

CHAPTER 19

ENTHEOGENIC ESOTERICISM

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The title of this chapter was not chosen lightly. It brings two highly controversial terms together in a novel combination and, in so doing, attempts to call attention to a specific phenomenon in contemporary religion, namely the religious use of psychoactive substances as means of access to spiritual insights about the true nature of reality. The question of why, and in what sense(s), this type of religion should be understood as a form of “esotericism” will be addressed below; but something must be said at the outset about the adjective “entheogenic” and its implications. The substantive *entheogen* was coined in 1979 by a group of ethnobotanists and scholars of mythology who were concerned with finding a terminology that would acknowledge the ritual use of psychoactive plants reported from a variety of traditional religious contexts, while avoiding the questionable meanings and connotations of current terms, notably “hallucinogens” and “psychedelics”.¹ As suggested by its roots in Greek etymology (ἐνθεός), natural or artificial substances can be called *entheogens* (adjective: *entheogenic*) if they generate, or bring about, unusual states of consciousness in which those who use them are believed to be “filled”, “possessed” or “inspired” by some kind of divine entity, presence or force.² While the altered states in question are pharmacologically induced, such religious interpretations of them are obviously products of culture.

Although the terms “entheogen” and “entheogenic” were invented with specific reference to the religious use of psychoactive substances, it is important to point out – although this broadens current understandings of the term – that the notion of “entheogenic religion”, if taken literally, does not strictly imply such substances: after all, there are many other factors that may trigger

1. Ruck *et al.*, “Entheogens”.

2. On the rich vocabulary for such states of consciousness in classic antiquity, see the exhaustive overview in Pfister, “Ekstase”, especially 955–7.

or facilitate a state of ἐνθουσιασμός (“enthusiasm”), such as specific breathing techniques, rhythmic drumming, ritual prayer and incantations, meditation, and so on. This was already the case in antiquity, and remains so today. It will therefore be useful to distinguish between entheogenic religion in a *narrow* and in a *wide* sense: with respect to the wider category, one could think of such cases as the ritual practices known as “theurgy”, described for instance by the third/fourth-century neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus,³ the complicated techniques known as “ecstatic kabbalah,” developed by the Jewish mystic Abraham Abulafia in the thirteenth century,⁴ or even the experience of being “filled by the Holy Spirit” in contemporary Pentecostalism. The historical evidence in Western culture for entheogenic religion in a *narrow* sense (that is, involving the use of psychoactive substances) is a contentious issue to say the least, and discussing it seriously would require a book-length treatment; but in order to establish that we are not pursuing a chimaera it suffices, for now, to point out that the existence of such kinds of religion in indigenous cultures is well documented, particularly in the Latin American context.⁵ The present chapter will focus exclusively on one particular trend of contemporary entheogenic religion – in a narrow sense – which may be defined as a form of Western esotericism and has not yet received the attention it deserves.

ENTHEOGENS AND RELIGION: CONCEPTUAL PITFALLS AND PREJUDICES

That entheogens might have a legitimate place in religion at all is controversial among scholars, but for reasons that have less to do with factual evidence than with certain ingrained prejudices rooted in Western intellectual culture. Firstly, on the crypto-Protestant assumption that “religion” implies an attitude in which human beings are dependent on the divine initiative to receive grace or salvation, the use of entheogens is bound to suggest a “magical” and therefore not “truly religious” attitude in which human beings themselves dare to take the initiative and claim to have the key of access to divinity. Such a distinction (in which the former option is coded positively and the latter negatively) makes intuitive sense to us because modern intellectual culture since the Enlightenment has internalized specific Protestant assumptions to an extent where they appear wholly natural and obvious: in Clifford Geertz’s

3. See e.g. Shaw, “Theurgy”; Luck, “Theurgy and Forms of Worship.” Luck suggests that Neoplatonic theurgy may in fact have been entheogenic religion in the narrow sense as well, but the evidence does not allow us to establish this as a fact.

4. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 146–55; Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, 13–52.

5. See for example the ritual use of *ayahuasca* (aka *yage*, *hoasca*, *daimé*) in a variety of Latin American religions (Labate & Jungaberle, *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca*), or peyote religion in the USA.

famous formulation, the dominant symbolic system clothes them with such an “aura of factuality” that the “moods and motivations” connected to them seem “uniquely realistic”.⁶ These assumptions are, however, culture-specific and highly problematic. The underlying opposition of “religion” versus “magic” (along with “science”) as reified universals has been thoroughly deconstructed, in recent decades, as artificial and ethnocentric to the core: it depends on normative modernist ideologies and implicit hegemonic claims of Western superiority that are rooted in heresiological, missionary and colonialist mentalities but cannot claim universal or even scholarly validity. Ultimately based upon the theological battle against “paganism”, the “magic versus religion” assumption, including its “manipulative” versus “receptive” connotations, is a distorting mirror that fails to account for the complexity of beliefs and practices on *both* sides of the conceptual divide.⁷

A second cause of controversy has to do with certain idealist frameworks or assumptions that seem so natural to Western scholars that they are seldom reflected upon. Religion is generally supposed to be about spiritual realities, not material ones, and therefore the claim that modifying brain activity by chemical means might be a religious pursuit seems counterintuitive. It comes across as a purely technical and quasi-materialist trick that cheats practitioners into believing they are having a “genuine” religious experience. However, such objections are extremely problematic. First, they wrongly assume that there are scholarly procedures for distinguishing genuine from fake religion. Second, they ignore the fact that *any* activity associated with mind or spirit is inseparable from neurological activity and brain chemistry. In our experience as human beings we know of no such thing as “pure” spiritual activity (or, for that matter, any other mental activity) unconnected with the body and the brain: if it did exist, we would be incapable of experiencing its effects!⁸ Since all forms of experience, including “experiences deemed religious”, are bodily phenomena by definition, it is arbitrary to exclude entheogenic religion merely because of the particular method it uses to influence the brain.

