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Source: *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (October 1999), pp. 100-118

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/nr.1999.3.1.100>

Accessed: 16-03-2017 21:06 UTC

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# Drugs and the Baby Boomers’ Quest for Metaphysical Illumination

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Robert C. Fuller

In 1882, America’s foremost psychologist and philosopher recounted his personal experience with nitrous oxide gas. William James had become interested in the use of nitrous oxide while reviewing a work entitled *The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy*. The book recounted the amateur philosopher Paul Blood’s claim that after breathing nitrous oxide he had been afforded an “insight of immemorial Mystery.”<sup>1</sup>

James considered himself a thoroughgoing empiricist, one for whom all ideas must be tested by experience. So, with respect to Blood’s mystical claims, he decided to experiment for himself. The results were impressive. The intoxication proved so enjoyable that James was moved to “urge others to repeat the experiment, which with pure gas is short and harmless enough.” He informed his readers that although the effects will vary from person to person, there is nonetheless a general pattern to the subjective effects of nitrous oxide: “With me, as with every other person of whom I have heard, the keynote of the experience is the tremendously exciting sense of an intense metaphysical illumination.”<sup>2</sup>

The developed fruits of James’s metaphysical illumination can be seen in his epochal *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. First published in 1902, the *Varieties* argues that there is an experiential core to religion that underlies all of the various creeds and rituals associated with religious organizations. In brief, James contended that religion can be reduced to experiences that provide individuals with the felt conviction (1) that the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance and (2) that a union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end. Importantly, James’s understanding of the authentic core of religion could be directly traced to his own earlier metaphysical illumination:

Some years ago I myself made some observations on this aspect of nitrous oxide intoxication, and reported them in print. One conclusion was forced upon my

mind at that time, and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken. It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different.<sup>3</sup>

As a psychologist, James knew that our normal waking consciousness is structured by the interplay between our senses and the interpretive categories provided by culture. He further recognized that our normal waking consciousness has tremendous utility in adapting us to the physical and social environment. But as a psychologist James also knew that many other states of consciousness (e.g., dreaming, hypnosis, mysticism) exist as well. It struck James that these other types of consciousness must have certain utilities of their own: "We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, James concluded that

The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in.<sup>5</sup>

James had, in essence, defined religion in terms of certain expanded states of consciousness that enable us to be receptive to "higher" spheres of experience. As historian William Clebsch has noted, James's psychological rendering of religion drew new attention to the aesthetic spirituality found in such writers as Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson. That is, James had succeeded in defining spirituality not in terms of church membership or consenting to doctrinal standards, but in terms of attaining a certain consciousness of living in harmony with a divine reality. In so doing, James "set the agenda for American religious thought, now fully distinct from theology, in the twentieth century."<sup>6</sup> James was, of course, more an early creature than the historical creator of this modern religious "agenda." Yet his life and thought surely prefigured the religious pathway that many other twentieth-century Americans were destined to take as they turned away from institutional religion while yet desiring metaphysical illumination.

This "agenda" of equating authentic spirituality with the attainment of expanded states of consciousness has factored significantly in the religious life of many members of the Baby Boomer generation. As Wade Clark Roof demonstrated in his *A Generation of Seekers*, many Baby Boomers found experimental drug use to be a springboard to fascination

with alternative forms of spirituality. According to Roof, hallucinogenic drugs opened up ways to expand consciousness. Getting high led to psychic adventure, an exciting freedom from conformity that prompted individuals to explore novel philosophies and religions. Roof offers us the example of Mollie, one of the persons whose spiritual journeys features prominently in his study. Mollie, who began experimenting with drugs in the sixties, “has been on a spiritual quest ever since. She has explored many of the spiritual and human potential alternatives of the post-sixties period: holistic health, macrobiotics, Zen Buddhism, Native American rituals, New Age in its many versions. She’s read a lot about reincarnation and world religions. . . . She’s an explorer down many religious paths.”<sup>7</sup> It would appear that Mollie, much like William James before her, traveled a path that led from experimental drug use to spiritual outlooks that might be characterized with such words as pluralism, postmodernism, and religious eclecticism.

This article seeks to focus attention on the connection between drug use and Baby Boomer spirituality. I am particularly interested in the connection between drug use and what might be called the “seeker” style of Baby Boomer religiosity. By this I mean the penchant for forms of religious expression that lie outside of our nation’s established church traditions. The hallmarks of this largely unchurched form of spirituality are a commitment to the symbolic rather than literal nature of religious truth, pluralism of perspective, a hunger for a felt connection with a higher spiritual reality, and rapidly changing interests or affiliations. While almost every historian of late twentieth-century American religion acknowledges that drugs have played a role in shaping the spirituality of the most “highly active seekers” of the Baby Boom generation, few have tried to explain this connection in any detail. I can not here look at how the use of such socially accepted drugs as caffeine (coffee, tea, chocolate) and alcohol (wine, beer, liquor) has influenced Baby Boomer spirituality.<sup>8</sup> Instead, I will limit myself to a few comments on how the psychological effects of both psychedelic drugs (especially mescaline and LSD) and marijuana helped to create the defining characteristics of “seeker” spirituality. More specifically, I will argue that the Baby Boomers’ acquaintance with these drugs played an important role in popularizing a form of spirituality that emphasizes the pluralistic nature of religious truth, monistic ideas of god, and the primacy of the “private” sphere of religious experience.

