

## Book Reviews

*God on Psychedelics: Tripping Across the Rubble of Old-time Religion*, by Don Lattin. The Apocryphile Press, 2023. Pb. 170pp. \$14.00. ISBN-13: 9781958061282

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Don Lattin's *God on Psychedelics* is one of the most recent and illuminating studies on how spiritual seekers involved in what has been termed the "psychedelic renaissance" understand their psychedelic experiences as religious or mystical. Particularly, Lattin is interested in how relatively few of these spiritual seekers relate their psychedelic experiences to their own religious traditions. As he states in the introduction, the main questions of his study are:

How does the psychedelic revival fit into the larger story of religion in America? Why do relatively few people in the burgeoning psychedelic renaissance connect drug-induced spiritual states with their own religious tradition? What lessons can mainstream churches and synagogues learn from psychedelic mysticism and the broader "spiritual but not religious" movement in the United States? What can the religious establishment teach entheogenic explorers about ethics, accountability, and community? (x–xi)

In the first chapter, Lattin begins by introducing four Protestant clergy members who he interviewed after they participated in a study at Johns Hopkins University where researchers administered psilocybin to religious leaders who were psychedelic neophytes. As he explains, all four

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found that their psychedelic experiences led them to a deeper engagement with their Christian faith. The second chapter explores the relationship between Judaism and entheogenic religion. At focus here is how Richard Alpert (better known as Ram Dass) conceives of his Jewish identity as it intersects with his lifelong engagement with Eastern philosophy and psychedelic spirituality. According to Lattin, Alpert serves as a paradigm for how Jews relate their religious tradition to psychedelics. In the third chapter, Lattin explains how the Christian tradition provides a framework for spiritual seekers involved in the psychedelic renaissance to conceive of their experiences as mystical. Here he argues that these spiritual seekers presume three stages to a kind of ascetical preparation to attain mystical insight: purgation, learning not to be controlled by the passions, and illumination or “seeing the world the way it really is” (72).

The remaining four chapters highlight key features of the current state of entheogenic religion in the United States. Chapter four explores how the psychedelic renaissance has coincided with a rise in psychedelic chaplaincy. This is a relatively new phenomenon in the United States and is inspired by the shamanism associated with indigenous entheogenic religions. It is worth mentioning that Lattin also discusses the issue of how training in psychedelic chaplaincy as well as research on psychedelics are funded by private interest groups, typically wealthy donors. Chapters Five and Six discuss two entheogenic communities, particularly their legal legitimacy. The first is the Oregon branch of the Santo Daime religion, which is an ayahuasca church founded in the early twentieth century in Brazil that integrates indigenous practices with Christian beliefs. The second is the Sacred Garden Church, an entheogenic church located in Oakland, California, that regards all entheogenic plants as sacraments. The Santo Daime community successfully sued U.S. customs who seized a shipment of ayahuasca and were granted the right to import their sacrament. The Sacred Garden Community largely operates in a legal grey area given that the city of Oakland decriminalized psychedelics, but it is ambiguous whether it is legal to operate a psychedelic church. The final chapter and the conclusion detail Lattin’s own experiences with psychedelics and his brief psychosis induced by peyote, which serves as a cautionary tale. Here he also makes his own claim on how we should understand emerging entheogenic religions. According to him, “the beneficial effects of psychedelics are better understood from a spiritual or ontological, rather than a scientific or medical, perspective” (160).

As other reviewers have noted, Lattin is not a scholar of religion but a renowned journalist for the *San Francisco Chronicle* whose work focuses on both mainstream and alternative religious movements. This does not take away from Lattin's study but does mean that it lacks the nuance and panache typically offered by scholars in the field of religious studies. For example, he does not critically appraise key terms, e.g., religion, mysticism, or spirituality, and his historical analysis of the association between psychoactive substances and mystical or religious experience is fairly limited. Another aspect that is lacking in Lattin's text is an awareness of new entheogenic religious movements in the United States that have emerged in the past few years. Although he does discuss two such movements in the San Francisco Bay Area (The Sacred Garden Community and Zide Door), his work would have benefited by attending to others. One of the most intriguing and rapidly growing entheogenic religious movements that has recently gained considerable attention is The Divine Assembly, a self-described magic mushroom church founded by former Mormons located in Salt Lake City, Utah. Another is Psanctuary which is also a magic mushroom church located in Louisville, Kentucky.

Lattin's book will not only appeal to scholars of religion who research entheogenic religion but also to religious leaders and laypersons intrigued by the ongoing psychedelic renaissance. Its greatest contribution is that it examines how spiritual seekers involved in the psychedelic renaissance relate their experiences to their own religious traditions, which is an issue not usually discussed by scholars. In all, his study is well-articulated, insightful, and sheds light on how the psychedelic renaissance is increasingly associated with the growth of entheogenic religion in the United States.