

Soul-altering substances

What implications does the psychedelic renaissance have for faith and spirituality?

by [Ron Cole-Turner](#) in the [November 2023](#) issue



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In 2015, the CENTURY published an advertisement with the headline “Seeking Clergy to Take Part in a Research Study of Psilocybin and Sacred Experience.” The notice from Johns Hopkins School of Medicine invited leaders from all religious traditions to volunteer for a study involving a psychedelic drug, psilocybin. Those who followed the link to the website learned that psilocybin is the active ingredient in what it called “sacred mushrooms.” Psilocybin, the website explained, has “been

reported to occasion unitive and mystical experiences.”

The reported link between psilocybin and mystical experiences was based on earlier work done at Hopkins. In a 2006 peer-reviewed article, researchers made this stunning claim: “When administered to volunteers under supportive conditions, psilocybin occasioned experiences similar to spontaneously occurring mystical experiences which were evaluated by volunteers as having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance.” Follow-up studies have consistently confirmed this finding.

If they already knew this, why would Hopkins scientists want to run virtually the same experiment again, but with religious leaders? One hint is found at the top of the webpage in the form of a question: “Can psilocybin help deepen spiritual lives?” If clergy took a psilocybin journey, how would they answer that question? The website mentioned the “expertise” of religious leaders. Would their training in religion help them find the language to describe experiences that many say are ineffable or beyond words? And if so, what would they say about it?

Answers will have to wait until the publication of the clergy study, expected by the end of this year. Only then will we learn the full story about whether participating clergy found spiritual meaning in their experiences and how their ministerial work was affected.

A brief preview of the report, however, was offered in June at the Psychedelic Science 2023 conference in Denver. I have been deeply curious about the link between psychedelics and spirituality ever since I read the 2006 paper, so I knew I needed to be there to hear the latest update and to gauge the mood in the room. I also wanted to catch up on the latest news across the board from what’s being called the psychedelic renaissance. Not only do psychedelics appear to bring about spiritual or mystical experiences, they also seem to have unexpected powers to bring about treatments for a wide range of mental health disorders. This therapeutic promise, so widely reported by the media, drives nearly all the research in today’s renaissance.

Psychedelic Science 2023 was organized by the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, launched in 1986 by activist Rick Doblin to underwrite research into the medical benefits of psychedelics and related drugs, such as MDMA (often known as ecstasy or molly). Since its founding, MAPS claims to have raised over

\$130 million. Psychedelic Science 2023 was the largest such gathering in history, with more than 11,000 people in attendance.

The sheer scope of mental health conditions that seem partly treatable with psychedelic substances is bewildering. Depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse disorders are all being studied. So are eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, chronic pain including headache disorders, irritable bowel syndrome, traumatic brain injuries, methadone detoxification, opioid withdrawal, and borderline personality disorder. Even, it seems, Alzheimer's disease.

How can these drugs be effective in treating such a wide range of problems? How do just one or two sessions create lasting benefits? How do they seem to accelerate standard talk therapy by bringing about breakthroughs? I went from session to session, trying to make sense of it all—and wondering about the connections between mental health and spiritual health.

One area of research that's especially relevant to ministry involves psychedelic sessions to help terminal cancer patients deal with end-of-life distress and demoralization. For some, the anxiety is so overwhelming that they cut themselves off from their family, their friends, and even their oncology team. News reports of patients' psychedelic experiences and how it transforms the dying process have helped us think in new ways about care for the dying.

Most of this research into the mental health therapy benefits of psychedelics is still at an early stage, promising but not proven. The studies involve small numbers of volunteers, enough to show safety and healing potential but not enough to convince the statistics-minded skeptics at the Food and Drug Administration. But in one area of research, the arduous pathway through clinical trials is essentially complete: the use of MDMA to treat PTSD. (While MDMA's action in the brain differs from that of traditional psychedelics like LSD and psilocybin, its experiential effects are somewhat similar.)

Of all the psychedelic-assisted therapies in the pipeline, MDMA for PTSD is the flagship. It is on track to be the first to be approved for therapeutic use in the United States and beyond. More than 30 years ago, MAPS began to navigate stiff political headwinds and to raise the millions of dollars needed to fund the research into the medical value of MDMA. Late last year, a second MAPS-sponsored phase III clinical

trial was completed, paving the way for a formal application to the FDA by early next year.

