgment, when the righteous would be resurrected and granted life eternal in God’s heavenly paradise.

Jesus did not provide a detailed description of the afterlife in the Kingdom of Heaven. He simply stated that the Kingdom of God will come and that men should prepare for the day of judgment. However, we do know that, by preaching about the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus sought to join heaven and earth: “Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth” (Luke 11:2).

In striving to connect this world with the next, to connect heaven and earth, Baigent observes,

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\*Modern mainstream Christian scholarship has generally rejected the theories that Jesus studied in India or with the Essenes in Judea during the missing years and holds that nothing is known about this time period in the life of Jesus.

The approach of the Egyptians was not a kind of philosophy, a speculation on divine possibilities, or a faith built solely upon a hope for a better life after death. The Egyptians were not only mystical but intensely practical. They did not want to talk about heaven—they wanted to go there. And return. Just like Lazarus in fact.<sup>20</sup>

Based on the works of Egyptologists and of ancient Greek authors such as Iamblichus, who witnessed these rites firsthand, Baigent believes that the ancient Egyptians practiced some extraordinary techniques of initiation.<sup>21</sup> All of which led Baigent to conclude,

We can be very sure that there were some deeply esoteric and secret practices regularly conducted in the secluded rooms and chapels of the Egyptian temples, and that men—and undoubtedly women as well, the priestesses of Isis for one—were initiated into the secrets of the kingdom of the gods . . . until they become illuminated like a star.<sup>22</sup>

While Baigent concludes that the nature of these “hidden mysteries of Egypt” remains obscure, we believe that we found the key to unraveling these mysteries in what we call “entheogenic Egypt.”

## Entheogenic Egypt

A massive metal-and-glass pyramid is the modern architectural icon that marks the entrance to the Louvre Museum in Paris, home to one of the greatest collections of Egyptian antiquities in the world.

In the Egyptian section of the Louvre, we found Lady Taperet’s funeral stele, dated from circa 850–690 BCE, probably from the region of Thebes. The small, richly colored stele is made of plastered and painted wood (twelve inches high by eleven inches wide). Here the Lady Taperet, whose mystical name is “Lady Tuth-Shena” (“traveler on the path of Troth,” the scribe of the underworld), is standing before the falcon-headed god Horus (see plate 27). Emanating toward her from the sun disk on Horus’s head are five rays of trumpet-shaped flowers that

strongly indicate *Datura*. Frequently associated with the witch's flying ointment and the shaman's flight of the soul, *Datura* is a widespread genus of powerful, tropane-based hallucinogens that produce out-of-body experiences. According to ethnobotanist William Emboden, an entheogenic explanation for this iconography, which has long puzzled Egyptologists, is highly plausible because of the presence in the stele of other psychoactive plants besides *Datura*, including *Nymphaea caerulea* (blue lotus) and the narcotic water lily.<sup>23</sup>

The role of entheogens in facilitating travel to the Far-World in ancient Egypt is illustrated by this funerary scene. The scene takes place in the realm of the dead, as indicated by the resin cone on Tuth-Shena's head, to which she has been transported by the psychoactive *Datura* flowers. She holds her hands up in awe, in supplication of the sun god (symbolized by the sun disk), expressing her desire to accompany him on his nocturnal journey, thus enjoying rebirth with him every morning through eternity.

Amenemheb was a high-ranking officer in the army during the pharaonic reigns from Thutmose III to Amenhotep II. Amenemheb is best known from a biographical inscription that describes how he accompanied Thutmose III on one of his foreign expeditions, and how he prevented the king from being trampled by an elephant. A painting from the Tomb of Amenemheb shows a man confronting a large hyena along with rare images of blue *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms (see plate 28).

*Amanita muscaria* was known in ancient Egypt, where it was called "raven's bread," a name still used in central and eastern Europe. However, while today there are subspecies of *Amanita muscaria* that have brown, yellow-orange, and pink caps, there are no known blue species of *Amanita muscaria* anywhere in the world, although there are blue species of the genus *Amanita* in Australia. Nevertheless, there may have been blue *Amanita muscaria* species in the mountainous regions of the Mediterranean three thousand to five thousand years ago. In addition, in ancient Egypt the color blue was symbolic of the sky, the heavens, and the primal floods, giving it the meaning of life, death, and rebirth, which may have inspired the artist to paint these mushrooms blue.

The stele of Lady Taperet and the Tomb of Amenemheb are just



two of the entheogenic images we found in surveying the religious art of ancient Egypt, images so numerous that it would require a separate book to adequately describe them. Undoubtedly there was a plethora of psychoactive plants present in Egypt and the surrounding Fertile Crescent, which can be identified in the artworks and artifacts of the early civilizations that thrived in the region. As Emboden observes,

Early civilizations in the area of the Fertile Crescent employed *Datura*, *Cannabis*, *Claviceps* [ergot], *Mandragora* [mandrake], *Nymphaea* [blue lotus, blue water lily], *Vitis* [vining plants], and possibly *Papaver* [opium poppy] as medicaments and ritual entheogens.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, there is also evidence of knowledge of psychoactive fungi and of the acacia tree, one of the most prominent trees in ancient Egyptian art due to its association with the death and rebirth of the god Osiris. Egyptian myth attributes the rebirth of Osiris and every subsequent pharaoh to the sprouting of the DMT-containing acacia tree out of the coffin in which Osiris was buried. While a complete catalog of psychoactive plants in dynastic Egypt has yet to be compiled, there is little doubt that these plants were used by the priestly caste in medicine and the healing arts, as well as in facilitating journeys to the Far-World.

### Archimedes's Lever

It was Archimedes (287–212 BCE), the Greek physicist, who proclaimed, “Give me a place to stand and a lever long enough, and I will move the world.” It was Jesus who applied Archimedes’s lever to move world history. The place Jesus stood was biblical Jerusalem, where the Jewish population seethed under Roman rule and oppression. His lever was the Old Testament prophecy foretelling the coming of the Messiah who would liberate Israel and restore the covenant with God. From this place (Jerusalem) and with this long lever (Jewish messianic tradition), Jesus moved the history of the Western world through the Resurrection, promising the end of history and the coming Kingdom of Heaven.

By examining key passages of the Gnostic and canonical Gospels within the context of the Psychedelic Gospels, we have explored the possibility that Jesus and his disciples achieved an experience of divinity through the use of sacred entheogens. Obviously, we have no “smoking gun,” no indisputable direct visual or textual evidence to support this point of view, which flies in the face of all we’ve been told about the origins of Christianity. Nevertheless, what we have proposed is a compelling and plausible explanation that resonates with the cultural and historical context of biblical times. This is consistent with the findings of biblical researcher John J. Pilch that “adequate and culturally plausible explanations are just as valid as scientific certitude.”<sup>25</sup> Regarding the cultural context, it is well documented that Christianity emerged in a Mediterranean region rife with Egyptian, Greek, Judaic, and Roman healing cults, mystery rites, and Gnostic initiations, many of which utilized sacred plants.