## **THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION SWING OPEN**

A revolution in middle-class America’s metaphysical outlook began on a smogless morning in Los Angeles. It was 4 May 1953, and Humphry Osmond was eager to share three hundred milligrams of mescaline with

the British writer and intellectual Aldous Huxley.<sup>9</sup> Osmond was a psychiatrist visiting Los Angeles to attend the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association. He had become interested in how mescaline, the principal psychoactive substance in peyote, might help us understand the biochemical basis of schizophrenia and other mental disorders. It was Osmond who coined the term psychedelic from the Greek words for “mind” and “to manifest.” The term psychedelic had obvious advantages over such other possible nomenclature as “drugs” or “narcotics.” Indeed, both mescaline and the newly synthesized substance known as LSD-25 seemed to act less as a poison than as a catalyst for revealing the manifold powers of the mind. Osmond was curious about what Huxley might think about mescaline’s mind-manifesting capacities.

A half hour after swallowing a glass of water containing the dissolved dose of mescaline, Huxley became aware that his visual perceptions seemed to have a greater intensity. Colors became brighter and more vivid. Gazing at a glass vase containing three flowers, Huxley began to see things in novel way: “I became aware of a slow dance of golden lights . . . red surfaces . . . bright nodes of energy that vibrated with a continuously changing, patterned life.”<sup>10</sup> Huxley believed that the mescaline had somehow allowed him to bypass the filtering functions ordinarily imposed upon experience by our limited physical senses. He was beholding the universe in its indescribable glory. He records that his experience was that of “seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence.”<sup>11</sup>

When trying to communicate his mescaline-induced epiphany, Huxley recalled a line from William Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it really is, infinite.” Mescaline had cleansed Huxley’s doors of perception. He found himself staring face to face at the infinite, sacred reality permeating the whole universe. Everything that he beheld radiated the very essence that the mystic Meister Eckhart had called *Istigkeit*, “isness.” Having pierced beneath the world of verbal description, Huxley was immersed instead in “a world where everything shone with Inner Light, and was infinite in its significance.”<sup>12</sup>

Huxley did not consider psychedelic experience to be the ultimate purpose of life. He compared mescaline-induced experience to what Catholic theologians call “a gratuitous grace.” It shakes us out of the ruts of ordinary perception and allows us to see life as it is apprehended by what he called “Mind at Large.” And while Huxley did not offer a full theological discourse on the ontological and metaphysical significance of Mind at Large, he did give some broad hints. First, it was clear to him that institutional Christianity had little of importance to say about the Light which radiates through being. True, certain Christian mystics had slipped past the doors of ordinary perception and gained insight. Yet

Christianity, by proclaiming that the Absolute was incarnate only in Christ, makes it difficult to see that the Absolute is actually incarnated in the whole of being. In contrast, the Romantic visionaries such as Blake, Wordsworth, and Whitman are reliable guides to circumventing the reducing valve of the brain and to glimpsing the “isness” of existence. So, too, are the philosophies of Vedanta Hinduism and Zen Buddhism. In fact, Huxley realized that mescaline had ushered him directly into the realms of Eastern enlightenment. He had studied Eastern philosophies for many years, realizing that they were alluding to understandings that evade all verbal description. Now he had found his own way of cleansing the doors of perception, paving the way for an experiential realization of how the radiating presence of the “Dharma Body” of the Buddha permeates all living things.

Others soon joined Huxley in connecting the use of mind-altering drugs with the pursuit of metaphysical illumination. Albert Hofmann, for example, described the twenty-fifth batch of lysergic acid derivatives (hence the use of the term LSD-25) that he discovered as “a sacred drug.” Hofmann conjectured that LSD excites brain synapses and somehow shifts the “wavelength setting of the receiving ‘self.’” The implication was that we are surrounded by metaphysical realities that but await our discovery. LSD, by shifting awareness toward alternate states, “expose[s] a gleam of the transcendental reality, in which universe and self, sender and receiver, are one.”<sup>13</sup> To this extent the experience afforded by LSD confirmed what Hofmann called the “heart of my Christian beliefs.” His encounter with a sacred drug had illuminated the very words of Jesus recorded in John 14:20: “At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you.” Hofmann’s metaphysical illumination had not, however, helped him to embrace the institutionalized part of Christianity. He complained that ecclesiastical Christianity espoused a “nature-alienated religiosity” that corrupted the pure insights of the great Christian mystics such as Jakob Boehme, Meister Eckhart, Angelus Silesius, Thomas Traherne, William Blake, and others. For this reason he counseled fellow citizens of “Western industrial societies who are sickened by a one-sided, rational, materialistic world view” to look to Eastern religions such as Zen Buddhism.<sup>14</sup> Here persons will find emphasis upon the metaphysical dimension of the human mind through which we can come to know our unity with God. Hofmann hoped that one day we might learn to use LSD as an adjunct to daily periods of quiet meditation. Used as a material aid to meditation, LSD would reveal itself to be a sacred drug capable of eliciting the condition of cosmic consciousness.

It was, of course, the psychologist-turned-guru Timothy Leary’s first experience with psilocybin mushrooms (*teonanacatl*, the “flesh of the gods”) that most noticeably accelerated the Baby Boom generation’s discovery of the religious significance of psychedelic experience. “The

journey lasted a little over four hours,” Leary wrote. “Like almost everyone who had the veil drawn, I came back a changed man.”<sup>15</sup> What distinguished Leary from other prophets of the psychedelic gospel was his conviction that it was his destiny to change others as well. Leary, along with his Harvard psychology colleague Richard Alpert, devoted a great deal of time and energy to the study of mind-manifesting drugs both before and after Harvard saw fit to relieve him of his faculty status. With the help of fellow proselytizers such as Alpert (a.k.a. Ram Dass), Huston Smith, Allen Ginsberg, and Alan Watts, Leary dedicated himself to the task of showing Baby Boomers how the metaphysical illuminations available through psychedelic drugs were destined to revolutionize their individual and collective destinies.