At the conference, I saw numerous sets of slides filled with data that mostly seemed to confirm the healing potential of drugs like psilocybin, LSD, MDMA, ibogaine, and mescaline. Often the first slide would show the scope of the problem, the millions of people suffering from a mental health disorder for which today's psychopharmacology has a less than satisfactory treatment. Next would be a slide showing the benefits of talk therapy, followed by a slide showing what happens when one or two sessions involving any one of the psychedelic drugs were added to the protocol. The dramatic jump in the bar graphs was easy to see. Then came the disclaimers: it's early in the research, this study is still under review, the sample size was small and not very diverse, and we're not sure how this works but it's really promising.

More than the data, however, what really struck me were the stories of the experiences of the research volunteers, especially those suffering from depression or PTSD. Psychedelic drugs are more than a bit weird, because they seem to do two things: they bring on intensely meaningful experiences, and they open a pathway to mental health therapy. Are these two things connected? If so, how?

No one seems to know how to answer these questions, even though they underlie the very foundation of the field. Just how do psychedelics bring healing from mental disorders? We are learning about how they act in the brain. We know a lot about how they act on particular serotonin receptor sites. This action at the cellular level seems to modulate the activity of brain regions and the networks that link them together. We can see this by imaging the brains of volunteers during psychedelic sessions. But how does it all add up in terms of neuroscience, and how do we understand the connection between what the brain is doing and what the mind is experiencing? What's the relationship between intense subjective—even spiritual—experiences and their neural correlates?

Different researchers interpret these findings in different ways. Some suggest that they can use brain imaging to point to the neural correlates of what mystics describe as "ego death" or a sense of universal connectedness. Others claim that imaging opens a window on the way the brain shakes itself loose from patterns of thought, releasing us from the grip of negative ideas that bind us to our anxious or depressed state of mind. Still others point to the power of these drugs to stimulate the growth

of new neurons and the partial rewiring of the brain. By stimulating neurogenesis and supporting neuroplasticity, psychedelics help the brain heal itself.

Each of these theories is probably true to some extent. But the thing that comes through most clearly from the reports of the research volunteers is just how powerful, meaningful, and transformative their psychedelic experiences were. Their stories, narrated anonymously by the psychotherapists on the research teams, touch on spiritual dimensions of human existence, feelings of shame, a lack of acceptance, and a sense of bondage to unwanted patterns of behavior. Again and again, these subjective experiences were more powerful than our theories can comprehend.

What, then, should we make of the fact that psychedelics are linked to both mystical experience and mental healing? How are the two effects connected? In the next decade or two, as psychedelic mental health therapies are approved and slowly rolled out, we will have plenty of opportunity to learn from the insights of those who undergo them. What will they tell us about their experiences and their healing? How will they connect the two?

Add to this the many others who will start exploring psychedelics for nontherapeutic reasons as they become decriminalized. Oregon is already offering access to guided psychedelic experiences for adults who simply want a safe and legal experience. Colorado is not far behind. In one-on-one settings or in retreats, psychedelic tourists will soon make their way to a new generation of healers and retreat centers. Supporting the trend toward decriminalization is biomedical research that seems to show that careful use of psychedelics can improve our sense of satisfaction in life and our generalized mental health.

As for the clergy study, I knew some of the basics before I arrived in Denver. The study was launched in 2015. Recruitment was slower than expected. After careful screening, 24 volunteers enrolled in the study, 12 each at Hopkins and New York University.

Several sessions at the conference were devoted to the clergy study, starting with one that featured some of the key members of the research team. Central to this work is Roland Griffiths, psychiatry and neuroscience professor at Hopkins and lead author of the 2006 study. His appearance at the Denver meeting was complicated by the fact that last year he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, which he has discussed publicly in interviews in the *New York Times* and elsewhere. He insists that

he is a “bench scientist” and not a religious believer. Over the past 20 years, however, he has studied both the medical and spiritual effects of psychedelics, especially psilocybin. He is widely recognized as the world’s foremost researcher in psychedelics.

Despite being a strong advocate, Griffiths told the audience that he is concerned for the future of the field. “Pop media is promoting scientifically unvalidated, inflated expectations,” he said. He hopes the field can “avoid replicating the mistakes of the ‘60s.” For that to happen, a “thorough assessment is needed of both short-term and long-term risks and benefits to individuals and to the culture of psychedelic use within established religious settings.” He warned that the “risks cannot be ignored.” At the same time, speaking specifically of the clergy study, Griffiths said that it offers “lots to unpack. We are very excited about the results.”