Our entheogenic theory calls into question the traditional understanding of the divinity of Jesus, while proposing an alternative pathway to knowledge of God and the Kingdom of Heaven. While this explanation runs counter to millennia of Christian doctrine, we hope *The Psychedelic Gospels* will inspire an ongoing exploration that enhances our understanding of the origins of Christianity and of other religions as well. To those who are skeptical, we invite you to provide a more plausible explanation for the profusion of psychedelic images found in a variety of Christian chapels, churches, and cathedrals throughout Europe and the Middle East.

As we reach the end of this long journey, we would like to express our admiration for the noble ideals of love, compassion, and social justice expressed by Pope Francis and by Christians throughout the world. We do not believe that the ideas proposed here diminish faith in Jesus Christ, who became a beacon of hope for humanity through his teaching of peace, love, and righteousness.



# 15

## Psychedelic Renaissance

America–2015

Steve Jobs loved LSD. The legendary Apple cofounder said, “Taking LSD was one of the two or three most important things he had ever done in his life.”<sup>1</sup> Jobs credited the multiple use of LSD as a major reason for his success and ability to “think different,” which became Apple’s motto.

Jobs was not the only visionary who attributed enhanced intellectual capacity to ingesting an entheogen. Cambridge University’s Francis Crick, codiscoverer of the DNA structure, was another. Crick revealed, when speaking with a close friend, that he had actually “perceived the double-helix shape while on LSD.”<sup>2</sup> The list of brilliant LSD users who have come out of the psychedelic closet includes physicist Richard Feynman and neuroscientist John C. Lilly.<sup>3</sup>

None of this should come as a surprise given the success of an earlier study in proving that psychedelic drugs significantly enhance problem-solving abilities. In 1966, a research team, which included psychologist James Fadiman and engineer Willis Harmon, conducted the Psychedelics in Problem-Solving Experiment.<sup>4</sup> The researchers administered low doses

of mescaline (a moderately light dose compared to doses used to induce mystical experience) to professional people (i.e., engineers, mathematicians, architects) who were highly motivated to solve a problem they had been working on for three months or more without success. Virtually all of the subjects reported making significant breakthroughs and producing solutions that were validated by independent tests and, eventually, commercial acceptance of their solutions.<sup>5\*</sup> This promising line of inquiry was abruptly terminated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which banned further research on human subjects as part of the then-growing political backlash to the 1960s psychedelic movement.

## Second Coming of Psychedelics

Today this problem-solving research and other potential medical and scientific benefits of psychedelics are being revisited by researchers at some of the nation's leading universities, such as Johns Hopkins, Harvard, and the University of California. In an article titled "The Second Coming of Psychedelics," journalist Don Lattin describes this renewed interest in "sacred medicine."<sup>6</sup> Paving the way for this resurgence of government-approved research is the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), a "non-profit research and educational organization that develops medical, legal, and cultural contexts for people to benefit from the careful uses of psychedelics and marijuana."<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, rigorous research has been conducted on entheogens, such as ayahuasca, LSD, mescaline, and psilocybin, and on the empathogen Ecstasy. The goal is to evaluate their effects on addiction, cluster headaches, depression, trauma, cancer, epilepsy, death, and dying, as well as to explore their value in the study of consciousness and mystical experience. The implications of this "new science of psychedelics" for brain research and psychiatry and for religion and spirituality have been documented in numerous articles and books.<sup>8</sup> A resurgence in the study of entheogens is well under way.

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\*Participants reported enhanced intellectual functioning, including enhanced fluency and flexibility of ideation, increased ability to concentrate, association of dissimilar ideas, and visualizing the completed solution.

## Cosmic Consciousness

But aside from genius innovators like Jobs, where does this “psychedelic renaissance” leave the people who explored entheogens, often illegally, for personal growth and spirituality—including the twenty-three million Americans who have experimented with LSD? Where does it leave people like Julie and me, who had our first and only authentic experiences of the divine and of cosmic consciousness through entheogens? Not long after we met, Julie told me about her most powerful psychedelic encounter. Here is what transpired in her own words.

*In 1969, I went to a music festival with a couple of friends outside of Philadelphia. At that time, I was an introspective, insecure twenty-one-year-old. One of my friends gave me a combination of high-dose LSD and mescaline. I found a place on the grassy knoll and ingested the entheogens. As the first group came on, a gospel group, I lay back on the grass and closed my eyes. I became very relaxed listening to the soulful music as the sun started to set.*

*After a while, I noticed colorful patterns behind my closed eyelids and felt the same tingly feeling in my gut that I had gotten on previous trips. Out of nowhere, though the sky was darkening outside, inside my eyelids the light was getting brighter and brighter. And suddenly, shockingly, I was traveling outward and upward toward space so fast that I felt like I was shot out of a cannon at the speed of light. I sped on and on, seeing intense flashes of light and color, until everything slowed down and the streaks condensed into stars.*

*As I moved through space, I began to notice that every star had a face and that I recognized every face and felt a loving connection to each and every one. I became aware that my experience was in a cosmic dimension and was unlike any entheogenic encounter I had ever known. I did not dwell on this. I simply experienced the beauty of it all, the utter magnificence of being connected to every particle and person in existence.*

*The next afternoon, when I became conscious of the earthly plane again, I sat up and observed that I was at a music concert and had missed the entire event! Almost everyone was gone. I was left with some*

*profound alterations of my mind and body. I was less afraid of everything, even death. I felt free and at peace. Most importantly, I realized I was connected to every living thing and felt much more love for myself and all life. Although this experience of cosmic consciousness took place more than forty years ago, it produced beneficial changes in my life that I am still grateful for today.*

In their classic 1966 study, *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*, mind researchers Robert Masters and Jean Houston investigate entheogen-induced mystical experience. “One of the most important questions raised by the psychedelic drugs is whether authentic religious and mystical experiences occur among the drug subjects. To this question, the answer must be *Yes*.”<sup>9</sup> The authors note the “supreme irony” of the fact that, by taking a pill, an average person can achieve a state of exalted consciousness. As Grof, who first experienced LSD in Prague during the Cold War era, observes, “The Divine had manifested itself and had taken over my life in a modern laboratory in the middle of a serious scientific experiment conducted in a Communist country with a substance produced in the test tube of a twentieth-century chemist.”<sup>10</sup>

After careful consideration, our personal and professional experiences with entheogens engender a threefold mission. First, as researchers we call for the establishment of a public forum to evaluate the theory of the Psychedelic Gospels. Second, as teachers we are inspired to educate others interested in learning about entheogens. Third, as citizens we advocate the responsible use of entheogens for religious purposes as a fundamental right under the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. Let’s examine each of these initiatives.

## Interdisciplinary Committee on the Psychedelic Gospels

Our theory of the Psychedelic Gospels proposes that (1) entheogens played an important role in the origins of Christianity and (2) the ongoing significance of entheogens in Christianity is visually documented by their presence in medieval Christian art found in churches and cathedrals.

