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Editor's Introduction

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Introduction

When, for a number of reasons in early 2015, I decided that it would be a good idea to suggest a special issue on psychedelics and religion to the editors of the *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, I contacted a colleague in Toronto, with whom I had in recent years discussed the subject. A warm-hearted and generous man, Dan Merkur was a psychotherapist and scholar of religion who had worked at Syracuse University, Auburn Theological Seminary and the University of Toronto. He was immediately enthusiastic about the special issue and, as I hoped he might, offered to share some of his current research in an article.

Typically, on 27 February, 2015, shortly after I had suggested the idea to him, he contacted me to let me know what he was working on "the autosymbolic effects of partial sensory deprivation on psychedelic spirituality." After some discussion, he sent me a summary of his ideas, which were part of a wider project on, as he put it, "Freud, psychedelics, and related matters:"

> The governmental requirement that psychedelics be tested, so far as possible, as chemotherapy, rather than as adjuncts to psychotherapy (let alone spiritual direction), have led to the practise of administering blindfolds, headphones, and selected music. A dialogue with a spiritual guide, for example, might well be preferred for spiritual reasons, but will not be countenanced by government imposed standards of scientific research. These constraints have predictable effects on the resultant spirituality. When self-reports of partially sensorily deprived psychedelic spirituality are compared with self-reports of experiences that involved no such restraints, similar cognitive or noetic struc-

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> tures, which I termed "unitive modes" (Merkur, 1998), may be discerned; but they are differently contextualized. Unconstrained psychedelic spirituality finds unities in the physical world. It is a this-worldly spirituality. Partially sensorily deprived psychedelic spirituality instead undergoes "autosymbolic" transformation (Silberer, 1909), producing mental imagery that is metaphoric or allegorical of the noetic categories, and resulting in the construction of what drug-takers experience as otherworlds. It is a counter-factual spirituality.

I was keen to read more. However, on 17 October, 2015, he wrote to me to let me know that his progress had been hampered by cancer of the pancreas and, moreover, that not only was it inoperable, but that he was much too weak to tolerate chemotherapy. Indeed, he was writing to me from his hospital bed and indicated that his "prognosis was expressed in weeks." This was, of course, a shock. One very rarely receives such news expressed in such matter-of-fact terms. Obviously, the article was now of no concern to me and I expressed my deep sadness. However, brushing aside my protestations, he insisted that he wanted to write it. This said a lot about the kind of person he was. Regardless of his own problems, he was concerned to deliver what he had promised. His pain, he said, was under control and it allowed him "several hours daily to devote to writing," which, he assured me, was a welcome distraction. "I've my computer (and email) set up in my hospital room… The article I promised you is planned... So if I live another couple of weeks you'll have the article that I promised; but if not, not."

Dan died on Wednesday, 20 January, 2016 at Sunnybrook Hospital, Toronto. He will be much missed by all of us who had the pleasure of knowing him and of reading his work, which was often outré, usually subversive, and always thoughtful.

It is difficult to come away from reading Dan's work without a head filled with new ideas. While readers of his books and articles on psychedelic experience, esotericism and psychotherapy (some of which combine all three areas) may not always agree with him, he was always provocative in the best sense of that word. Hence, while it is a great shame that we cannot now read the article he planned for this issue, I encourage those with an interest in the nature and significance of psychedelic experiences to spend a little time with his most important contribution to the subject, *The Ecstatic Imagination: Psychedelic Experiences and the Psychoanalysis of Self-Actualization* (1998), which he began thinking about while studying for his MA in Interdisciplinary Studies at York University, Toronto, in 1981. In it, he uses evidence garnered from self-reports of psychedelic experiences to construct a psychoanalytic approach to drug-induced altered states. While his theories will be questioned by some, the

book is an excellent example of the type of rigorous work that will contribute to a greater understanding of the relationship between psychedelic states and mystical experience. The second part of this project, *Mystical Moments and Unitive Thinking* (1999), which moves away from the focus on specifically psychedelic experiences, was published the following year. Two far more accessible books—in the tradition of *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (1970) by John Allegro—that readers might enjoy are *The Mystery of Manna: The Psychedelic Sacrament of the Bible* (2000) and its companion volume, *The Psychedelic Sacrament: Manna, Meditation and Mystical Experience* (2001). Finally, those interested in the general area should also consult *Gnosis: An Esoteric Tradition of Mystical Visions and Unions* (1993).

Dan would have been delighted with the articles published in this issue. Indeed, it always pleased him when scholars turned their minds to the subject, for, as with the study of the occult and related religious trajectories, the analysis of drug-induced states of transcendence is typically considered outré and, therefore, provocative in the conservative, predominantly secular research cultures of Western academia. As one of the contributors to this issue, Wouter Hanegraaff, commented several years ago in a thoughtful paper on the subject (as well as in his article for this issue), there are a number of "ingrained practices rooted in Western intellectual culture" that make the study of drug-induced transcendence controversial.