A final cause of controversy is, of course, the well-known rhetoric employed in the “war on drugs” since the end of the 1960s. Here the polemical use of reified universal categories is once again decisive: rather than carefully differentiating between the enormous variety of psychoactive substances and their effects, the monolithic category of “drugs” suggests that all of them are

6. Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System”.

7. See detailed discussion in Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, chapter three, with special reference to Styers, *Making Magic*.

8. Some critics might point to out-of-body experiences as counter-evidence, but any account of such experiences is communicated to us *after* the fact, that is, after the subject has purportedly “returned” to his or her body. Therefore all we have is *memories* in the minds of embodied persons, indirectly communicated to us in the form of verbal accounts.

9. Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 8–9 and *passim*.

dangerous and addictive. Although the medical and pharmacological evidence does not support this assumption, politics and the media have been singularly successful in promoting the reified category; and as a result, the notion that entheogens might have a normal and legitimate function in some religious contexts is bound to sound bizarre to the general public. Scholars who insist on differentiating between different kinds of “drugs”, pointing out that some of them are harmless and might even be beneficial,¹⁰ therefore find themselves in a defensive position by default: it is always easy for critics to suggest that their scholarly arguments are just a front for some personal agenda of pro-psychedelic apologetics.

The bottom line is that, for all these reasons, the very notion of entheogenic religion as a category in scholarly research finds itself at a strategic disadvantage from the outset. It is simply very difficult for us to look at the relevant religious beliefs and practices from a neutral and non-judgemental point of view, for in the very act of being observed – that is, even prior to any conscious attempt on our part to apply any theoretical perspective – they *already* appear to us pre-categorized in the terms of our own cultural conditioning. Almost inevitably, they are perceived as pertaining to a negative “waste-basket category” of otherness associated with a strange assortment of “magical”, “pagan”, “superstitious” or “irrational” beliefs; and as such, they are automatically seen as different from “genuine” or “serious” forms of religion. The “drugs” category further causes them to be associated with hedonistic, manipulative, irresponsible, or downright criminal attitudes, so that claims of religious legitimacy are weakened even further.

In this chapter an attempt will nevertheless be made to treat entheogenic esotericism as just another form of contemporary religion that requires our serious attention. A first reason for doing so is strictly empirical: if it is true that entheogenic esotericism happens to exist as a significant development in post-World War II religion and in contemporary society, then it is simply our business as scholars to investigate it. A second reason is more theoretical in nature: both the “esoteric” and the “entheogenic” dimension of this topic challenges some of our most deeply ingrained assumptions about religion and rationality, and studying their combination may therefore be particularly helpful in making us aware of our blind spots as intellectuals and scholars.

10. See for example the clinical research presented in the special issue “Ayahuasca Use in Cross-Cultural Perspective”, *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 37.2 (2005), edited by Marlene Dobkin de Rios and Charles S. Grob. Obviously, and confusingly, the “harmless or even beneficial” category is often referred to by the same term “drugs” (as in “prescription drugs”). That substances such as ayahuasca could be understood as “drugs” in such a sense is widely experienced as counterintuitive because of its hallucinogenic properties (associated with the recreational or hedonistic practice of “tripping”); but that such properties are incompatible with beneficial medical or psychiatric effects is an *a priori* assumption rather than an established fact.

ENTHEOGENS AND THE NEW AGE

The wider context in which entheogenic esotericism has appeared is usually referred to as the New Age. In my 1996 study *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, I wrote the following:

One of the most characteristic elements of the counterculture was the widespread use of psychedelic drugs. It has often been noted that most of the New Religious Movements which enjoyed their heyday in the wake of the counterculture (late 1960s and early 1970s) strongly discouraged or flatly forbade the use of drugs. Instead, they emphasized meditation and other spiritual techniques as alternative means of expanding consciousness. This same approach has become typical for the New Age movement of the 1980s, which no longer encourages the use of psychedelic drugs as part of its religious practices.¹¹

Rereading this passage fifteen years later, I must confess that I find it rather naïve. In my book I analysed the beliefs and ideas of the New Age on the basis of a representative sample of primary sources, and found almost no evidence for the relevance of psychedelics. However, I should have been more sensitive to the social and discursive necessity for New Age authors to be discreet or secretive about the role that psychoactives might have played in their life and work, particularly after LSD and other psychedelic substances were criminalized during the second half of the 1960s. A good example is the famous case of Fritjof Capra. His bestseller *The Tao of Physics* (1975) begins with an oft-quoted description of the experience that had set him on the course towards writing his book. Capra described how, one late summer afternoon in 1969, he was sitting by the ocean and suddenly became aware of his whole environment as “being engaged in a gigantic cosmic dance”:

I “saw” cascades of energy coming down from outer space, in which particles were created and destroyed in rhythmic pulses; I “saw” the atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance of energy; I felt its rhythm and I “heard” its sound, and at that moment I *knew* that this was the Dance of Shiva, the Lord of Dancers worshipped by the Hindus.¹²

Capra may have found it preferable to have his readers assume that this experience happened to him “just like that”; but the description is of such a nature that, especially coming from the pen of a typical representative of the hippie

11. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 11.