### TURNING ON, TUNING IN, AND DROPPING OUT

Leary was able to condense the psychedelic gospel to a catchy slogan: “Turn on, tune in, and drop out.” This single phrase managed to capture the various yearnings generated by the era’s political, social, and religious unrest. It was a multivalent war cry, synthesizing the disparate impulses of the growing 1960s counterculture into a mantra of common aspiration.

*Turning on* was the fun part. Psilocybin, mescaline, LSD, methedrine, and later STP were the “major hallucinogens” of the hippie movement. Marijuana and alcohol were its “minor hallucinogens.”<sup>16</sup> While the size of dosage, the particular setting in which the drug is taken, and the psychological set (i.e., expectations) of each individual greatly affect the phenomenology of psychedelic experience, there is nonetheless a fairly standard range of subjective effects caused by these substances. As David Wulff has so ably summarized, the phenomenology of psychedelic experience usually begins with a veritable “orgy” of vision:

Light and color become greatly intensified, objects seem plastic or alive, and fantastic imagery swirls through the visual field. Dramatic scenes of mythic proportions may unfold in a profusion of eidetic images. Sensitivity to sounds, tastes, and odors may be increased . . . Time, the medium of these experiences, is also radically transformed. Intervals only minutes long are so full and rich that they seem almost of infinite duration. . . . More remarkable, perhaps, is the dissolution of the self, sometimes called depersonalization or derealization. . . . The awesome experience of union with the surrounding world, the sudden illumination of existence, the “sacramental vision of reality,” in Huxley’s phrase. . .<sup>17</sup>

While the official rhetoric was that psychedelic substances were simply *upaya* (the Sanskrit term for “skillful means” which Ram Dass used to explain the value of psychedelics for opening consciousness past the restrictive ego), most users were probably content with the emotional

rush. Yet for Leary, sense and sensuality have a sacramental quality to them. *Turning on* was thus a form of nature religion. Turning on was intended to celebrate the intrinsic delight to be found by becoming especially receptive to the sensations emanating from the pristine depths of nature. Much as earlier Americans such as Henry David Thoreau or John Muir had turned attention to the sacredness of forests, Leary was turning attention to the sacred sensations to be found in our own natural constitution.

*Turning on* also meant more than hedonistic pleasure. It had to do with ecstasy, with expanding consciousness. The Episcopal priest turned psychedelic messiah Alan Watts wrote that a major theme of the 1960s was the realization that “ecstasy is a legitimate human need—as essential for mental and physical health as proper nutrition, vitamins, rest, and recreation.” Or, as Leary put it, ecstasy is a necessary step toward spiritual rebirth: “Listen! Wake up! You are God! You have the Divine plan engraved in cellular script within you. Listen! Take this sacrament! You’ll see! You’ll get the revelation! It will change your life! You’ll be reborn!”<sup>18</sup>

*Tuning in* had a slightly more esoteric ring to it. When Albert Hofmann suggested that LSD adjusted the “wavelength setting” of the receiving self, he was arguing that there are realities which we can only receive through some kind of alteration in consciousness. Almost all psychedelic researchers agreed. It was argued that psychedelics do not distort reality, they disclose dimensions or levels of existence that are otherwise screened by the rational ego. This was the whole point of Leary’s and Alpert/Dass’s efforts to provide a cartography of the metaphysical realms accessible to all who circumvent the restrictive filters imposed upon the mind through social conditioning. Psychedelic researchers argued that “When we examine those psychedelic experiences which seem to be authentically religious, we find that during the session the subject has been *able to reach the deep integral level* wherein lies the possibility of confrontation with a Presence variously described as God, Spirit, Ground of Being, Mysterium, Noumen, Essence, and Ultimate or Fundamental Reality.”<sup>19</sup>

No one exemplifies more clearly what “tuning in” was all about than Huston Smith. Smith was a philosophy professor at MIT when he visited Leary’s home and accepted his host’s kind invitation to try some mescaline. Smith’s philosophical outlook on life was never the same. Free of the ego’s restrictions, Smith was able to gaze deeply into the mysteries of the cosmos. He gained first-hand, experiential insight into “the metaphysical theory known as emanationism, in which, beginning with the clear, unbroken and infinite light of God or the Void, the light then breaks into forms and decreases in intensity as it diffuses through descending degrees of reality.”<sup>20</sup> Light was in all, all was in light. In Smith’s version of emanationist metaphysics, all levels of existence are connected

with one another. Furthermore, the “power” of being continuously flows from higher levels to lower ones. It follows that the key to a vibrant spiritual life is attaining states of consciousness that enhance our receptivity to this inflow of spiritual power.

Smith’s metaphysical illuminations led him to write *The World’s Religions*, which became a staple in college comparative religion courses, selling more than two million copies. His lectures, workshops, and subsequent writings all promoted the “perennial philosophy” that he was quite literally turned on to while visiting Timothy Leary. In *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World’s Religions*, the book that most clearly summarizes his own world view, Smith appends a brief essay entitled “the psychedelic evidence.”<sup>21</sup> Smith contends that the data collected by psychedelic researchers provide empirical evidence of the claims of the perennial philosophy: the self exists on many levels; the levels of self (or consciousness) correspond to levels of the cosmos that are ordinarily obscured from human view; and to circumvent the ego and have a direct experience of the deeper levels of the cosmos is to widen our knowledge of the world in which we live and have our being—it is to have enlightenment.