We are not the first to propose an entheogenic theory of Christianity.\* One school of thought, represented by Carl Ruck and Mark Hoffman, believes that entheogens were rarely used in Christianity and then only by marginal, underground cults. We disagree. Based on pertinent passages from the canonical and Gnostic Gospels and on the widespread evidence of entheogens in some of the most sacred sites in Christendom, we conclude that they were present from the time of Christ up through the High Middle Ages.

Another group of entheogen researchers, which includes Clark Heinrich and J. R. Irvin, affirm John Allegro's original thesis that visionary plants have been widely used in Western culture and religion through the ages including in the mystical experiences of early Christianity.<sup>11</sup> We agree. However, they also endorse Allegro's radical interpretation of the Old and New Testaments, which concludes that the Jesus of the Gospels did not exist but was rather a metaphor, a code name, for the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom.

We admire Allegro for being one of the first academics to call attention to the fundamental role of entheogens in religion. Nevertheless, our theory differs from Allegro's in three ways. First, while Allegro denies the existence of Jesus, we concur with those scholars of religious studies who believe that Jesus was a historical figure.<sup>12</sup> Second, while Allegro bases his theory on the speculative interpretation of ancient languages, we base our theory on the plausible identification of entheogenic images. Third, while Allegro hopes that his writings will liberate people from the thrall of a false Christian orthodoxy, we hope that our discoveries will educate people about the history of psychoactive sacraments in Christianity.

Given the controversial nature of our theory, we call for the establishment of an interdisciplinary committee on the Psychedelic Gospels.<sup>13</sup> This committee would be comprised of scholars from relevant fields, including anthropology, art history, ethnobotany, and theology, to name

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\*A basic list of entheogen scholars includes David Spess, Jonathan Ott, Dan Russell, Mark Hoffman, Carl Ruck, Blaise Staples, Clark Heinrich, Peter Furst, John Allegro, Huston Smith, Robert Forte, Jack Herer, Robert Thorne, Chris Bennett, Jose Alfredo, Michael Hoffman, and R. Gordon Wasson.

a few. The committee would evaluate potential entheogenic images in Christian art from around the world. In addition to this committee, we advocate the discussion of these ideas in a wide variety of social media forums. (See the appendix for an in-depth discussion of the rationale, mission, and composition of this committee.)

## Deepak Chopra on God

In educating people about psychedelics, one topic that is not disputable is that entheogens can provide an authentic pathway to the divine. In a beautifully written book, *God: A Story of Revelation*, best-selling author Deepak Chopra describes four pathways available to “anyone who is eager for God.” In evaluating the lives of twelve religious visionaries, Chopra finds that they followed four paths to higher reality.<sup>14</sup>

The first is the *path of devotion*, which involves an inner journey and a total immersion in the wonder of God, as exemplified by the poet Rumi. The second is the *path of understanding*, the way of the mind, which involves reflection on the great theological questions, as epitomized by the philosopher Socrates. The third is the *path of service*, the way of action, of giving oneself in selfless service to others, as represented in the humble life of Rabbi Baal Shem Tov. And the fourth is the *path of meditation*, which ultimately opens the mind to awareness of higher consciousness, as found in the life of Catholic mystic Julian of Norwich.

These universal paths were set down in India thousands of years ago. However, in the context of the current psychedelic renaissance, it is time to add a fifth path, the *path of entheogens*. Generations of indigenous shamans, classical priestesses, and modern mind explorers have all born witness to the power of this pathway to open and sacralize the doors of perception, which is exemplified by the life and work of Stanislav Grof, the founder of LSD psychotherapy.

No doubt, some will be skeptical of the idea of encountering God through an entheogen. Christians who have dedicated themselves to prayerful devotion may balk at the claim of “effortless beatific vision.” But as Catholic brother David Steindl-Rast of the Mount Savior Monastery in Pine City, New York, observes, “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 sacraments. . . . Faith, simply accepted with gratefulness that God works through all created things. All? If we can encounter God through a sunrise seen from a mountain top, why not through a mushroom prayerfully ingested?"<sup>15</sup>

## Freedom of Religion

James Fadiman has been involved in psychedelic research since the 1960s. In his book, *The Psychedelic Explorer's Guide*, Fadiman describes this new era of positive possibilities for psychedelics as a "time of tentative celebration." He observes, "The warming trends toward legalization; increased religious, medical, and psychotherapeutic use; scientific exploration; and cultural acceptance are encouraging."<sup>16</sup> In this context, the most dramatic changes have been in the legal status of entheogens for both personal use and religious purposes.

Regarding personal use, domestically twenty-three states have approved medical marijuana laws, while Alaska, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington have legalized marijuana for medical and recreational purposes. Internationally, several nations have legalized or decriminalized drug use, including Brazil, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Spain, and Uruguay. In 2001 Portugal undertook a national experiment and decriminalized all drugs, while making treatment available as needed for drug users. Contrary to the dire predictions by proponents of the War on Drugs, the results have been entirely beneficial, leading to less addiction, less crime, less use, and large savings in law enforcement.

Directly related to entheogens and religious freedom in the United States are legal decisions that affirm the use of peyote and ayahuasca under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993.\* This act has been invoked to protect the religious freedom of the three hundred thousand

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\*The Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993, Public Law 103-141, reinstated the Sherbert Test, mandating that strict scrutiny be used when determining whether the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, guaranteeing religious freedom, has been violated.

members of the Native American Church, who use peyote as a sacrament, and of the members of two Catholic churches, Santo Daime and União do Vegetal (UDV), whose members use ayahuasca. While both churches originated in Brazil, they are expanding rapidly and have branches in the United States. The Santo Daime case is particularly relevant to our discussion of entheogens in Christianity, because Santo Daime is a well-established Catholic church recognized by the government and the bishops of Brazil. The followers of Santo Daime believe that the psychoactive Daime tea is the blood of Christ, similar to the wine, which serves as the Eucharist in the Christian communion.

For members of the Native American Church and the Santo Daime Church, these legal decisions are good news. But what about the millions of Americans who are not members of these churches? How do we as a nation justify allowing one group the right to use illegal substances for religious purposes without extending that right to all other citizens? For most citizens, current legislation presents an imposing legal barrier because there are no other established religions that use entheogens as their central sacrament.

As a result, for those who advocate the legal right to use entheogens, there are two main options, which are not mutually exclusive. The first would be to amend the federal Controlled Substances Act to permit the responsible use by adults of entheogens for therapeutic, religious, and spiritual purposes. The second would be to establish centers where people could legally explore entheogens under the supervision of experienced guides.<sup>17</sup>

## God Is a River of Love

Shortly before she passed away in 2007, Julie and I visited my mother in a nursing home in Tucson. She was beaming, animated in a way I had rarely seen. “Jerry,” she said, “I had a dream last night. I dreamt that God is a river of love that flows through the universe. All I have to do is to let go into that river.” A few days later, she lay down after lunch and never woke up. My mother, Marion Brown, was a poet who looked into the heart of the world and found the profound truth spoken by Tagore,

the great Indian mystic: “Love is the only reality, and it is not a mere sentiment. It is the ultimate truth that lies at the heart of creation.”