When the definitive publication of the clergy study appears, it will include a rigorous phenomenological analysis of the vast quantity of interview responses from the participants. Only then will it be possible to look closely at nuances in the ways in which participants described their experiences. Did they tap into their religious expertise? Were they able to describe the spiritual or mystical dimensions of their experiences with unusual depth or clarity?

The Denver audience was given a brief, informal sampling of some of the comments that study volunteers made, some in the days immediately after a session and others almost two years later. Cody Swift, a member of the research team, presented a few highlights. As a group, he said, the clergy felt that their experiences resonated with their theological beliefs. At the same time, they felt that the experience encouraged them to extend the meaning of their beliefs beyond their prior understandings, deepening the cognitive with the affective and experiential. They “tended to describe God in relational qualities of closeness, intimacy, and love.” One participant, Swift said, offered this response: “I didn’t see God. I felt God the whole time.”

It is hardly a closely guarded secret that many of today’s clergy are demoralized. Swift noted that some reported that they were “just going through the motions.” After the study, he said, they spoke in terms of “a lived practice.” As one priest put it, “Because of my session, I know God less, but I love God more. I am more in love with the mystery.”

Some spoke of a growing sense of trust in God, of less rigidity and more flexibility in their theological outlook, and of a sense of freedom from striving in their work. Some described what Swift called “an increased openness to other religious pathways, not as an intellectual question only.” Speaking of other religions, one pastor was quoted as saying, “I felt as if I embodied them.” Hearing that brought the audience to applause.

For anyone haunted by the possibility that Timothy Leary’s 1960s advice to “turn on, tune in, drop out” might show up in the new research context, it will be reassuring to learn that no one in the study said that the experience was incompatible with their theology. No one dropped out of religious work because of what they experienced.

Their biggest problem, it seems, was their religious isolation. A few were brave enough to speak with a colleague or with their bishops or supervisors before the study. Others felt the whole experience was probably best left unmentioned. Among other things, they seemed to fear that their intensely meaningful spiritual experience would be interpreted wrongly, perhaps criticized with war-on-drugs clichés rather than met with the kind of spiritual openness they felt they needed in their moment of awe and tenderness. Would their precious spiritual encounter be dismissed as so much fake mysticism, a kind of spiritual cheating or a flirtation with the demonic?

After Swift finished his summary, this comment from the audience brought laughter and loud applause: “I would go back to church if I knew my priest had done this.” Swift responded that at the end of the study, several participants reported that their church attendance increased, which was followed by more laughter and applause. It was clear all along that the mood in the room was sympathetic to spiritual experience but laced with feelings of frustration with organized religion. It was as if people were encountering spiritually enlightened clergy for the first time.

More clergy-focused sessions followed throughout the day. Some of the Hopkins research volunteers spoke, publicly disclosing their own role in the study. One was Jaime Clark-Soles, a Baptist minister and New Testament scholar. Pointing to the importance of scripture in the Baptist tradition, Clark-Soles said that part of the value of her experience was to “connect her even more fully and differently” to what is already there. She spoke of “experience informing interpretation,” something we need because “we are alienated from the experience of God.” Many today have a spiritual hunger or thirst for “a natural connection” that leads to “transformation,

healing, wholeness.” Sometimes people worry that drugs will become an alternative to religion. They ask her: “If people do this, why would they go to church?” Her response: “In fact, it pushes us toward community, not isolation.”

Hunt Priest, an Episcopal priest who was working in parish ministry at the time of the study, also spoke. Asked what Christianity brings to this particular moment of rediscovery of a psychedelics-spirituality link, he responded that Christianity is no stranger to mystical experience. What’s sad, he said, is that “we’ve lost track of our mystical tradition.” Even so, he suggested that Christianity brings rich gifts to this moment. “We bring history and tradition and community. We offer communities of meaning and care.”

In the months following his psychedelic experiences, Priest took a leave from parish duties in order to devote himself full-time to creating a new organization called Ligare, a name that incorporates the Latin root in the word *religion*. Ligare describes itself as a network of people “dedicated to bringing the direct experience of the sacred to all who desire it through ritualized engagement with psychedelic substances within the context of the Christian contemplative tradition.” Or, as Priest told the overflow crowd in Denver, his calling now is to invite people “to have a direct experience with the Beloved.”

