# Foreword: Psychedelics, Spirituality, and “The West”

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Just over four years ago, the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School began to explore the intersections between psychedelics and spirituality. In this, we can hardly claim to have been visionaries or trendsetters: the wave of the “psychedelic renaissance” was clearly rising—*cresting* even—and we decided to ride it. I’m glad we did, and I’m proud that we have earned a reputation for promoting rigorous and responsible research and programming at these crossroads, where, unfortunately, and all too often, platitudes have been peddled as profundities. But not here: in this volume, *Psychedelic Intersections*, so capably edited by Jeffrey Breau and Paul Gillis-Smith, you will find evidence of fine, first-rate scholarship.

I would like to acknowledge and thank not only Jeffrey and Paul but also one of the Center’s former postdoctoral fellows, J. Christian Greer. Four years ago, Christian offered a yearlong reading group on psychedelics at Harvard Divinity School, and student demand was high. Jeffrey and Paul were among the students, both in the first year of their MDiv degrees. Together with Christian, they created a walking tour of Harvard’s rich psychedelic history—the audio version is now available through a variety of streaming platforms. When Christian left the Center at the end of his fellowship, Jeffrey and Paul very capably took over the reading group and also conceived the idea for an annual conference. The first, “Explorations in Interdisciplinary Psychedelic Research,” was held in April 2023. These published proceedings are from the second conference, in February 2024, “Psychedelic Intersections: Cross-Cultural Manifestations of the Sacred.” The Center is now preparing to host its third conference, “Psychedelic Intersections: Betwixt and Between Chaplaincy, Plant Medicine, and Aesthetics,” in February 2025. Jeffrey and Paul have done a superb job leading the reading group, the conference, and now hosting the online speaker series, “Psychedelics and the Future of Religion,” with which our efforts began. They graduated from the Divinity School and now serve as the Program Leads for the Center’s efforts in the field of psychedelics and spirituality.

And the Center’s efforts are now part of a much broader coalition at Harvard. In 2023, a generous gift from the Gracias Family Foundation established the Harvard Study of Psychedelics in Society and Culture. Along with the Petrie-Flom Center for Health Policy, Biotechnology, and Bioethics at Harvard Law School; the Mahindra Humanities Center at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences; and the Office of Ministry Studies at the Divinity School, the Center is part of this university-wide and interdisciplinary study—all of us doing our part “to transform the psychedelics research landscape by producing cutting-edge scholarship and convening faculty, students, and experts to engage in discussion around their far-reaching implications.”[1] We are honored to work with such creative and capable colleagues from such different schools and with such different approaches.

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[1] https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/newsplus/harvard-launches-new-study-of-psychedelics-in-society-and-culture/

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Four years ago, the world of psychedelics was entirely new to me; two familiar figures drew me into it. The first figure was Roland Griffiths, whose research at Johns Hopkins University claimed to show that "mystical-type experiences" occasioned by psilocybin resulted in extraordinary therapeutic outcomes. Roland's research had gathered an enormous amount of attention, and he figured large in Michael Pollan's canonical chronicle of the "renaissance," *How To Change Your Mind*.[2] As a scholar of the Christian mystical tradition, I felt obliged to understand better how the label "mystical" was being used in this contemporary context. The second figure was Brian Muraresku, whose breakout bestseller *The Immortality Key* suggested that "Western civilization" was built on the cornerstone of a psychedelic sacrament, or rather two: the potion or *kykeon* served in the rites of the Eleusinian mysteries, and the early Christian eucharist. And behind those, he speculated, there might have been an even older and more widespread psychedelic spirituality in the ancient Mediterranean world, what he calls "the religion with no name." As a scholar of philosophy and religion in the ancient Mediterranean, including early Christianity, again, I felt obliged to lean in and learn more about the intersections of psychedelics and spirituality. I'm glad I did: I've learned a lot, and I've met some very interesting people.

To be candid, I have my disagreements with both Roland and Brian. They were both guests in the online series I started hosting over four years ago, called "Psychedelics and the Future of Religion" (which, as I remarked, Jeffrey and Paul now host). Roland was my first guest; Brian joined us later but within the first year. I pressed Roland on what kind of "mystical-type experiences" he was foregrounding in this research and why, worried that he was favoring positive experiences of union with a benevolent "source" and pushing aside evidence of disquieting or harrowing experiences.[3] Sadly, I had never had the chance to meet him in person and to continue this conversation: he died just over a year ago, on October 16, 2023, at the age of 77. Everyone I know says Roland was a kind and sincere person and a devoted scientist.