This too is the message of Jesus Christ, a message of love and compassion that reverberates through the centuries, uplifting the spirits of billions of people. Undeniably, one of the most expansive effects of entheogens is their ability to open our hearts to the wellspring of boundless love that flows within each and every one of us. Love, pure and simple. Love, as invisible as X-rays to the naked eye, yet as powerful as the force of gravity across the universe.

Throughout this book, we have peered into the biblical past and found images of entheogens enshrined in Christian churches and cathedrals, hinted at in the canonical Gospels, and whispered about in the Gnostic Gospels. All these clues point to the strong likelihood that entheogens were present at the beginnings of Christianity, just as they served as the light of ancient Greece through the Eleusinian Mysteries and the inspiration of ancient India through the *Rigveda*. But to seek the source of humanity’s love affair with entheogens, we must look even deeper into the past, much deeper into prehistory. We must walk in the footsteps of our earliest ancestors who dropped flowers into graves and who ingested the magical plants that gave them the first glimpse of much that is admirable in humanity: altruistic love, divine compassion, and immortality of the soul.

Certainly, since biblical times the sacred use of entheogens has posed daunting challenges to religious and political communities. Challenges so great that, with the coming of monotheism, entheogens were suppressed as the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden in Genesis; demonized as the tools of Satan during the Inquisition; and banned as dangerous drugs in the 1960s. With the resurgence of interest in the medical and scientific benefits of entheogens, these challenges will surely resurface, as issues of theology, religious freedom, and psychoactive sacramentals.

Let us address these issues with an open heart and an open mind.



## APPENDIX

# Interdisciplinary Committee on the Psychedelic Gospels

As we have stated, since the publication of Wasson's *Soma* (1968) and Allegro's *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (1970), a spate of new evidence has appeared, on websites<sup>1</sup> and in articles<sup>2</sup> and books, documenting the presence of sacred mushrooms in Christian art. Several of these books published during the last decade are J. R. Irvin's *The Holy Mushroom* (2008), John A. Rush's *The Mushroom in Christian Art* (2011), and Carl A. P. Ruck and Mark A. Hoffman's *The Effluents of Deity* (2012).<sup>3</sup>

While Irvin's book focuses mainly on a reevaluation of the Allegro-Wasson debate, it presents forty-three color plates in order to document the presence of psychoactive mushrooms in frescoes, stained-glass windows, illuminated manuscripts, and sculpted capitals. Rush's book is accompanied by a DVD containing 252 colored images that are discussed under three historical time periods: early Christian art (200 to 1000); middle Christian art (1000 to 1550); and late Christian art (1550 to the present).

However, significant questions have been raised regarding the validity of many of the entheogenic images presented by Irvin and Rush. The first problem is a technical one. In reviewing artworks from

different time periods and countries, Irvin and Rush have often relied on low-quality, sometimes corrupted, digital copies of these works found on the Internet. This had led to errors in interpretation.

To cite one example, in plate 32 of *The Holy Mushroom*, Irvin describes Saint Valburga as “holding a distinct *Amanita muscaria* in its young, bulbous state of development, complete with white spots.”<sup>4</sup> It was early on during our visit to Germany that we realized that Saint Valburga was actually holding a vial, not a mushroom, as confirmed in numerous other artworks and accounts of this saint (see plate 19). To cite another, the description accompanying Rush’s image of God creating plants from the Great Canterbury Psalter reads, “Notice that the deity has something in the palm of his right hand and at the tip of his left index finger.”<sup>5</sup> And in the text describing this image, Rush adds, “God is likewise holding something that looks suspiciously like a mushroom, but it might be a symbol for alpha and omega.”<sup>6</sup> In reality, our photograph of the image of God creating plants, reproduced directly from the original Great Canterbury Psalter housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, clearly indicates that God is not holding anything in either of his hands (see plates 12 and 13).

But these technical errors are just the tip of an iceberg that quickly chills any hope that the panoply of pictures presented by Irvin and Rush would definitively silence critics of the holy mushroom theory. In order to allay the argument that these critics “only addressed one picture,” Thomas Hatsis, a historian of Western religion and medieval pharmacopoeia, has examined many of the images presented by Irvin and Rush and found their analysis, for the most part, to be flawed.<sup>7</sup>

Hatsis’s main critique is not technical but methodological. After reviewing the forty-plus plates showing the sacred fungus in Christian art that Irvin includes in *The Holy Mushroom*, Hatsis contends that “Irvin’s only criterion for interpreting the artwork is that if something looks like a mushroom, it is a mushroom—a weak methodology that we shall see has many problems, the first of which lets a self-fulfilling prophet see whatever he wishes.”<sup>8</sup> For example, in plate 2, Irvin describes the man and woman in the image as Adam and Eve standing beside abstract trees that are actually the holy mushroom representing the Tree

of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Yet historical research shows that this image from the Aberdeen Bestiary (twelfth century, Scotland) “actually represents the female and male passions of the Fire-Bearing Stones (*De laipidibus igniferis*) lust rocks that ignite when conjoined.”<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, in comments on plate 33, a depiction of “The Last Judgement” from the Holkham Bible (ca. 1320–1330, England), Irvin observes, “The angel on the left stares at three distinct mushrooms that he holds in his hand.”<sup>10</sup> To the contrary, Hatsis points out that “a careful investigation shows that the supposed three mushrooms are the ‘three nails’ of the *Arma Christi*.”<sup>11</sup> Also known as the “Instruments of the Passion,” the *Arma Christi* is a collection of objects associated with the Passion and the Crucifixion.

Summing up his acerbic critique, Hatsis concludes:

Nearly every plate Irvin submits suffers similar shortcomings as those discussed above. Most fall into one of five categories: 1) they are either from non-devotional works; 2) open to alternative, naturalistic interpretations that require fewer leaps in faith; 3) are objects that were never intended to represent mushrooms at all; 4) or are so desperately lacking in their “*mushroomness*” it’s a wonder Irvin submitted them as evidence. 5) Finally, there are Irvin’s truly remarkable claims like rocks representing “metaphors for the mushroom.” How one goes about proving or disproving that a rock covertly depicts a mushroom is too highly sophisticated an argument, far about the intellectual capabilities of this writer.<sup>12</sup>

Similar concerns can be raised regarding Rush’s *The Mushroom in Christian Art*. In contrast to Irvin, who focuses mainly on distinctive mushroom images, Rush argues that the mushroom “has many disguises, and thus we need to build a mushroom typology.”<sup>13</sup> In constructing this typology, Rush postulates that, while in some of the art the mushroom is quite evident, in others it is represented by analogies and symbols, such as, “for example, halos, crosses, bread, books, wounds, and blood.”<sup>14</sup> The problem with this broad symbolic approach is that it opens the door to a loose interpretation of Christian

art and the temptation to see mushrooms where there are none.