Even Huston Smith acknowledged that such metaphysical illuminations are probably not for the masses. The uninitiated must rely on the exoteric teachings of institutional religion. But for the initiated, the one who has turned on and tuned in, the esoteric teachings of the perennial philosophy were now being understood as objects of direct, immediate perception.

*Dropping out* also had multiple meanings. Some were political, others were social, and still others were religious. Common to these urges to drop out was a pervasive rejection of the philosophical and cultural outlook often referred to as modernism. Modernism is the intellectual and cultural expression of rationalistic science. Intellectually, modernism affirms the existence of singular universal truths that can be discerned through disciplined rational inquiry. Psychologically, modernism posits the unity of the self, asserting the existence of a true or essential self lurking behind the various identities that society imposes upon us. And, culturally, modernism believes in and yearns for the inevitability of material progress. In contrast, Leary’s psychedelic gospel proclaimed many of the ideas that have subsequently been identified as the “postmodern” outlook.<sup>22</sup> While postmodernism means many different things to many different people, it is commonly understood as a philosophical outlook that distrusts the subject-object dichotomy of conventional rationality. It is skeptical of universal, general truths and believes instead in multiple perspectives and conversations. And if modernism emphasizes the “distance senses” such as viewing, reading, or hearing, postmodernism embraces the “proximity senses” of touching, tasting, or—in the words of the 1960s—just happening. Postmodernism

sees the self as plural, capable of being many identities without any conflict or necessary incompatibility. Almost all of these “postmodern” themes pervaded the psychedelic literature of the 1960s and 1970s. Introduction to the world of psychedelic experience was, for many, simultaneously an introduction to an entirely new intellectual and cultural stance that put them at odds with those representing the “modernist” establishments.

Modernism had tended to marginalize all forms of knowledge that did not fit neatly within its scientific strictures. For that matter, it also tended to marginalize all types of persons who did not conform neatly with social expectations. The use of psychedelics turned all of this upside down. For one, they exploded the pretensions of rationalistic science to understand the totality of existence. As James would have put it, they proved that normal rational consciousness is but one special type of consciousness. They also brought the proximity senses to the forefront of experience and discovery. Under the influence of mind-manifesting drugs, what is felt or experienced is valued more than rational abstractions. Psychedelic experience was primarily visual and focused upon immediate bodily sensations. The universe, it seemed, was no one, single thing but rather altered with changes in subjectivity and awareness. To this extent, then, the use of psychedelics initiated persons into a new stance toward the world; the psychedelic trip was a rite of passage into a distinct counterculture. For thousands of Americans, the use of psychedelic drugs was the first step toward dropping out of a worldview that had framed middle-class American life for decades.

*Dropping out* was thus a slogan for the era’s reappraisal of middle class thought and values. It meant attempting to stand back and undo one’s social conditioning and reassessing the value of almost everything that upwardly mobile members of America’s middle class during the late 1950s and early 1960s thought they fully understood: the relative importance of such things as a job, sex, individuality, clothes, hair, technology, and church. Jay Stevens suggests that drugs provided the emerging counterculture with a “deconditioning agent.” In a matter of seconds they quite literally dismantled the whole cognitive repertoire that society had programmed into their brains. And although the dismantling was only temporary, it gave vivid insight into how arbitrary the “normal waking state” actually is. In their foreword to Alan Watts’s psychedelic masterpiece *The Joyous Cosmology*, Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert argued that the freedom to use drugs in order to liberate our minds from the tyranny of social conditioning is a basic American freedom:

Thus appears the fifth freedom—freedom from the learned, cultural mind. The freedom to expand one’s consciousness beyond artifactual cultural knowledge.

The freedom to move from constant preoccupation with the verbal games—the social games, the game of self—to the joyous unity of what exists beyond.<sup>23</sup>

Not surprisingly, the principal theme of Carlos Castenada's popular works on drug-assisted paths to enlightenment was learning how to "stop the world." Readers turned to Castenada's books hoping to learn how they might disentangle themselves from—and evolve beyond—the seemingly oppressive nature of middle-class society. The allure of Don Juan's teachings was that some combination of psychedelics and Native American wisdom might prove helpful in the quest of "stopping" the power of social conditioning. A surprising number of Americans wanted to drop out of bourgeois culture. They implicitly accepted Leary's dictum that the best way to do so was to turn on and tune in.

Dropping out became ever more fashionable as the 1960s progressed. Clothing trends, hair length, music, and everyday jargon all reflected the implicit admiration of the hippie movement. By 1967 there may have been as many as 200,000 full-time hippies across the United States, let alone the multiples of that number who adopted elements of the hippie lifestyle. In his book *The Hippies and American Values*, Timothy Miller summarizes the counterculture's attitude toward religion by noting that

the hippies tended to take unusual (by traditional American standards) approaches to religion, often emphasizing Eastern spiritual teachings, and they were often syncretistic, pursuing a sort of religiosity that combined elements ranging from Hindu mysticism to Neopaganism to Ouija boards. It's a fair guess that most hippies would not have been very welcome in most churches; for their part, the hippies were not interested in getting active in any conventional religious body.<sup>24</sup>

They were not, however, just dropping out of conventional religion. They were simultaneously affirming a new spiritual outlook that in many ways conformed to the phenomenological contours of drug experience.