12. Capra, *Tao of Physics*, 11.

generation, we may safely assume that it occurred under the influence of LSD or some other psychedelic substance.¹³ It revealed to Capra that spirit and matter were not radically separate, and eventually led him to explore the parallels and mutual interpenetration of modern physics and Eastern mysticism.

In going through my sample of New Age sources, I came across countless other descriptions of impressive “mystical” or visionary experiences. Many authors described them as crucial turning points in their spiritual development, and emphasized (like Capra) that they had provided them with essential *knowledge* about the true nature of reality. The case of Jane Roberts, author of the bestselling Seth books and arguably the most influential source of basic New Age metaphysics,¹⁴ may be used here as one more representative example. According to her own account, published in 1970, her first exposure to “spiritual” reality occurred out of the blue on the afternoon of 9 September 1963, when she was quietly sitting at the dinner table:

Between one normal minute and the next, a fantastic avalanche of radical, new ideas burst into my head with tremendous force, as if my skull were some sort of receiving station, turned up to unbearable volume. Not only ideas came through this channel, but sensations, intensified and pulsating ... It was as if the physical world were suddenly tissue-paper thin, hiding infinite dimensions of reality, and I was suddenly flung through the tissue paper with a huge ripping sound. My body sat at the table, my hands furiously scribbling down the words and ideas that flashed through my head. Yet I seemed to be somewhere else, at the same time, traveling through things. I went plummeting through a leaf, to find a whole universe open up; and then out again, drawn into new perspectives.

I felt as if knowledge was being implanted in the very cells of my body so that I couldn't forget it – a gut knowing, a biological spirituality. It was feeling and knowing, rather than intellectual knowledge ... When I came to, I found myself scrawling what was obviously meant as the title of that odd batch of notes: The Physical Universe as Idea Construction. Later the Seth Material would develop those ideas, but I didn't know that at the time.¹⁵

Everything in this description suggests a psychedelic experience, yet nowhere in her published writings does Jane Roberts mention any instances of experimentation with LSD, mescaline, DMT or other substances that were available

13. Capra does not mention LSD, but does refer to the powerful impact of his experiences with unspecified “power plants” (see *Ibid.*, 12).

14. Hanegraaff, “Roberts, Dorothy Jane”, 999, with reference to my extensive analyses of her writings in Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*.

15. Jane Roberts, *The Seth Material*, 11–12.

and widely publicized at the time. Her official account should be compared with the notes in her unpublished journal, now at Yale University. Just two weeks before, on 23 August 1963, she noted that she and her husband had “both become very interested in ESP and parapsychology”; and for 9 September we read only this: “Strange, try to be cautious – but seem to have hit upon new thought-system. My definition of time is original – I think will have a lot of work to do on it”. One month later, on 10 October, she noted: “Physical World as IDEA construction’ began today”.¹⁶ These scanty notes seem to suggest that this manuscript was not in fact the result of automatic writing, but a deliberate writing project started a month after the breakthrough experience.

As suggested by the cases of Capra and Roberts, it would be naïve to simply believe the authors of influential New Age publications at their word when they write that such experiences happened to them “just like that”, especially after the start of criminalization. It is obvious that neither they nor their publishers had anything to gain from acknowledging the role that psychoactives may have played in their spiritual development: if you wish to convince a general readership that the universe revealed its true nature to you, that you found yourself communicating with superior spiritual entities on other planes of reality, or saw spectacular visions of other worlds, it just does not help your credibility to tell them that it all happened while you were tripping on acid! Nevertheless, most scholars of New Age – with the notable exception of Christopher Partridge (see below) – seem to have made the same assumptions that I made in 1996. J. Gordon Melton’s *New Age Encyclopedia* from 1990 and Christoph Bochinger’s 700-page monograph on the New Age (1994) made no reference at all to “drugs” or “psychedelics”; Paul Heelas’s study of 1996 mentioned them only in passing; and they are entirely absent from Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis’s recent multi-author *Handbook of New Age* (2007). In the pioneering volume *Perspectives on the New Age*, edited by Melton together with James R. Lewis, only one author said at least something about it: in her research on the Ananda World Brotherhood Village, Susan Love Brown noted that many of its members had evolved from an initial use of drugs towards an emphasis on drugless techniques such as meditation.¹⁷ Michael York’s *Emerging Network* (1995) emphasized the same point, quoting Marilyn Ferguson’s 1980 bestseller: “The annals of the Aquarian Conspiracy are full of accounts of passage: LSD to Zen, LSD to India, psilocybin to Psychosynthesis”.¹⁸ Evincing a similar pattern, a monograph by Sarah M. Pike

16. Jane Roberts, “Journal”. Note that Roberts’s notes about the murder of President Kennedy, later that year, are much longer and evince much more bewilderment and emotion.