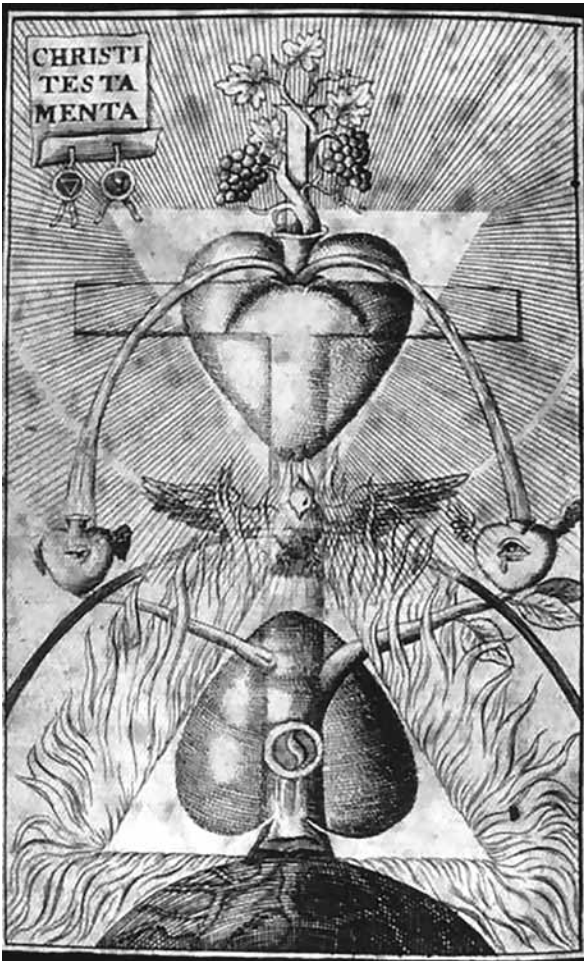
According to Hatsis, Irvin's ahistorical and Rush's symbolic approaches to entheogen research frequently lead to spurious arguments, dogmatic conclusions, and untestable statements such as "the value of the [mushroom] motif is its visible invisibility."<sup>15</sup> These objections are obviated by the more rigorous scholarship of Ruck and Hoffman in *The Effluents of Deity*. Here Ruck and Hoffman apply the interdisciplinary tools of art history, comparative religion, and anthropological fieldwork to uncover the role of botanical Eucharists in medieval artistic masterpieces, such as Van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece (Belgium), Grüenwald's Isenheim Altarpiece (France), Bernward's Michaeliskirche (Germany), and the frescoes of the Baptistery of Parma (Italy).

Utilizing this interdisciplinary approach, Ruck and Hoffman offer a compelling analysis of entheogens and entheogenic symbolism encoded into Christian and esoteric art. The sacred plants and symbols are frequently hidden in plain sight through a variety of "illusionist tricks that the artist might employ simultaneously along with the full panoply of highly sophisticated visual puns, double entendres, and symbolic elements."<sup>16</sup>

One example of an illusionist trick is the *Vexierbild*, which allows the same image to be seen first as one object and then another. The silhouette drawing of the young woman who, from another perspective, transforms into an old hag is a well-known case in point. Once one sees the two images, it is impossible to look at the picture without recognizing both interpretations. Another example is the revelation that the "drapery in medieval illuminations often suggests a fungal configuration that once seen, is hard to dispel."<sup>17</sup> See fig. 11.5 (p. 161) for mushroom images embedded in the drapery of the Jesse panel in the ceiling painting in Michaeliskirche in Germany, and fig. 8.1 (p. 113) for similar images in the disciples' hems in the fresco depicting the Last Supper in the Church of Saint Martin in France.

A Renaissance example of a conscious encryption, visible only to initiates, is the seventeenth-century Jakob Böhem drawing *Christi Testamenta* (Testament of Christ, Amsterdam, 1682). It is worth quoting Ruck and Hoffman's analysis of this drawing at length, because it





*Fig. A.1. Jakob Böhem, Christi Testamenta, 1682*

provides a lucid example of a message richly encoded with secret images and also offers an erudite counterbalance to Hatsis's critique of cryptic mushroom metaphors. In this Böhem drawing:

The mushroom goes unnoticed at the center of the bleeding heart superimposed upon the radiant, luminous Tau cross, from whose aorta is growing the grape vine. The image represents Böhem's meditation upon John, 15:1-8 ('I am the true vine') and is a Christianized version of the *Sephiroth* Tree of Life of the Cabbala. The Cross itself is rooted in the earth and growing, amidst flames, upwards as



a tree, with two lateral branches bearing additional smaller hearts on either side as fruits, each receiving a stream of blood pouring in an arc from the aorta at the top of the unnoticed mushroom. The arcs define an additional mushroom cap with the tree trunk as the stipe. . . . The document of the Testaments is seen in the upper left. It is sealed. One would have to break its seals to read its message. One seal bears the image of the Eucharistic grail; the other, the inverted triangle, like the one superimposed upon the mushroom heart. . . . Such alchemical puzzles were termed a “rebus,” a message encoded with images, from the Latin ablative plural of *res* (‘thing, object’), indicating that the message is conveyed “through the instrument of objects.” Need we ask what he could be saying?<sup>18</sup>

Given these conflicting interpretations of mushroom symbolism in Christian art—as expressed in the writings of Irvin, Rush, Hatsis, and Ruck and Hoffman—there is an obvious need to establish sound methodologies and objective criteria for evaluating evidence of sacred plants in religious art. To reiterate a guiding scientific principle set forth at the beginning of this investigation: extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. If our theory of the Psychedelic Gospels is valid, then we predict the following.

1. The entheogenic evidence presented throughout this book will be vetted and confirmed by other scholars with relevant expertise.
2. Additional unambiguous icons of entheogens in Christian art will be found and similarly confirmed.

Given the controversial nature of the theory of the Psychedelic Gospels, and the challenge that this theory presents to conventional accounts of the origins of Judeo-Christianity, we believe that the Psychedelic Gospels should be studied with the same rigor applied to the Dead Sea Scrolls and Gnostic Gospels. To achieve this goal and to objectively evaluate current (and future) iconic evidence offered in support of this theory, we call for the establishment of an international interdisciplinary committee on the Psychedelic Gospels.

This committee would be cochaired by a mycologist and an art historian with impeccable scientific credentials. It would include scholars from diverse fields, including anthropology, archaeology, art history, classics, mycology, religious history, and theology. The committee would be charged with collecting potential psychedelic images in religious art from around the world and evaluating them for the presence of entheogens based on well-defined criteria. For example, are the psychoactive images clear and unambiguous? Are mushrooms shown as stylized mushrooms (or mushroom-trees) or naturalistically, as they appear in the wild? Can the genus and/or species of the mushroom be determined? Does the artwork and history surrounding the image provide additional confirmation of the presence of psychoactive mushrooms or other entheogens?