## MARIJUANA AND THE QUEST FOR EXPANDED INTERIORITY

During the 1960s marijuana was discovered by white, middle class Americans. By 1970, more than eight million Americans had smoked this intoxicating "weed."<sup>25</sup> By 1980, that figure had probably reached twenty million. Although marijuana lacks the hallucinatory or vision-giving powers of the major hallucinogens, it could be used more casually and more frequently. Marijuana heightens the senses and induces an almost childlike openness to inner sensations. It gives persons the impression that they are finally getting in touch with themselves and

with the deeper recesses of nature. The marijuana “high” floods the senses and deepens a person’s appreciation of interiority. In this way marijuana facilitated the Baby Boomers’ growing identification of religion as the inner-directed pursuit of personal, mystical experience. Its use also created unique social settings that allowed young cultural rebels to bond with a countercultural community centered around the spiritual goal of personal growth or individuation, even if at the expense of traditional cultural values. The cultural history of marijuana in the late twentieth century is thus very much the history of unchurched American spirituality.

The actual physiological effects of smoking a marijuana cigarette are poorly understood. It is generally thought that the psychoactive chemical called delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, is responsible for marijuana’s intoxicating effects. Yet there is such great variation from subject to subject that the exact effects of THC upon the nervous system are still in dispute. In fact, the only two established facts concerning marijuana smoking are that it causes a mild reddening of the eyes and a temporary increase in heartbeat. The psychological effects vary from person to person, but a commission appointed to study marijuana use by the Canadian Government found that typical reports by users include:

happiness, increased conviviality, a feeling of enhanced interpersonal rapport and communication, heightened sensitivity to humour, free play of the imagination, unusual cognitive and ideational associations, a sense of extraordinary reality, a tendency to notice aspects of the environment of which one is normally unaware, enhanced visual imagery, an altered sense of time in which minutes may seem like hours, enrichment of sensory experiences, increased personal understanding and religious insight, mild excitement and energy . . . .<sup>26</sup>

These psychological effects combine to give individuals a sense of having stepped beyond their ordinary limits. To paraphrase Emerson, it is as though they have momentarily established an “original relationship to the universe.” Unleashing what the report calls “unusual cognitive and ideational associations,” marijuana use imparts the subjective feel of creativity and aesthetic insight. THC has no chemical resemblance to other drugs associated with the 1960s counterculture such as LSD, mescaline, or psilocybin. As Johns Hopkins School of Medicine professor Solomon Snyder concludes, “the impression emerges from current research that marijuana is a mild intoxicant. Moderate users, when high, have rich fantasies and enhanced perception, but are generally in control of their thoughts and actions and can behave quite normally if the need arises.”<sup>27</sup>

The effects of marijuana on a person’s mental and social functioning hold important clues about its role in “bonding” individuals to alternative

religious beliefs and to small groups of fellow seekers. Charles Tart's intensive study of the experience of "being stoned" confirms Snyder's observation concerning marijuana's ability to incite rich fantasies and enhanced perception. Tart's subjects saw patterns and designs more sharply and noticed subtle differences in shades of color better than when they were "straight."<sup>28</sup> Subjects reported an enhanced sense of touch, finding tactile sensations to be more exciting. Marijuana subjects' sense of taste and smell were likewise more vivid and intense. Perhaps more importantly, Tart found that persons under the influence of marijuana appear to have an intensified awareness of their own thought processes. Being stoned tends to give persons the sense that their thoughts are more original, intuitive, and profound (although many researchers note that these same individuals often later think that marijuana only gave them the *feeling* of being more original). Tart concludes that, on the whole, "marijuana intoxication characteristically produces a childlike openness to experience and a sense of wonder and awe, in contrast to the usual businesslike manner in which we classify events and people strictly in terms of their importance to us." This childlike openness to experience opens the doors of aesthetic appreciation of life's intrinsic meaning and beauty. It expands a person's sense of interiority, helping him or her to feel connected to the what Emerson might call "the divinity that flows through all things."<sup>29</sup>

William Novak's study of the role that marijuana has played in the lives of Americans makes another telling point about the connection between drugs and alternative spirituality. Novak writes that, "for some, marijuana has served as a teacher whose principal lesson has been that life holds multiple forms of reality."<sup>30</sup> Marijuana, it seems, provided a psychopharmacological catalyst that moved thousands—perhaps millions—of Baby Boomers to shift away from the kinds of thinking associated with "modernism" to those commonly linked with "postmodernism." Much as the use of cocaine structured states of consciousness that were conducive to Freud's "discovery" of psychoanalysis, marijuana produces psychological states that favor pluralism, postmodernism, and a tendency to embrace some form of nature religion.<sup>31</sup> Marijuana affords its users a "pluralism of perspectives." In our normal waking state, we process sensory data by connecting "incoming information" with the most appropriate set of ideas or concepts. Marijuana users, however, report that they find themselves connecting the same sensory data to two or more different sets of concepts. This gives them the sensation that there is not just one reality, but several realities depending upon your current frame of mind. As one subject reported to Novak, "When I'm very stoned, I find myself switching constantly between two or more frames of mind."<sup>32</sup> Another subject commented that "When I'm high, the ideas keep on coming.

Sometimes I wonder whether marijuana actually creates these ideas—or whether, perhaps, it functions more like a magnet, drawing together the various iron filings of thought from different parts of my mind and bringing them together.”<sup>33</sup> These multiple associations give experience a highly symbolic character. Marijuana users frequently conclude that life is multi-dimensional. While the waking state of consciousness attends to the “material” meaning of experience, there are nonetheless other levels of experience more capable of yielding insights about life’s intrinsic beauty and spiritual purpose.