> The bottom line is that… the very notion of entheogenic religion as a category of 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-judgmental point of view, for in the very fact 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," "superstituous" 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 (2013, 395).

Thankfully, increasing numbers of academics are resistant to the arbitrary sacred-profane, rational-irrational distinctions that have traditionally been made between some techniques of ecstasy and others. As Aldous Huxley insisted in his 1956 essay *Heaven and Hell* (1994), because all religious experi-

ence involves brain chemistry, there is little justification for excluding those experiences induced by psychedelics, while accepting those induced by the restricted diets and hostile environments favoured by ascetics. Indeed, as I argue in a forthcoming book, their use as "technologies of transcendence" and their cultural influence throughout the modern period has been significant.

This special issue begins with Hanegraaff's insightful discussion of the work of an influential French Spiritualist now largely overlooked, whose ideas were developed during a particularly fertile period in the modern history of both occult thought and psychedelic experimentation. As with a number of other notable occultists working during the second half of the nineteenth century, Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet became convinced that hashish could be used as a technology of transcendence. His experiments with psychoactives seemed to produce trance states explicable in Spiritualist and Mesmerist terms. Indeed, it is suggested that Cahagnet's ideas can be considered catalytic in the modern occult interpretation of visionary experience. Hanegraaff's research adds to an increasing amount of evidence suggesting scholars need to look again at the history of modern occultism from the perspective of drug-induced transcendence. Much may have been missed. This line of argument is taken up in the next article, which argues that the ideas of one of the principal occultists to emerge during the *fin-de-siècle*, Aleister Crowley, was influenced far more than is typically recognized by his use of psychoactives and by his addiction to opiates. Books such as particularly *Diary of a Drug Fiend* (1922) and the articles gathered together under the title "The Herb Dangerous" in successive issues of his journal *The Equinox* are often treated as if they were peripheral to his thought. This, it is argued, is unlikely. Rather, drugs had a formative impact on his life and work.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, while numerous important thinkers have, alongside Huxley, had a formative impact on psychedelic occulture—such as Carlos Castaneda, Albert Hofmann, Timothy Leary, Gordon Wasson, and Alan Watts—one of the most important and enigmatic figures to emerge from the 1960s was Terence McKenna. In the next article, Erik Davis, whose work at the nexus of psychedelic countercultures, esotericism, and alterative thought is well-known, discusses "the weird naturalism" evident in one of the most occulturally significant moments in recent psychedelic history, namely the outré proceedure performed in 1971 by McKenna his brother Dennis in La Chorrera, a remote village in the Colombian jungle. The experiment was an excellent example of psychedelic occulture, in that it wove together ethnobotany, alchemy, science fiction, fantasy, the theories of Marshall McLuhan, and chemically induced transcendence.

The "Experiment at La Chorrera" is itself an important moment in recent psychedelic occulture, in that it would, as Davis notes, contribute to "the domestication of *Psilocybe cubensis* mushrooms in America and, through Terence's widely distributed psychedelic raps and rants, kickstart the millennial return of the Mayan calendar that became the 2012 phenomenon." Drawing on McKenna's early unpublished text *Crypto-Rap*, as well as several other notoriously arcane sources from the brothers' *corpus*, in an analysis of the "natural' and "cultural" contexts that both inspired and informed the "Experiment," the article helps us towards an understanding of its significance as a prime example of "weird naturalism," in which an "orientation towards the fantastic holds fast to a materialism at once biological, metabolic, and alchemical."

The next article in several respects follows on from the ideas discussed by Davis. Graham St. John, who recently published his wide-ranging research into countercultural experimentation with the powerful psychoactive compound DMT (Dimethyltryptamine), *Mystery School in Hyperspace: A Cultural History of DMT* (2015), discusses, with reference to McKenna's thought, the esoteric ideas that have emerged around its relationship with the enigmatic pineal gland. In an interesting discussion of Rick Strassman's thinking, particularly as articulated in his influential book *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, the article provides a thoughtful exploration of the principal ideas informing esoteric interpretations of the compound and its occultural significance.

Finally, one of the ways in which DMT is sometimes consumed within indigenous religious contexts is in the form of ayahuasca. The final article in this special issue provides an anthropological analysis of ayahuasca shamanism in Australia. Using the concept of "dividualism," Alex Gearin problematizes discussions of contemporary "New Age" practice that seek to identify it as a broadly individualistic "self-religion." In particular, there is evidence to suggest that contemporary Australian ayahuasca practice strengthens ethical commitment and collectivism. Indeed, championing the importance of ethnographic research, he argues that "the configuration of how social obligations are materialized in modes of ecstatic sensory and bodily practices and are orated in formalized sharing-round rituals, present evidence for… emic logics of social action that are "more complex and more shaded" than generalized cross-cultural constructs of individualism and collectivism may fully accommodate."

The hope of the editor is that this special issue might go some way to stimulating further scholarly analysis of the significance of psychoactives as technologies of transcendence.

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