17. Susan Love Brown, “Baby Boomers, American Character, and the New Age”, 89, 94–5.

18. York, *The Emerging Network*, 50; see also 111 and 181 about the neopagans Starhawk and Margot Adler. In Adler’s 1985 questionnaire among pagans, fifty-six respondents are quoted as responding “never, never, ever, ever use drugs” (certainly not a formulation used identically by all of them), but 76% of her sample responded that it was a matter of personal

and an overview for the general public by Nevill Drury (both 2004) referred to psychedelics only in discussing the 1960s counter-culture, implying that it ceased to be a factor after that period.¹⁹

That a widespread shift from drugs to meditation occurred during the 1970s is not in doubt, and it is easy to understand that for organized groups (spiritual communities, new religious movements) it became a practical necessity to regulate or prohibit drug-use among their membership. However, this should not make us overlook the other side of the coin: the fact that putting an emphasis on their development from hedonistic drug use to more respectable and safe alternatives was simply quite convenient for erstwhile counterculturalists. As they were losing popular credit due to the excesses of the psychedelic era and the criminalization of psychoactives, it was in their best interest to emphasize the pursuit of “spirituality” as a healthy and socially responsible way of life rather than advertise the use of drugs. As a result, we cannot determine with any degree of certainty how many of the experiences highlighted by New Age authors were in fact linked to clandestine experimentation with psychoactives, and how many of them somehow occurred spontaneously, resulted from specific drugless techniques, or were simply invented or exaggerated. But absence of evidence is no evidence of absence, and the *argumentum ex silentio* is rightly classed among the logical fallacies. In a society where psychoactives were the talk of the town and widely available, it stretches credulity to assume that the entire 1960s generation that created the foundations of New Age religion would suddenly have become so obedient to authority as to have stopped using them privately as a means to explore spiritual realities. It is more reasonable to assume that while many replaced drugs by meditation, others continued using psychoactives but just stopped talking about it. This makes it relevant to be attentive to passing hints such as this one by the holistic healer William Bloom in 1993: “At the very least you should know about [psychedelic drugs], for they are – albeit secretly – a portal of change and illumination for many people.”²⁰

In short, my suggestion is that after its sensational and exhibitionistic public phase during the 1960s, the use of psychedelics in a spiritual context evolved after 1970 into a private and discreet, individualist practice, which continued to have a considerable impact on New Age religion because of the types of religious experiences and visions that it produced or facilitated. This makes it into an aspect of “esotericism” in the specific dictionary sense of secrecy and concealment – but *not* of the well-known discursive practice of secrecy as “skilled revelation of skilled concealment” (as elegantly formulated by Michael

choice because such substances were “occasionally very valuable”; and thirteen respondents saw them as “a powerful tool” if used in a sacred context.

19. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America*, 83–5; Drury, *The New Age*, 73–4, 76–96.

20. Bloom, *First Steps*, 65, as quoted in Steven J. Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age*, 235n9.

Taussig²¹), where secrets are forms of social capital that impart power to those who are in a position to hide or reveal them. Instead, we are dealing with practices of secrecy and concealment born simply out of social or legal necessity. The obvious difficulties of finding hard data under such conditions are not a sufficient reason to ignore this dimension of New Age, for at least two reasons. First, simply by being more attentive to it, evidence relevant to entheogenic esotericism may be noted and recognized that would otherwise be overlooked: authors and practitioners do make references to it, but often just in passing and by means of coded language (e.g. “power plants” and “psycho-technologies” rather than “drugs” or “psychedelics”). Second, even where there is no strict empirical proof of entheogenic esotericism, it may still be the most plausible explanation in specific cases, such as those discussed above. The assumption that spectacular experiences as reported by Capra and Roberts happened “just like that” (because we cannot think of anything better), are unsatisfactory and in fact rather lazy from an intellectual point of view: until somebody comes up with a better explanation, it seems much more reasonable to attribute them, at least provisionally, to the use of substances that are known from clinical research to have exactly these kinds of effects.

ENTHEOGENIC SHAMANISM

The only scholar who has given systematic attention to the role of entheogens in what he calls contemporary “occulture” is Christopher Partridge. In a very well-documented overview, he distinguished between three phases in the “modern spiritual psychedelic revolution”:

1. from Albert Hofmann’s discovery of LSD in 1938 to the end of the 1950s, with Aldous Huxley as the central figure;
2. the psychedelic era from the 1960s to 1976, with Timothy Leary at the centre; and
3. the development of rave culture since the mid-1980s.²²

Publishing his book in 2005, Partridge sketched the emergence of a fourth phase dominated by cyberculture as well. While such a periodization makes perfect sense, I will be emphasizing an element of *continuity* from the 1960s to the present (with roots in the 1950s), concerning a specific current or subculture that is usually discussed in terms of (neo)shamanism. It is in this context that we find the clearest examples of what I propose to call *entheogenic esotericism*.

21. Taussig, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism”, 273.

22. Partridge, *The Re-enchantment of the West*, vol. 2, 82–134; see also parts of the chapter on “Cyberspirituality” (135–64).