The “multiple perspectives” afforded by marijuana use helped newcomers to the religious counterculture bond with alternative myths and worldviews. Their pluralistic way of viewing experience turned them away from religious belief systems that proclaimed one, absolute truth. Instead, they naturally tended to see beliefs as relative and highly personal rather than descriptions of universal realities. Marijuana use predisposed persons to believe that the “real” truth of religion resides in the flood of sensations that pour into us if we but learn to become receptive to the deeper dimensions of experience. Things such as rituals, liturgy, and doctrine were thus secondary to the inner, experiential core of spiritual awakening. Smoking marijuana was in this sense a ritual that helped connect young seekers to the mystical philosophies of Alan Watts, Aldous Huxley, Carl Jung, Carlos Castaneda, Zen Buddhism, and Vedanta Hinduism. These exotic forms of spirituality all suggested that the core of authentic spirituality is the inner experience of a sacred reality. And all suggested that the vast majority of America’s churches had somehow lost touch with the experiential basis of genuine spirituality. As one user put it, “It’s difficult to talk about marijuana and religion because I have a hard time separating them out. Authentic religion, when you sweep away all the extraneous stuff of politics and institutions, is about transcendence, heightened awareness, ecstasy, and goodness. Religion and marijuana both involve going beyond the rational, material, and normative concerns of existence. Religion is the original altered state of consciousness.”<sup>34</sup>

Marijuana users understandably formed a distinct American subculture. They were more likely to be liberal in politics and less likely to be affiliated with a religious organization.<sup>35</sup> The longer and more often people smoked marijuana, the more likely they were to bond or connect with the eclectic cluster of metaphysical ideas underlying the era’s “alternative spirituality” movement. In the 1960s and 1970s, the actual act of smoking marijuana was something like a rite of initiation into the religious underground. Persons who took their first “joint” were aware that they were thereby signifying their desire to join an elitist, clandestine, and self-consciously countercultural segment of American society. They knew that they were joining a community that valued nonconformity, peacefulness, and quiet introspection. By the late 1970s

and 80s, marijuana smoking had largely lost this countercultural element. As marijuana became more pervasive in American society, it lost any special significance and became just one more intoxicant alongside others. It no longer served to bond individuals into a distinct counterculture, and thus marijuana intoxication became less and less distinguishable from the rowdiness associated with adolescent beer drinking.

Marijuana was for the most part associated with a wholly informal, unchurched form of spirituality. Joints were passed around in small groups that gathered together in dormitory rooms or apartment living rooms. As the marijuana high began to “enhance visual imagery,” “enrich sensory experience,” and create “a free play of the imagination,” these small groups made it possible for individuals to witness to their changing religious and philosophical beliefs. Informal gatherings of marijuana smokers provided a forum for the transmission of the various mystical philosophies that made up the era’s alternative spirituality (and that were in large part to become the nucleus of the New Age spirituality of the 1980s and 1990s). The increased conviviality and feeling of enhanced interpersonal rapport and communication associated with marijuana use grounded these newly acquired beliefs in a sense of community and thus gave them greater credibility or support.

There were a few attempts to “institutionalize” the religious use of marijuana, resulting in the emergence of several “dope churches” in California during the 1960s.<sup>36</sup> Most were short-lived, their memberships rarely rising over a few dozen persons. In general, the twenty million members of the Baby Boom generation who tried marijuana saw no inherent connection between their sense of enhanced interiority and the creation of new religious institutions. Instead, they grew more confident in defining their spiritual pursuits in ways that bore less resemblance to the religious patterns of earlier generations. They came to see themselves as seekers more than joiners. Their spirituality would be self-consciously eclectic, seeking modes of spiritual expression that would conform to the patterns of “consciousness-expansion” that had become the bedrock of their personal pursuits of metaphysical illumination.

## **DRUG-INDUCED ECSTASY AND SPIRITUAL AWAKENING**

By the early 1960s, it became abundantly clear that a significant “ideological reorientation” was beginning to take shape in American cultural and religious life. Robert Ellwood has suggested that among the most influential themes of this ideological reorientation were (1) a shift from mainline to nonconformist religion, (2) a rediscovery of natural rather than revealed religion, (3) a new appreciation for Eastern

religious thought, and (4) a new Romanticism that accords spiritual importance to certain nonrational modes of thought and perception.<sup>37</sup> In general, this represented a shift from seeking God in the church to seeking God in the depths of nature (including the depths of our own psychological nature). The spiritual awakening of the 1960s was committed to the belief that the sacred is already implanted in the human heart and the natural world. The essence of personal spirituality, in this view, was to seek out new avenues for discovering this immanent presence of the sacred. American authors such as Emerson, Whitman, and James surely provided clues. So, too, did the mystical writings of Hinduism and Buddhism. And not to be overlooked were the kinds of metaphysical illumination made possible with the help of mind-manifesting drugs.

Mind-altering drugs were, without doubt, an important factor in the spread of spiritual change in the 1960s and early 1970s. Baby Boomers used these substances in settings that implicitly connected them with the very themes Ellwood discerns in the spiritual unrest of the 1960s: the shift from mainline to nonconformist religion, the rediscovery of natural religion, a new appreciation for Eastern thought, and a new Romanticism. Drugs induced an experiential ecstasy that lent an aura of mystical authority to the changes taking place in the emerging “seeker” style of Baby Boomer spirituality. This was true not only for those who themselves ingested drugs, but also for a good many of those who never used them at all.

For those who used them, drugs provided an experience-based rite of passage to the “new Romanticism.” They elicited an emotional ecstasy based not on the “distance senses” of reading and hearing, but rather on the “proximity senses” of touch, taste, and bodily sensation. Psychedelics and marijuana provided new configurations of the world based not upon reflective reason, but upon dreamlike free association and idiosyncratic impressions. Psychedelics deconstructed the world of waking rationality and temporarily transported the initiate into a whole new mode of thinking and feeling. This new mode was charged with excitement, mystery, and intrigue. And although this new mode of awareness gave rise to insights that were ineffable upon return to the normal waking state, they nonetheless left the lasting impression that our lives are surrounded by a higher order of being.