Unlike the political infighting that delayed the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls for decades, the workings of the interdisciplinary committee on the Psychedelic Gospels would be transparent. The Judeo-Christian art images and religious texts in question would be made available online for public viewing and comment. It is through this interdisciplinary peer-review process that the theory of the Psychedelic Gospels can be independently confirmed or refuted, and thereby gain credence in mainstream scientific and theological circles.

# Notes

## Sacred Mushroom Seeker

1. D. Brown, *Da Vinci Code*.
2. Riedlinger, *Sacred Mushroom Seeker*, 10.
3. Furst, *Hallucinogens and Culture*, 86.
4. Wasson, "Seeking the Magic Mushroom."
5. Riedlinger, *Sacred Mushroom Seeker*, 10.
6. Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck, *Road to Eleusis*, 33.
7. Ott, "Twentieth-Century Darwin," 190.
8. Brown and Lupu, "Sacred Plants and the Gnostic Church."

## Chapter 1. Green Man of Rosslyn Chapel

1. Earl of Rosslyn, *Rosslyn Chapel*, 2.
2. Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*.
3. Furst, *Hallucinogens and Culture*, 9.
4. Lewis-Williams, *Mind in the Cave*, 7.
5. Hancock, *Supernatural*, 90.
6. Wasson et al., *Persephone's Quest*, 77.
7. Doniger O'Flaherty, "'Somatic' Memories," 57.
8. Wasson, letter to *Times Literary Supplement*, September 25, 1970.

## Chapter 2. O Immortal Soma!

1. Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan*.
2. Griffith, *Hymns of the Rgveda*, Book 8, Hymn XLVIII, Soma, 435.

3. Wasson et al., *Persephone's Quest*, 17.
4. Wasson, *Soma*, 3.
5. Ibid., 9.
6. McKenna, *Food of the Gods*, 97–120.
7. Doniger O'Flaherty, "'Somatic' Memories," 95.
8. Ingalls, "Remarks on Mr. Wasson's *Soma*," 190.

### Chapter 3. Santa, the Reindeer Shaman

1. Cairngorm Reindeer Center, [www.cairngormreindeer.co.uk](http://www.cairngormreindeer.co.uk).
2. Eliade, *Shamanism and Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*.
3. Furst, *Hallucinogens and Culture*, 6.
4. Wasson, *Soma*, 231–356, devotes more than two-thirds of this book to presenting these accounts as exhibits to the text, so scholars would have easy access to the diverse primary source material that he collected over decades.
5. Dikov, *Mysteries in the Rocks*, 7–27.
6. Devlet, "Rock Art Studies," 120.
7. Wasson et al., *Persephone's Quest*, 68.
8. Wasson, *Soma*, 160.
9. Ibid., 161.
10. Hutton, *Shamans*, 32.

### Chapter 4. Eleusinian Mysteries

1. Wasson et al., *Persephone's Quest*, 160.
2. Preka-Alexandri, *Eleusis*, 21.
3. Translation of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter by Danny Staples in Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck, *Road to Eleusis*, 69.
4. Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck, *Road to Eleusis*, 81.
5. Ibid., 44.
6. Ibid., 12.
7. Hillman, *Chemical Muse*, 6.

### Chapter 5. María Sabina and the Little Saints

1. Rothenberg, *María Sabina*, 20.
2. Ibid., 22.
3. Ibid., 25.
4. Mexican poet Homero Aridjis, as cited by Rothenberg, *María Sabina*, xix.

5. For discussion, see Wasson, *Wondrous Mushroom*, 39–40, and Wasson et al., *María Sabina*.
6. See Wasson, *Wondrous Mushroom*, 79–92, and Furst, *Hallucinogens and Culture*, 73–74.
7. Wasson, *Wondrous Mushroom*, 58.
8. Rothenberg, *María Sabina*, 14.
9. Ibid.
10. Rothenberg, *María Sabina*, 83–84. Also found in María Sabina, *Mushroom Ceremony*, which includes four long-playing records (currently CDs) and the liner notes with the words of her all-night chants printed side by side in Mazatec, Spanish, and English, recorded by R. Gordon Wasson and first released by Folkways Records in 1957.
11. Wasson, *Wondrous Mushroom*, 21.
12. For an excellent discussion of this theory and of the “conversation across the disciplines” between Richard Evans Schultes and Weston La Barre, see Furst, *Hallucinogens and Culture*, 2–4, which states, “It was La Barre’s hypothesis, then, (1) that the magico-religious use of hallucinogenic plants by American Indians represents a survival from a very ancient Paleolithic and Mesolithic shamanistic strata, and that its linear ancestor is likely to be an archaic form of the shamanistic Eurasiatic fly-agaric cults that survived in Siberia into the present century.”
13. Furst, *Hallucinogens and Culture*, 166–73.
14. Wasson, *Wondrous Mushroom*, 8.
15. Cited in Furst, *Flesh of the Gods*, 185–200.
16. Wasson, *Wondrous Mushroom*, 30.
17. Estrada, *María Sabina*, 13–14.
18. Rothenberg, *María Sabina*, 64.
19. Ibid., 69.
20. Estrada, *María Sabina*, 20.
21. Ibid., 13.

## Chapter 6. Miracle of Marsh Chapel

1. J. B. Brown, *United Farm Workers Grape Strike*.
2. See Brown and Brutoco, *Profiles in Power*, and Brown, Brutoco, and Cusumano, *Freedom from Mid-East Oil*.
3. For background see Penner, *Timothy Leary*, 189–243.
4. Cited in Doblin, “Pahnke’s Good Friday Experiment,” 85.

5. Smith, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception*, 101.
6. Doblin, "Pahnke's Good Friday Experiment," 87.
7. Ibid., 87–88; also see Richards, "Phenomenology and Potential Religious Import," 189–99.
8. Clark, *Chemical Ecstasy*, 77.
9. Harner, *Way of the Shaman*, 3.
10. Grof, *Holotropic Mind*, 14–17.
11. Ibid., 15–16.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 17–18.
14. Guerra-Doce, "Psychoactive Substances in Prehistoric Times," 91.
15. Wasson et al., *Persephone's Quest*, 78.