Neoshamanism has attracted much attention from scholars in recent years, but even in some of the best research we find, once again, strange blind spots that have more to do with the intellectual preoccupations of academics than with the subjects they are studying. The evidence shows beyond a shred of doubt that what is now known as neoshamanism emerged during the 1960s as a movement dominated by enthusiasm for natural psychoactives (peyote, ayahuasca, psilocybin mushrooms and various other less well-known species), but many scholars of the phenomenon seem remarkably blind to the evidence in that regard. For example, all specialists of neoshamanism acknowledge the books by Carlos Castaneda as a major catalyst (Kocku von Stuckrad even calls Castaneda's *Teachings of Don Juan* the "foundational document of modern Western Shamanism"²³), but, amazingly, they tend not to mention, even in passing, that his spectacular "shamanic" experiences were described, in explicit detail, as being induced by psychoactive "power plants."²⁴ No general reader of Castaneda misses this fact, and it accounts in no small measure for his bestselling success; so how could it have escaped the academics? Similarly, the anthropologist Michael Harner is rightly highlighted as seminal to the development of neoshamanism since the 1970s, but, again, the fact that he was initiated into shamanism by drinking ayahuasca in the Ecuadorian Amazon forest, and discussed it as almost inseparable from hallucinogens in his earlier work,²⁵ is usually treated as irrelevant or marginal at best.²⁶

The basic flaw in these analyses of neoshamanism is that they automatically equate the legally enforced turn away from public entheogenic practice with a freely developed preference for drugless techniques. For example, Andrei Znamenski notes that Harner "purposely moved away from replicating [hallucinogenic] experiences in Western settings", searching instead for alternatives "by experimenting with drugless techniques from native North American, Siberian, and Sámi traditions."²⁷ Strictly speaking, these statements are correct, but they fail to mention the most decisive factor: the simple fact that, after 1970, Harner had no other choice if he wanted to organize anything public and stay out of jail. In a very similar way, the closely related movement of transpersonal psychotherapy pioneered by Stanislav Grof was forced to abandon the use of LSD and develop "holotropic breathing" as a legal alternative.²⁸ In both cases, there is no reason to doubt that workshop leaders would have continued using psychedelics (albeit perhaps more cautiously and with more

23. Von Stuckrad, *Schamanismus und Esoterik*, 155.

24. E.g. Hutton, *Shamans*, 156–9; von Stuckrad, *Schamanismus und Esoterik*, 153–5.

25. Harner, *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*; Harner, "Sound of Rushing Water"; Harner, *The Way of the Shaman*, 1–19.

26. It is not mentioned at all by Hutton, *Shamans*, 156–61. Von Stuckrad, *Schamanismus und Esoterik*, 157–8, and Znamenski, *Beauty of the Primitive*, 233, discuss it as merely a preparation for the development of his "core shamanism".

27. Znamenski, *Beauty of the Primitive*, 233.

28. Grof, *Beyond the Brain*; Grof, *LSD Psychotherapy*.

safeguards than during the wild 1960s) if only the law had allowed it. For these reasons, applying the post-1970 model of Harnerian “core shamanism” as a model for describing the nature of neoshamanism as a historical phenomenon is anachronistic and misleading: it reduces the phenomenon to only its sanitized and politically correct dimension intended for the general public. Much more than as an example of the literary and popular reception of Siberian and Native American spirituality – a sophisticated etic focus congenial to academic interests, and certainly fascinating in itself, but rather remote from the emic concerns of practitioners “on the ground” – neoshamanism should be seen, first of all, as a form of modernentheogenic religion. Having been born from experimentation with natural psychoactives (entheogenic in the narrow sense), it branched off into two directions after 1970: a “safe”, legal and therefore publicly visible ritual and psychotherapeutic practice (entheogenic in the wider sense), and a clandestine underground culture that continued to work with psychoactives.

The main outlines of the pre-prohibition phase are reasonably clear,²⁹ although more critical research from outsiders would certainly be welcome. The most crucial pioneer was the investment banker R. Gordon Wasson, who developed a fascination with the cultural significance of mushrooms since 1927 and, in the summer of 1955, participated in mushroom ceremonies with the Mexican Mezatec shamaness Maria Sabina. Two years later, in 1957, a lavishly illustrated account of these sessions in *Life* magazine³⁰ made Wasson and Sabina into instant celebrities. The article in question, “Seeking the Magic Mushroom”, inspired Timothy Leary to follow in Wasson’s footsteps and travel to Mexico, where he set up the Harvard Psilocybin Project; later in the 1960s, Maria Sabina’s residence Huautla was overrun by hippie tourists. A parallel and converging development emerged from William Burroughs’s participation in ayahuasca ceremonies in the Amazon in 1953, and similar explorations by his friend Allen Ginsberg in 1960, resulting in a classic of the psychedelic counterculture known as the *Yage Letters* (1963).³¹ Riding the wave of growing popular excitement about these indigenous entheogenic traditions, anthropologists like Carlos Castaneda and Michael J. Harner began exploring Mexican and Amazon traditions; and it is on this basis that they eventually became literary and practical founding figures of what was to become known as “neoshamanism”.