Drugs were a springboard to fascination with extraordinary states of consciousness of almost any kind. This, in turn, incited interest in Eastern religions whose meditation practices struck Americans as perfectly suited to their own new spiritual convictions. Psychedelics in particular were understood to be cleansing the very doors of perception opened through Hindu and Buddhist meditation systems. The role of psychedelics was so important to the growth of Americans’ interest in Eastern religions that in the fall of 1996 *Tricycle*, a major Buddhist journal, devoted an entire issue to the topic. One American-born practitioner of Buddhism

noted that “many who took LSD, mushrooms, and other psychedelics, often along with reading from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* or some Zen texts, had the gates of wisdom opened to a certain extent.” Opening these gates gave them vivid insight into the fact that “their limited consciousness was only one plane and that there were a thousand new things to discover about the mind.”<sup>38</sup> For thousands of Americans, drugs and interest in Eastern religious practices went hand in hand. The statistics are staggering. A recent poll of over 1,300 Americans engaged in Buddhist practice showed that 83% had taken psychedelics.<sup>39</sup> Some, of course, had eventually decided that the two are incompatible. But 59% responded that psychedelics and Buddhism do mix, and 71% believed that psychedelics can provide a glimpse of the same reality to which Buddhist practice points. Ram Dass was interviewed in this issue and admitted that he still took drugs as a supplement to his other spiritual practices. He offered that “from my point of view, Buddhism is the closest to the psychedelic experience, at least in terms of LSD. LSD catapults you beyond conceptual structures. It extricates you. It overrides your habit of identifying with thought and puts you in a nonconceptual mode very fast.”<sup>40</sup>

Drug-induced states thus appealed to many Baby Boomers who yearned for an experientially based spirituality. As one researcher puts it, psychedelics serve “as a kind of phase through which we pass when we’re trying to become more truly who we are, more authentic, and more genuine.”<sup>41</sup> The ecstatic nature of drug-induced states of consciousness lent charisma or authority to the claims made by psychedelic pundits. In this sense they legitimated the transition from “consensus” to “alternative” religion. Cultural anthropologist Marlene Dobkin de Rios points out that to the extent that firsthand experience is considered the true way to knowledge, drugs will be considered with awe and respect: “In those societies where plant hallucinogens play a central role, one learns that the drug user believes that he or she can see, feel, touch, and experience the unknown.”<sup>42</sup> The growing “seeker” community among the Baby Boomers provided a context in which drug use was indeed thought to be a way to see, feel, and experience a metaphysical reality. There was, of course, a concurrent tendency for the “seekers” among the Baby Boomers to associate established religious institutions with a secondhand or less authentic form of spirituality. And thus the use of psychedelics and marijuana helped accelerate a shift away from mainline to nonconformist religion among those Baby Boomers who were most caught up in the “ideological revolution” of the 1960s and 1970s.

The psychedelic movement also influenced the spirituality of millions who never used drugs at all. Drugs were a cultural icon; they symbolized an orientation to the world that was embraced by those who never even saw a mushroom, joint, or tab of LSD. Books, rock music, clothing, and

even commercial advertising communicated various facets of the “drug experience” to virtually every member of the Baby Boom generation. Even those pursuing a scholarly approach to understanding religion were forced to consider the possibility that drugs constituted a legitimate and genuine path to metaphysical illumination. Huston Smith, for example, argued that psychedelics gave our scientifically oriented culture an “empirical metaphysics.” Smith argued that the extensive data collected by psychedelic researchers such as Leary, Masters and Houston, and Grof provided impressive evidence in favor of a worldview that proclaims humanity’s inner connection to a wider spiritual universe. Indeed, Smith and other advocates of the role of drugs in triggering metaphysical illumination maintained that we were on the verge of obtaining empirical evidence that would substantiate almost every point of the counterculture’s manifesto. That is, psychedelic research seemed to lend empirical confirmation to the hippies’ advocacy of individuality, nonrational modes of thinking, multisensory experiences, and the inner divinity of every person.

Of particular importance was the way in which psychedelic experiences helped put new understandings of God into popular circulation. Psychedelic literature hastened a trend away from identifying God solely in biblical terms and instead defined God in more monistic and even pantheistic ways. Beginning with Huxley, users of psychedelics attributed metaphysical importance to their visions of bright light, their feelings of vibrations, and their sense of being enveloped by an ineffable presence. Watts, for example, claimed that psychologists were “studying peculiar states of consciousness in which the individual discovers himself to be one continuous process with God, with the universe, with the Ground of Being, or whatever name he may use by cultural conditioning or personal preference for the ultimate reality.”<sup>43</sup> Huston Smith, meanwhile, claimed that LSD research substantiates a very different view of God than is found in the Bible. As he put it, “the God who is almost invariably encountered [while under the influence of psychedelics] is so removed from anthropomorphism as to elicit, often, the pronoun ‘it.’”<sup>44</sup> A theological student writing in the mid-1960s witnessed that under the influence of LSD he, as an individual, “ceased to exist, becoming immersed in the ground of Being, in Brahman, in God, in ‘nothingness,’ in Ultimate Reality.”<sup>45</sup> The religious experiences born of psychedelics were powerful testimony to the era’s yearning for a religious vocabulary befitting the unchurched segment of American religious life. And, again, even many of those Baby Boomers who never used psychedelics or marijuana were nonetheless confirmed in their growing predilection for a nonconformist religious vocabulary.