## Chapter 7. Battle of the Trees

1. Wasson, *Soma*, plate XXI, 180.
2. See Kupfer, *Romanesque Wall Painting*, 1–16.
3. Samorini, "Mushroom-Tree of Plaincourault," 35–36.
4. The photo was also described in a note published in the *Bulletin de la Société Mycologique*, vol. xxvii, 31–32.
5. Wasson, *Soma*, 179.
6. Mérygnny-Indre, *Chapelle de Plaincourault*, 7, states in French, "L'arbre du péché original, traité à la manière d'un énorme champignon."
7. Quoted in Wasson, *Soma*, 179–80.
8. Allegro, *Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, 80.
9. See Irvin, *Holy Mushroom*, 1–7, and throughout the work for an in-depth reevaluation of the Wasson-Allegro debate and exploration of the ongoing schism it caused within the fields of theology and ethnobotany.
10. J. A. Brown, *John Marco Allegro*, editors' foreword, ix–xiii.
11. Ibid., 207.
12. Ibid., 213.
13. Brown, *John Marco Allegro*, xv–xvi.
14. Translation from the French of the statement by Alain Crantell, regional park guide, Chapel of Plaincourault, July 19, 2012.
15. Eliade, *Shamanism*, 63.
16. Schultes and Hofmann, *Plants of the Gods*, 83.
17. Samorini, "'Mushroom-Trees' in Christian Art."

18. Hoffman, “Gallery: Christian Mushroom Trees,” in “Wasson and Allegro on the Tree of Knowledge.”
19. Wasson, letter to the editor, *Times Literary Supplement*, August 21, 1970, cited in Irvin, *Holy Mushroom*, 8.
20. Abbaye de Saint-Savin sur-Gartempe et Vallée des Fresques, *Visitors Guide 2012*.
21. Kupfer, *Romanesque Wall Painting*, 3.

### Chapter 8. The Prophet Has Spoken

1. See Schultes and Hofmann, *Plants of the Gods*, 54, 144–53.
2. Kupfer, *Art of Healing*, 1.
3. The *Corpus* erroneously translates this inscription as “The Prophet David,” but correctly interprets the one on the other side of the passageway as “Moses. He came down.” In accord with this translation, Kupfer, *Romanesque Wall Painting*, 128, states, “Large figures of David and Moses, identified by inscription, stand in niches beneath architectural canopies on either side of the central bay.” See Debiais, Varenne, and Treffort, *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiéval*, including four entries for Nohant-Vic, Church of Saint Martin de Vicq.
4. Kupfer, *Romanesque Wall Painting*, 122.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 128.
7. *Ibid.*, 143.
8. Kupfer, *Art of Healing*, 1.
9. Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, 399.

### Chapter 9. Down the Rabbit Hole

1. Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*.
2. Baigent, *Jesus Papers*, 7–8.
3. Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, 35.
4. Baigent, *Jesus Papers*, color plate of Station XIV, facing page 50.
5. For more information, see [www.renneslechateau.nl/2007/11/22/louis-de-coma/](http://www.renneslechateau.nl/2007/11/22/louis-de-coma/).

### Chapter 10. Canterbury Tales

1. Professor Rosa Alcoy cites this quote from Professor Klaus Reinhardt in an excerpt from the commentary volume that accompanies Moleiro’s the Great Canterbury Psalter.

2. Arthur, *Mushrooms and Mankind*, 79; Irvin, *Holy Mushroom*, 117.
3. See the book covers of Arthur, *Mushrooms and Mankind*, and Rush, *Mushroom in Christian Art*.
4. See Lash, "Discovery of a Lifetime," for discussion of the Great Canterbury Psalter, the Eadwine Psalter, and the Utrecht Psalter. Lash erroneously refers to the Great Canterbury Psalter as the "Paris Eadwine Psalter."
5. The replica of the Great Canterbury Psalter, which contains 365 pages and 140 gold-embellished images, is described by Moleiro as a "first, unique and unrepeatable edition limited to 987 copies."
6. This first half contains 184 pages that, in part, follow the iconographic organization of the Utrecht Psalter (Rheims, ca. 800) and the Eadwine Psalter (Canterbury, ca. 1160), earlier psalters with which the Great Canterbury Psalter is sometimes confused.
7. See Binski and Panayotova, *Cambridge Illuminations*, 363–86, for manuscripts and documents at Cambridge University, as well as for additional information on book reproduction in the medieval West.
8. This translation was provided by Mathew Lupu, M.A. candidate, classical archaeology, Florida State University.
9. Lash, "Discovery of a Lifetime."
10. Houvet, *Chartres*, 3.
11. Miller, *Chartres Cathedral*, 10.
12. *Ibid.*, 4–5.
13. *Ibid.*, 62–63.

## Chapter 11. Saint Bernward's Secret

1. Irvin, *Holy Mushroom*, 136.
2. Reichardt, "Jewish Cathedral Builder," 1.
3. Lutz, *Michaeliskirche*, 36.
4. Kern, Oesterley, and Woltmann, *St. Michael's Church*, 2.
5. As Samorini, "'Mushroom-Trees' in Christian Art," 103, notes, the depiction "seems to indicate quite clearly that the artist intended to represent this species of mushroom in his bas-relief."
6. *Ibid.* Samorini identifies this psychoactive mushroom as *P. semilanceata* (Fr.) Quél. In this article, Samorini appears to be working from a reverse image of a photo of the Adam and Eve scene on the left-hand side of Bernward's Door of Salvation.
7. Kern, Oesterley, and Woltmann, *St. Michael's Church*, 26.



8. See Ruck and Hoffman, *Effluents of Deity*, chapter 2, “Column at the End of Time,” 33–48, for a detailed analysis of the Jesse Tree.
9. Ibid.
10. Ruck et al., *Apples of Apollo*, 49–50.
11. See Ruck and Hoffman, *Effluents*, 33–48, for development of this interpretation of the Tree of Jesse.

## Chapter 12. The Pope’s Banker

1. Tuchman, *Distant Mirror*, xiii.
2. See Charles-Murray, “Emergence of Christian Art,” 51–63, for discussion of other factors, including the Jewish roots of Christianity; art as an expensive luxury requiring cemeteries and buildings for public display; and emphasis on literary tradition (gospels, hymns, sermons, and letters) over artistic representation in early Christianity.
3. Spier, *Picturing the Bible*, 1.
4. Giovannini, Ventura, and Torlo, *Aquileia*, 71.
5. See Fabbro, “Mushrooms & Snails,” for further discussion of the identification of the mushrooms of Aquileia as either *Amanita muscaria* or *Amanita caesarea*. Due to the red-orange color of the caps and the white gills, we believe that these mushrooms represent *Amanita muscaria*.
6. This theory is proposed by Fabbro, “Did Early Christians Use Hallucinogenic Mushrooms?”
7. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, I, 13–15; I, 24–25.
8. Irvin, *Holy Mushroom*, 109–47. Of the total number of entheogenic Christian images presented in Irvin’s book, the majority are from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries.
9. See Harner, “Role of Hallucinogenic Plant in European Witchcraft,” 125–50. Based on Vatican records, Harner argues that a variety of *Datura* plants were key ingredients in the witches’ brew. *Datura* species contain atropine, a powerful hallucinogenic agent that can create the illusion that one is flying. For a comprehensive discussion of the witches’ ointment and the evolution of the concept of the “satanic witch,” see Hatsis, *Witches’ Ointment*, 154–81.
10. Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*.
11. Ruck and Hoffman, *Effluents of Deity*, 60, state, “But with canonic censure because of the appearance of demons which often occur in God’s church in such cases, let it be established that no one be canonized without

apostolic authority and with the life of the candidate approved by persons of authority.”