After the prohibition of psychoactive drugs, this original form of neoshamanic practice somehow continued as an underground tradition through the 1970s and into the 1980s. How this happened exactly and on what scale, which personal networks were involved, how they developed, and how its participants communicated and exchanged information, remains largely unknown

29. For a short overview, see e.g. Znamenski, *Beauty of the Primitive*, 121–64.

30. Wasson, “Seeking the Magic Mushroom”.

31. Burroughs & Ginsberg, *Yage Letters Redux*.

at present. Since many participants and sympathizers are still alive and potentially available for interviews, one can only hope that somebody will pick up the question and try to write the history of this lineage, particularly for the period of the 1970s and the early 1980s. There is no doubt that with the emergence of rave culture by the mid-1980s and the spread of the Internet, entheogenic neoshamanism (in the narrow sense) re-emerged in public view. It became accessible and attractive to a new generation, and because the Internet makes discussion of potentially illegal practices so much safer and easier, the number of online sources relevant to entheogens and shamanism has exploded exponentially. At present, it is simply overwhelming.

ENTHEOGENIC ESOTERICISM

In this short programmatic article I cannot do more than try to illustrate the nature of contemporary entheogenic shamanism as exemplified by a few representative figures. Arguably its central figurehead was the American prophet of an “archaic revival”, Terence McKenna (1946–2000). Elsewhere I have described how his intense entheogenic experiences in the Colombian Amazon forest in 1971, together with his brother Dennis and some friends, inspired him to develop a radical spiritual worldview that stands at the very origin of contemporary millenarian fascination with the year 2012.³² Several books published by McKenna in the early 1990s have become classics of the new underground scene of entheogenic shamanism;³³ and McKenna himself has attained an iconic status as “public intellectual” in that context, not least due to a series of audio and video recordings of his lectures that are now easily accessible online. His charismatic status rests upon the unique combination of a sharp intellect, a high level of erudition, a delightful self-relativizing sense of humour and excellent communication skills (his books are extremely well written, and his unmistakable nasal voice and hypnotic style of delivery has even been sampled in trance music recordings online) – all in the service of expounding one of the weirdest worldviews imaginable.

McKenna’s mature work is a 1990s upgrade of the radical countercultural ideals of the 1960s, and appeals to a new generation that sympathizes with the hippie culture of that period, but does not share its anti-technological bias.³⁴ At the heart of this “cultic milieu” we find a profound sense of cultural crisis: Western society, built upon the life-denying and totalitarian dogmatism

32. Hanegraaff, “And End History”. On McKenna’s worldview, see also Kripal, *Esalen*, 369–375. In spite of its remarkable popularity, 2012 millenarianism is another aspect of contemporary esotericism that seems to be neglected almost completely by academic research.

33. McKenna & McKenna, *Invisible Landscape*; McKenna, *Archaic Revival*; McKenna, *Food of the Gods*; McKenna, *True Hallucinations*.

34. Zandbergen, “Silicon Valley New Age”, 161.

of traditional Christianity and materialist science, is spiritually bankrupt and heading for military and ecological disaster. In a deliberately utopian search for how humanity might find a way “back to the garden,” McKenna is referring first of all to indigenous cultures that are still in touch with nature and with the “archaic” roots of humanity. But underneath this most immediately obvious emphasis on “shamanic” cultures, there is an intellectual discourse grounded in assumptions proper to Western esotericism. While references to it can be found throughout his work, this background is nowhere more explicit than in a series of unpublished “Lectures on Alchemy” delivered at Esalen, California, around 1990, available online as an unedited transcript.³⁵

These lectures show the enormous impact of what I would like to refer to as *Eranos religionism*. Religionism means the exploration of historical developments in view of eternal truths or realities that transcend history and change.³⁶ Characterized by a valuation of myth and symbolism over doctrine and discursive rationality, this inherently paradoxical but intellectually fascinating project was central to the famous Eranos meetings organized since 1933 in Ascona, Switzerland;³⁷ and largely due to the financial support of the Bollingen foundation, it became enormously successful in the United States after World War II. Many of the central scholars associated with Eranos – notably Carl Gustav Jung, Mircea Eliade, Gershom Scholem, D. T. Suzuki, James Hillman and Joseph Campbell – achieved an iconic status in the American popular (counter-)culture, and their ideas have become essential to post-war understandings of “esotericism”.³⁸ It is only since the “empirical turn” in the study of Western esotericism since the early 1990s that this religionist perspective has come to be perceived, at least in the academic world, as primarily an object of research – a sophisticated form of post-war esotericism – rather than as an appropriate methodology for research.³⁹

McKenna’s understanding of “alchemy” and “hermeticism” turns out to be a typical example of Eranos religionism, with Jung and Eliade as central figures. From this perspective, he was making a valiant effort to introduce his audience to Frances Yates’s classic *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), her ideas about the Rosicrucian Enlightenment, and even a wide collection of original hermetic and alchemical texts, next to some of his favourite philosophers such as Plato, Plotinus, Bruno, Bergson, and Whitehead. During

35. McKenna, “Lectures on Alchemy”. The transcript available online would deserve some thorough editing, particular as regards the many spectacular misspelling of titles and names of authors that were clearly unknown to the transcriber but can still be identified (although sometimes barely) by specialists.