How can Christianity bring its history, tradition, and community to this moment? It is clear that psychedelics can bring about intense subjective experiences that are personally meaningful and often seem to have a spiritual or mystical dimension. But it is also clear that sometimes these intense experiences can be distressing. These are sometimes characterized as “a difficult journey” or “a challenging experience,” phrases that can minimize the emotional and spiritual distress encountered along the way. Christian mystics spoke of the “dark night of the soul.” Sometimes, despite our prayers and cries, God seems hidden and we feel abandoned.

Some argue that an individual psychedelic experience may be difficult, but the long-term result can still be beneficial. The idea is that psychedelics help us work through difficult issues, suppressed trauma, or deep-seated feelings of rejection that are painful to confront in the journey and yet neutralized emotionally by the experience. That may be true most of the time, but not in every case. The simple fact is that we do not have any rigorous scientific research on difficult psychedelic experiences. What are they like while they are happening, and what are their enduring effects? There is evidence to support the claim that, in general, people benefit emotionally

and socially from their experiences. But what about the exceptions?

Based on everything we know, it is clear that psychedelic substances are powerful medicines. For thousands of years, Indigenous communities used them with care and respect. European conquest, often aided by the church, nearly succeeded in stamping out Indigenous practices and silencing traditional wisdom. Only now are we trying to rediscover how to access the healing while reducing the harm.

Whatever we might think about the case for decriminalization, it should be clear that for any serious-minded person, these are not toys or party playthings. So-called recreational use is always a questionable idea. At the very least, a competent, drug-free companion should be present for any psychedelic journey. And in case anyone needs a reminder, possession and use are still mostly illegal.

If the power of psychedelics commands our respect, it also invites our theological engagement. How should we interpret the connection between these drugs and the spiritual or mystical experiences they seem to bring about?

For some of us, the purported spiritual value of these drugs is highly questionable. We might use words like *inauthentic* or *fake* to describe the spiritual experiences that occur when drugs are taken. We might worry that many people will turn to drugs as a shortcut to spiritual experience. We might agree that there's nothing to be gained by shaming drug users or demonizing the experience and yet maintain that the most caring response is to redirect people away from psychedelics and toward the proven disciplines of an authentic Christian life.

Others of us might also have questions, but our first response will not be to write off psychedelic spiritual experience as fake or deviant. It will be to listen as deeply as we can to the testimony of those who have taken the journey, to share their uncertainty or distress or joy, and to invite them to offer their own interpretation, not just in their words but in their lives. Are they more connected with God? With their family and friends? With nature? With their own inner feelings and yearnings? Do they feel themselves to be more alive spiritually as a result of their experience? Do they manifest more fully the fruits of the Spirit or the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love?

Perhaps in time we'll find ourselves asking what the church as a whole can learn from the witness of the few who take the journey into psychedelic spirituality. Will it prompt us to join Clark-Soles in connecting in a new way with scripture, full as it is

with stories of spiritual encounters, and to read it with what she calls “experience informing interpretation”? Perhaps it will even nudge us to come alongside Priest as he invites the spiritually hungry among us to seek “a direct experience with the Beloved.”

There’s an element of the unexpected to all this: Psychedelics and spirituality? Really? But the questions being raised and the experiences being reported might be exactly what we need to awaken a new consciousness of the Holy Spirit in a spiritually moribund church. Over the centuries, the experiences of the mystics have reenergized the faith of the church. So often their strange spiritual encounters have taken place under physically stressful circumstances, like sickness and high fever or fasting or climbing to high places for what became known as “mountaintop experiences.” Physical circumstances like fever, fasting, and hyperventilation can affect the brain, not exactly in the same way as drugs but in a similar enough way that we should be cautious about calling one authentic and the other fake.

The Holy Spirit, the great theologians remind us, is present and active everywhere, renewing the whole creation while healing and transforming individuals. Encounters with the Spirit may range from the highly unusual to the just plain ordinary, but it is always the light of the Spirit that makes us spiritual. “Just as when a sunbeam falls on bright and transparent bodies,” Basil of Caesarea wrote in the fourth century, “they themselves become brilliant too, and shed forth a fresh brightness from themselves, so souls wherein the Spirit dwells, illuminated by the Spirit, themselves become spiritual, and send forth their grace to others.”

One thing psychedelic substances might teach us is that too often our brains screen us off from the sunbeam of the Spirit. While that may at times be a good survival strategy, over time it can be spiritually deadening. What does it take for the light to get through, to open the eyes of the soul to see how much we are loved and how close God is?