I interviewed Brian later in the series and pressed him on the evidence he had assembled in *The Immortality Key*, and what conclusions that evidence did and did not support. In recent months, I finally published a long review article of Brian's book, along with two other books that I think offered more sophisticated approaches to the study of psychedelics in the ancient world.[4] Since Brian's book, in large part, brought me into this conversation, and since I have just published my first and only article on psychedelics and religion, permit me to highlight a few issues that I think bear repeating. My aims in reviewing Brian's book were many. First, I wanted to familiarize myself with the work of R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hoffman, and Carl A.P. Ruck, who, in *The Road to Eleusis,* argued that in the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries, the ritual potion or *kykeon* (κυκεών) was in fact a psychedelic sacrament that helped induce an ecstatic vision of the divine, probably derived from ergot. I found their proposal interesting and plausible, but not verified. I found somewhat frustrating their narrow focus on psychedelics as a—or rather *the*—means of inducing "mystical" ecstasy.

Second, I was keen to evaluate Brian's revision and expansion of their hypothesis in *The Immortality Key*. Brian set out to verify by the standards of contemporary science that the

[2] Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us about Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (Penguin Press, 2018).
[3] See Rachael Petersen's brilliant reflection, "A Theological Reckoning with 'Bad Trips,'" *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* Autumn/Winter 2022.
[4] Charles M. Stang, "Psychedelic Futures and Altered States in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean," *Harvard Theological Review* 117, no. 4 (2024): 851-870.

*kykeon* was indeed a psychedelic sacrament. He did not exactly succeed in that effort. The closest evidence is rather distant and indirect: excavation of an ancient inland colony in southern Spain, near Barcelona, settled by Greeks with some connection to Eleusis, has yielded evidence of ergot in a small chalice in a domestic chapel. What does this prove? Nothing. What might it suggest? Perhaps these Greeks borrowed (or stole) the closely guarded secret of the *kykeon* from Eleusis and put it to new use in their colony. Brian also set out to find any and all evidence that the early Christian eucharist might have been another psychedelic sacrament. Here, his efforts failed rather dramatically. I say "dramatically" with intention because he tells the story like a novel by Dan Brown or a documentary by Graham Hancock (who wrote the Foreword to *The Immortality Key*, by the way): might the "smoking gun" be just beneath the layer of this or that excavation, buried in this or that archive, on just the next page of this or that ancient manuscript? All of these tantalizing leads came up dry. I, for one, would have preferred to have been told that at the outset.

For Brian, the hope was that evidence from the Eleusinian Mysteries and from early Christianity would help confirm that there was an ancient "religion with no name," an invisible psychedelic spirituality that suffused the ancient Mediterranean world, whose "secret history" he could then tell. And he hoped further that all that ancient evidence would give warrant for a contemporary psychedelic "reformation." But the ancient evidence is simply not there, so the edifice of this "religion of no name" and the "reformation" built on it crumbles.

And so, my third aim in writing that review was to critique this framework of a psychedelic "reformation." I leaned on the excellent scholarship of Yulia Ustinova and Wouter Hanegraaff, who propose looking at ancient Mediterranean religion through the lens of "altered states" (of consciousness and knowledge, respectively).[5] Both scholars take very seriously the possibility that psychedelics, broadly defined, were among the many techniques ancients had at their disposal for altering their consciousness, and they both amass evidence of such. But precisely by amassing more evidence for the possibility of psychedelics in the ancient world, they diminish their singular significance. In other words, insofar as there is indirect evidence of psychedelics in the ancient world, that evidence suggests that psychedelics did not take center stage, that they were one among many (and often not the most important) elements in a complex alchemical transformation of consciousness. Far from a "secret history" of "the religion with no name," the picture that is emerging is that, insofar as psychedelics were known and employed in the ancient world, they didn't draw everyone's attention or raise many eyebrows at all. There were ancients who were skeptical or critical of the pursuit of ecstasy, of course, but fewer than you might think, especially in ancient Greece.

I wonder why Brian did not mention more of the ancient evidence for ritual use of psychedelics; I imagine he was aware of it. Was it because none of it was the "smoking gun" he was looking for, some "hard" evidence that would satisfy every skeptic? The field of archaeological chemistry promises, eventually, to deliver such hard evidence, but short of that, we are left mostly with literary evidence. For my part, the most striking literary evidence for ancient psychedelic use comes from the early fourth century CE, in a magical papyrus that has come to be known (incorrectly) as the "Mithras Liturgy."[6] It's essentially a detailed description of a spell, specifically a ritual ascent to see and meet the solar god Helios-Mithras. To prepare for the visionary ascent, the text describes how to prepare an eye ointment. The preparation is elaborate and magical, and some of the ingredients are still unidentified, so no one (as far as I know) has cracked the code. Regardless, the text is clearly describing a psychedelic eye ointment, something to apply to the eyes to help induce a vision of the god.