36. For extensive discussion of religionism and its various manifestations, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, especially chapters 2 and 4.

37. On Eranos and its cultural impact, see *Ibid.*, chapter 4, and the standard history by Hahl, *Verborgene Geist von Eranos*.

38. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, chapter 4.

39. *Ibid.*

the course of his lectures he read and discussed long passages from the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the *Asclepius*, and the *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*. In short, he was giving his audience a crash course in the main currents of early modern esotericism, presented as the epitome of a traditional enchanted worldview radically different from the waste land of modernity and contemporary society. A good example of how McKenna combined his considerable knowledge of alchemical literature with a creative form of “esoteric hermetics” is his discussion of mercury:

You all know what mercury looks like – at room temperature it’s a silvery liquid that flows, it’s like a mirror. For the alchemists, and this is just a very short exercise in alchemical thinking, for the alchemists mercury was mind itself, in a sense, and by tracing through the steps by which they reached that conclusion you can have a taste of what alchemical thinking was about. Mercury takes the form of its container. If I pour mercury into a cup, it takes the shape of the cup, if I pour it into a test tube, it takes the shape of the test tube. This taking the shape of its container is a quality of mind and yet here it is present in a flowing, silvery metal. The other thing is, mercury is a reflecting surface. You never see mercury, what you see is the world which surrounds it, which is perfectly reflected in its surface like a moving mirror, you see. And then if you’ve ever – as a child, I mean, I have no idea how toxic this process is, but I spent a lot of time as a child hounding my grandfather for his hearing aid batteries which I would then smash with a hammer and get the mercury out and collect it in little bottles and carry it around with me. Well, the wonderful thing about mercury is when you pour it out on a surface and it beads up, then each bead of mercury becomes a little microcosm of the world. And yet the mercury flows back together into a unity. Well, as a child I had not yet imbibed the assumptions and the ontology of science. I was functioning as an alchemist. For me, mercury was this fascinating magical substance onto which I could project the contents of my mind. And a child playing with mercury is an alchemist hard at work, no doubt about it.⁴⁰

In this passage it is easy to recognize a whole range of basic esoteric assumptions central to McKenna’s thinking: the interconnectedness of mind and matter, the notion of microcosmos/macrococosmos, the idea of individual minds being ultimately part of a universal Mind, and the idea of the human mind as the “mirror of nature” (and the reverse). Interestingly, he pointed out that as

40. McKenna, “Lectures on Alchemy”, lecture 1.

far as he was concerned, the occultist currents since the nineteenth century were of little interest, since they had already been infected by modernizing and secularizing trends. McKenna was pointing towards *pre*-Enlightenment hermeticism – flourishing, as he emphasized, first in late antiquity and then in the Renaissance, both periods of “crisis” similar to our own – for models of a “magical” and enchanted revival that was still in touch with the symbolic and mythopoeic thinking in analogies and correspondences proper to “archaic” cultures. As I have explained elsewhere, it was precisely from such a perspective that the counterculture had been reading Frances Yates’s narrative of “the Hermetic Tradition”.⁴¹ Authors like McKenna perceived it as a tradition dominated by magic, personal religious experience, and the powers of the imagination; it promoted a world-affirming mysticism consonant with an “enchanted” and holistic science that looked at nature as a living, organic whole, permeated by invisible forces and energies; and it reflected a confident, optimistic, forward-looking perspective that emphasized humanity’s potential to operate on the world and create a better, more harmonious, more beautiful society. To all this, McKenna added a direct avenue towards the attainment of *gnosis*: the use of entheogenic substances.

Few participants in the contemporary subculture of entheogenic neoshamanism are as well read in alchemical and hermetic literature as McKenna was, but they do share his basic worldview. Elsewhere I have argued that the various currents and ideas that may be constructed as “esotericism” have ultimately emerged from the encounter in Western culture between biblical monotheism and hellenistic paganism.⁴² First, they share a rejection of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, emphasizing instead that the world is co-eternal with God. This basic principle may lead to an extreme “gnostic” dualism or to radical pantheism, but most commonly it has taken the shape of a “cosmotheism” in which the divine is present in the visible world of creation without being identical with it. From this first principle there emerged a second one: the belief that as human beings, we are able to attain direct experiential knowledge of our own divine nature. We are not dependent on God revealing himself to us (as in classic monotheism, where the creature is dependent on the Creator’s initiative), nor is our capacity for knowledge limited to the bodily senses and natural reason (as in science and rational philosophy), but the very nature of our souls allows us direct access to the supreme, eternal substance of Being. Such direct experiential knowledge, or *gnosis*, is believed to be attained through “ecstatic” states of mind. Seen from this perspective, contemporary neoshamanism as represented by a central author like McKenna is, indeed, a typical form of entheogenic esotericism in the narrow sense of the word. McKenna’s “archaic revival” means a revival of *cosmotheism* against the

41. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, chapter 4 (section on Frances Yates).

42. *Ibid.*, conclusion.

worldviews of classic monotheism and rationalist science; and he highlights entheogenic substances as providing a direct doorway to *gnosis*.