12. Irvin, “Secret History.”
13. Riedlinger, “Latecomer’s View of R. Gordon Wasson,” 210.
14. Ibid.
15. Irvin, *Holy Mushroom*, 11.
16. Riedlinger, “A Latecomer’s View of R. Gordon Wasson,” 51.

### Chapter 13. The Dark Church

1. Tertullian, as cited in Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 88.
2. Yenipinar and Şahin, *Paintings of the Dark Church*, 7.
3. Ibid., 76.
4. Schonfield, *Passover Plot*; Baigent, *Jesus Papers*, 128–29.
5. Sabar, “UPDATE.”
6. See King, “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife . . .,’” 131–59.
7. Hoffman, “Entheogens and Religion.”
8. Samorini, “‘Mushroom-Trees’ in Christian Art.”
9. Irvin, *Holy Mushroom*; Rush, *Mushroom in Christian Art*; Ruck and Hoffman, *Effluents of Deity*.
10. Hatsis, “Dogmatist’s Debacle,” 13.
11. Ibid., 11
12. Beatty, “Tyranny of Belief.”

### Chapter 14. Kingdom of Heaven

1. For general background on Gnosticism, see Lewis, *Introduction to “Gnosticism,”* 12–27.
2. See Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 28–47, for in-depth discussion of the triumph of Orthodoxy over Gnosticism.
3. Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*.
4. Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, xvii.
5. For discussion of the emergence of the basic principles of classical Christian doctrine, see Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 244–72.
6. This summary and the quotes in it are based on Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, xx–xxi.
7. Ibid.
8. According to Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 6, on the basis of the Nag Hammadi library, Gnosticism appears to be “a much broader phenomenon

- than the Christian Gnosticism documented by the heresiologists.”
9. Brown and Lupu, “Sacred Plants and the Gnostic Church,” 64–77.
  10. The Gospel of Thomas, in Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 127, 137.
  11. “Thy filtre, O Agni, equipped with flames, may it cleanse us, cleanse us with the fruits of sacred songs!” (*RgVeda* IX 67:22–25), cited in Wasson, *Soma*, 53.
  12. The Gospel of Thomas, in Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 128.
  13. The Gospel of Philip, in Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 153–54.
  14. *Ibid.*, xxx.
  15. *Ibid.*, 144.
  16. For additional *Amanita muscaria* analogies, see Ruck, Staples, and Heinrich, *Apples of Apollo*; Heinrich, *Strange Fruit*; and Teeter, “Amanita Muscaria.”
  17. See Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, 178–90; Masters and Houston, *Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*, 247–313; Chopra, *God*, 271–78; and Cusumano, *Cosmic Consciousness*, 19–66.
  18. Baigent, *Jesus Papers*, back cover.
  19. *Ibid.*, 228.
  20. *Ibid.*, 157
  21. See Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 19–27, for discussion of the Neoplatonic ideas of Iamblichus.
  22. Baigent, *Jesus Papers*, 175.
  23. Emboden, “Art and Artifact,” 105–6.
  24. *Ibid.*, 93, notes, “As many of the images are imprecise in their execution, identification must be made in the context in which they are represented and is therefore often conjectural.”
  25. See Pilch, *Flights of the Soul*, 110.

## Chapter 15. Psychedelic Renaissance

1. Markoff, *What the Doormouse Said*, xix.
2. Gonzalez, “10 Geniuses Who Used Drugs and Their Drugs of Choice.”
3. Lilly, *Center of the Cyclone*.
4. See Fadiman, *Psychedelics Explorer’s Guide*, part 3, “Enhanced Problem Solving in Focused Sessions,” 116–93.
5. *Ibid.*, 125–30.
6. Lattin, “Second Coming of Psychedelics.”
7. See the MAPS mission statement at [www.maps.org](http://www.maps.org).
8. For example, see D. J. Brown, *New Science of Psychedelics*; Langlitz, *Neuro-psychedelia*; and Sessa, *Psychedelic Renaissance*.

9. Masters and Houston, *Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*, 247. The complete sentence reads, “To this question the answer must be *Yes*—but we feel an extended discussion is warranted and that many qualifications are in order.” Masters and Houston present this extended discussion in chapter 9, “Religions and Mystical Experience,” 247–313.
10. Grof, *Holotropic Mind*, 17.
11. For an in-depth discussion of entheogens in religion, including analysis of the strong vs. weak entheogenic theory, see Hoffman, “Entheogens and Religion.” We agree that there is promising scriptural evidence documenting the use of entheogens in the Old Testament (see Merkur, *Mystery of Manna*, and Shanon, “Biblical Entheogens”). Nevertheless, an investigation of the role of entheogens in early Judaism is beyond the scope of this book.
12. See, for example, Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, 205–15.
13. Some writers, particularly Andy Letcher, *Shroom*, 5, completely reject the mushroom theory of religion, equally criticizing both Allegro and Wasson’s versions of this theory. In largely denying the historical role of entheogens in classic and traditional cultures, Letcher contends, “That we in the West have found value in those remarkable mushroom experiences says something rather revealing about ourselves, about the ideas, hopes, fears, aspiration and desires that shape our time; not least about our yearning for enchantment in a barren scientific world stripped of magic and meaning.”
14. Chopra, *God*, 272–75.
15. Steindl-Rast, foreword, xii.
16. Fadiman, *Psychedelic Explorer’s Guide*, 241.
17. For discussion of the guidelines for voyagers and guides and of the Guild of Guides, see Fadiman, *Psychedelic Explorer’s Guide*, 12–38.

## Appendix.

### Interdisciplinary Committee on the Psychedelic Gospels

1. Hoffman, “Entheogens and Religion.”
2. Samorini, “‘Mushroom-Trees’ in Christian Art.”
3. Irvin, *Holy Mushroom*; Rush, *Mushroom in Christian Art*; Ruck and Hoffman, *Effluents of Deity*.
4. Irvin, *Holy Mushroom*, 136.
5. Rush, *Mushroom in Christianity*, DVD, plate 1:9a.
6. *Ibid.*, 202.

7. Hatsis, “Roasting the Salamander,” “Secret Christian Cult of the Radish,” “Mushroom in Mommy Fortuna’s Midnight Carnival,” and “The Dogmatist’s Debacle.” Except for the last article, the other three articles are unpublished papers that are posted on the Hatsis website.
8. Hatsis, “Dogmatist’s Debacle,” 11.
9. Ibid.
10. Irvin, *Holy Mushroom*, 137.
11. Hatsis, “Dogmatist’s Debacle,” 12.
12. Ibid., 13.
13. Rush, *Mushroom in Christian Art*, 12.
14. Ibid., 17.
15. Hatsis, “Dogmatist’s Debacle,” 17.
16. Ruck and Hoffman, *Effluents of Deity*, 258.
17. Ibid., 261.
18. Ibid., 255–56.

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# Index

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