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[5] Yulia Ustinova, *Divine Mania: Alteration of Consciousness in Ancient Greece* (Routledge, 2017); Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination: Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[6] Hans Dieter Betz, *The "Mithras Liturgy": Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

Wouter Hanegraaff spoke about the "Mithras Liturgy" early in our series and has written about it too.[7] He has explored how modern scholars consistently sidelined the portion of the text describing this psychedelic eye ointment and, more generally, have a "pathologized" experience induced by psychedelics, or, as he prefers, entheogens.[8] These scholarly prejudices reveal more about modern tastes than they do about ancient ones, and for Hanegraaff, how moderns tend to consign knowledge gained by means other than enlightenment-sanctioned methods to a wastebin of "rejected knowledge," the subtitle of an earlier book of his.[9]

So, if he was interested in evidence for psychedelics in the religions of the ancient Mediterranean, why wouldn't Brian want to include any discussion of the "Mithras Liturgy"? The simplest answer, I think, is that the omission reveals that he doesn't really want to tell the history of psychedelics in the ancient Mediterranean world but rather to marshal very selective evidence that psychedelics are the cornerstone of "Western civilization." How so? The ancient Eleusinian Mysteries boasted many Greek luminaries among its participants: the playwright Aeschylus, the philosophers Plato and Plutarch, and emperors such as Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius, and Julian (the Apostate). These authors were bound not to speak of the Mysteries, so we can't be sure how significant they were for them or what their significance was. But their participation allows Brian to make an easy set of associations: prominent intellectuals and politicians of ancient Greece and Rome were initiates into the Mysteries; thus, while there's no evidence of how the Mysteries bore on their intellectual or political commitments and pursuits, Brian can claim that "Western civilization" rests on these initiates' shoulders. But not entirely. Because whatever shibboleth "Western civilization" is, for Brian and for many other modern proponents, it's not just some secular enterprise. It is both Athens *and* Jerusalem, the "classics" and the cross. So, it makes sense that Brian, wishing to discover a psychedelic foundation of "Western civilization," would want, or even need, to find an early Christian psychedelic sacrament. Again, there's *no* evidence for that. None.

Brian's silence on the "Mithras Liturgy" makes better sense now: it doesn't serve his narrative. Why not? Because it's a magical text from an obviously syncretistic milieu in Roman Egypt. It's neither Athens *nor* Jerusalem. Proponents of "Western civilization" and its hoary traditions (and often, horrific applications) are not keen to admit that magic and syncretism are as important a part of whatever "the West" is as the sanctioned philosophies of luminaries such as Plato or Marcus Aurelius. Brian's narrative is a familiar one of a "Western civilization" in decline, with knowledge of the "classics" and church attendance plummeting. Psychedelics promise to revive this dying civilization because they were there at the very start of it all, in Athens and Jerusalem, providing the mystical kernel that has been occluded or suppressed by centuries of tradition. This narrative is as familiar as it is fanciful. And it serves us now as a cautionary tale. I am, like Brian, very interested in the question of whether and how psychedelics were known in the ancient Mediterranean world and to what use they were put. But I am interested in this question in the broader context of how humans seek what I have

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[7] "Reasonably Irrational: Theurgy and the Pathologization of Entheogenic Experience," Psychedelics and the Future of Religion, March 22, 2021, 1 hr., 38 min., https://cswr.hds.harvard.edu/news/2021/04/19/video-reasonably-irrational-theurgy-and-pathologization-entheogenic-experience; Chapter 2, "Heart of Darkness," in Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination*.

[8] As he remarks in "Reasonably Irrational," "Now when scholars discuss texts of this kind, they often feel compelled to distance themselves from the content. They use disparaging qualifiers such as murky, bizarre, abstruse, sub-philosophical, superstitions, or irrational."

[9] Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

come to call "transcendence and transformation."[10] I am interested in any and all evidence for this. What I am not interested in is marshaling such evidence in the service of some fanciful grand narrative about "the West" or "Western civilization." I could say the same about familiar narratives about an ancient mystical "East" or an indigenous "South"—that, however, is not my expertise, so I rely on others to do that important work: for example, in this volume Finnian Moore Gerety explores the question of *soma* in the Vedic tradition; Anna Sierka traces the role of psychoactive plants in medieval Judaism, and Osiris González Romero the same in Aztec religion; and Julián Sánchez González explores the possibility of an intercultural spiritual identity in the Americas. Let's do our level best to gather and responsibly interpret the evidence for psychedelics across history and across the globe. But let's refrain from and call out familiar and fanciful grand narratives. History can serve us better than that.

[10] "Transcendence and Transformation" is the name of the Center's initiative, supported by Elizabeth Rovere, Brian O'Kelly, and the Gracias Family Foundation, which holds many of our research and programming priorities, including the one on "Psychedelics and Spirituality."