All in all, then, drugs led a good many Baby Boomers down the road toward a more Romantic, postmodern, and unchurched form of spiritual thinking. Even among those who did not use them, psychedelics were a

symbol of the metaphysical illumination available to all who venture past the narrow confines of consensus religion. They demonstrated in the most vivid of ways that normal waking consciousness is but one special type of consciousness, parted by the filmiest of screens from unsuspected other worlds of being. Psychedelics were thought to open the doors separating these otherwise discrete worlds of consciousness, allowing passage back and forth. The ecstatic adventure—even for those who only read about it—was nothing short of a metaphysical illumination. And that illumination provided key symbols and metaphors for a great deal of the unchurched spirituality that has flourished in the late twentieth century.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Paul Blood, *Pluriverse: An Essay in the Philosophy of Pluralism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1920), xxii.

<sup>2</sup> James's initial publication on nitrous oxide appeared in *Mind* 7 (1882): 186-208. It also appears in an abridged form as "Subjective Effects of Nitrous Oxide" in *Altered States of Consciousness*, ed. Charles Tart (Garden City, NY: 1969), 367-70. More detailed discussions of the role that nitrous oxide-induced mystical experiences had in both Blood's and James's philosophies can be found in Hal Bridges, *American Mysticism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 15-19, and Dmitri Tymoczko's "The Nitrous Oxide Philosopher," *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 1996): 93-101.

<sup>3</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 307.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 408.

<sup>6</sup> William Clebsch, *American Religious Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 171.

<sup>7</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 22.

<sup>8</sup> See Robert C. Fuller, *Religion and Wine: A Cultural History of Wine Drinking in the United States* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1996). The role of coffee and other drugs in American religious life are discussed in my *Stairways to Heaven: Drugs and American Religion* (Boulder: Westview Press, forthcoming in 2000).

<sup>9</sup> See Jay Stevens' *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Jay Stevens, *Storming Heaven*, 198.

<sup>14</sup> Albert Hoffmann, *LSD: My Problem Child* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 209.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Leary, cited in Rick Fields, "A High History of Buddhism," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Fall 1996), 47.

<sup>16</sup> See the distinction between "major psychedelic drugs" and "minor psychedelic drugs" in Charles Tart, ed., *Altered States of Consciousness* (Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books, 1972), 327-31, 385-89.

- <sup>17</sup> David Wulff, *Psychology of Religion* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1991), 85.
- <sup>18</sup> Alan Watts, *Cloud-Hidden, Whereabouts Unknown* (New York: Random House, 1973), 35; Timothy Leary, *High Priest* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1968), 285.
- <sup>19</sup> Robert Masters and Jean Houston, *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 266.
- <sup>20</sup> Huston Smith, "Empirical Metaphysics," in *The Ecstatic Adventure*, ed. Ralph Metzner (New York: Macmillan Co., 1968), 72.
- <sup>21</sup> Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1976).
- <sup>22</sup> The terms "modernism" and "postmodernism" have been employed in a variety of academic discussions and their usage varies considerably from scholar to scholar. The use of the terms in this article is meant to connect with Robert Ellwood's discussion of these themes in recent American religious history in his *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 10-18.
- <sup>23</sup> Richard Alpert and Timothy Leary, in the foreword to Alan Watts, *The Joyous Cosmology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), x.
- <sup>24</sup> Timothy Miller, *The Hippies and American Values* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 19.
- <sup>25</sup> William Novak, *High Culture: Marijuana in the Lives of Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), xiv.
- <sup>26</sup> Canadian Government's Commission of Inquiry, *The Non-Medical Use of Drugs* (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), 117.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*; Solomon Snyder, *Uses of Marijuana* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 71.
- <sup>28</sup> Charles Tart, *On Being Stoned: A Psychological Study of Marijuana Intoxication* (Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books, 1971).
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 212; Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 14 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 7: 450.
- <sup>30</sup> Novak, *High Culture*, 9.
- <sup>31</sup> For a discussion of how a drug such as cocaine might influence an individual's intellectual grasp of life, see Robert C. Fuller, "Biographical Origins of Psychological Ideas: Freud's Cocaine Studies," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 32 (Summer 1992): 67-86. The reference to "nature religion" here is intended to draw attention to the many forms of unchurched spirituality in American history that have sought to locate the sacred within, not outside of, the most immediate forms of experiencing our natural universe. Although she offers no precise definition of the term, Catherine Albanese offers the best overview of this recurring pattern of American spirituality in *Nature Religion in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
- <sup>32</sup> William Novak, *High Culture*, 12.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.
- <sup>35</sup> See Bruce D. Johnson, *Marihuana Users and Drug Subcultures* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973).
- <sup>36</sup> See the excellent discussion of "drug churches" in J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 3rd ed. (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Company, 1988), 120-21.
- <sup>37</sup> See the concluding chapter of Robert Ellwood's *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening*, 326-36.
- <sup>38</sup> Jack Kornfield, interview in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Fall 1996), 35.
- <sup>39</sup> Magazine and Web poll, cited in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Fall 1996), 44.
- <sup>40</sup> Ram Dass, interview in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Fall 1996), 102.
- <sup>41</sup> Joan Halifax, interview in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Fall 1996), 102.
- <sup>42</sup> Marlene Dobkin de Rios, *Hallucinogens: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 203.
- <sup>43</sup> Alan Watts, "Psychedelics and Religious Experience," in *Psychedelic*, eds. Bernard Aaronson and Humphry Osmond (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1970), 131.
- <sup>44</sup> Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth*, 168.
- <sup>45</sup> John Robertson, "Uncontainable Joy," in *The Ecstatic Adventure*, ed. Ralph Metzner, 86.