McKenna died of brain cancer in 2000, but remains alive on the Internet. His most prominent successor in recent years is another American, Daniel Pinchbeck, who has inherited a somewhat similar “neoshamanic” worldview, including a millenarian focus on 2012.⁴³ They represent two different generations, but have much in common. McKenna often contrasted his mature worldview against the “intellectual despair” of post-war existentialism that was dominant during his childhood:

I grew up reading those people and it made my adolescence much harder than it needed to be. I mean, my god, there wasn't an iota of hope to be found anywhere. That's why, for me, psychedelics broke over that intellectual world like a tidal wave of revelation. I quoted to you last night Jean Paul Sartre's statement that nature is mute. Now I see this as an obscenity almost, an intellectual crime against reason and intuition. It's the absolute antithesis of the logos.⁴⁴

Pinchbeck, for his part, actually converted from existentialist despair to entheogenic esotericism. The typical case of a “jaded Manhattan journalist”, he had fallen into a deep spiritual crisis: “Wandering the streets of the East Village, I spent so much time contemplating the meaninglessness of existence that I sometimes felt like a ghost. *Perhaps I am already dead*, I thought to myself.”⁴⁵ He experimented with psychedelics, but without much result, until he made the radical step of travelling to the African country Gabon to participate in a ritual with the Bwiti people, who used a famous psychoactive substance known as Iboga. This was the beginning of what he describes, in his *Breaking Open the Head* (2002), as an initiation into shamanism that cured him of existential ennui and despair.

Pinchbeck now stands at the centre of a new movement that has been referred to by various terms, including “cyber-spirituality”, “techno-shamanism”, or “new edge”. As explained by Dorian Zandbergen in a recent analysis:

The rise and popularization of digital technologies such as Virtual Reality and the Internet in [the 1990s] was accompanied by the hopeful expectation of spiritual seekers that these would make permanently available the utopian worlds and the altered states of consciousness sought after by a previous generation of hippies. ... Because of the supposed inherent disembodied nature of

43. Pinchbeck, *Breaking Open the Head*; Pinchbeck, 2012; Pinchbeck, *Notes from the Edge Times* (based on columns for his website www.realitysandwich.com).

44. McKenna, “Lectures on Alchemy”, lecture 2, part 2.

45. Pinchbeck, *Breaking Open the Head*, 14.

cyberspace, some scholars argued in the 1990s that cyberspace has become the “Platonic new home for the mind and the heart”, a “new Jerusalem”, or a “paradise”.⁴⁶

In the decade after 9/11, the high-tech hippie utopianism of this New Edge movement (visible not just as an online community but also in very popular annual festivals such as Burning Man in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert) has taken on progressively darker and apocalyptic shades. In its stronger versions, global capitalist consumer society is perceived as a huge, impersonal, demonic system of dominance and control, with politicians and the media hypnotizing the population into tacit submission and enslavement to “the matrix”.⁴⁷ In that context, Native American cultures and their shamanic spirituality are seen as preservers of a traditional wisdom that Western society has tragically lost: they belong to the “Forces of Light” set against the powers of darkness that seek to enslave and dominate the planet. Entheogenic sacraments are credited with the capacity of breaking mainstream society’s spell of mental domination and restoring us from blind and passive consumers unconsciously manipulated by “the system” to our original state of free and autonomous spiritual beings: quite like Morpheus’s “blue pill” in *The Matrix*, they open participants’ eyes, causing them to wake up to the true nature of the collective deception passed on as “reality” (“the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth”⁴⁸), and introduce them to a wider, meaningful universe of spiritual truth, love and light. In short, they are seen as providing gnosis in a “gnostic–dualistic” rather than a “hermetic” sense: a salvational knowledge of the true nature of one’s self and of the universe, which does not just open the individual’s spiritual eyes, but liberates him from dominion by the cosmic system.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is, of course, impossible to predict how these contemporary manifestations of entheogenic esotericism will develop in the future. But that they already represent a significant phenomenon in contemporary culture is clear, and scholars of religion have an obligation to study them closely and find ways to place them in their proper historical, social, and cultural contexts. The gist of this chapter is that in order to do so, scholars will need to take the phenomenon of

46. Zandbergen, “Silicon Valley New Age”, 161, 163.

47. The reference is, of course, to the famous 1999 movie by the Wachowski brothers. On the gnostic nature of *The Matrix* series, see e.g. Flannery-Dailey & Wagner, “Wake Up!”, Bowman, “The Gnostic Illusion”.

48. Formulation by Morpheus during his first meeting with Neo in *The Matrix*. This dialogue amounts to a short catechism of neo-gnosticism.

“entheogenic religion” much more seriously than they have been doing so far. Whether we like it or not, we are dealing here with a vital and vibrant dimension of popular Western spirituality that has been with us for more than half a century now, and shows no signs of disappearing. It challenges traditional assumptions about what religion is all about, and its radical focus on ecstatic gnosis within a cosmotheistic context makes it particularly interesting from the perspective of the study of Western esotericism. Specialists in the field of contemporary religion should become aware of their inherited blind spots regarding the role that entheogens have been playing in these contexts for half a century. That role is not marginal, but central, and requires serious study. Scholars may have agendas and preoccupations of their own, but these cannot be an excuse for refusing to take notice of what is happening right in front of our eyes.