



ENTHEOGENS AND THE FUTURE OF RELIGION

ALBERT HOEMANN, R. GORDON WASSON,
BROTHER DAVID STEINDL-RAST, JACK KORNFIELD,
TERENCE MCKENNA, ANN AND ALEXANDER SHULGIN,
ROBERT JESSE, DALE PENDELL, THOMAS RIEDLINGER,
THOMAS ROBERTS, RICK STRASSMAN, ERIC STERLING

EDITED BY ROBERT FORTE

en•theo•gen *n.* [*lit.* generate god or spirit within] 1. psychoactive sacrament; a plant or chemical substance taken to occasion spiritual or mystical experience. *Example:* peyote cactus as used in the Native American Church. 2. hallucinogen; psychedelic.

ENTHEOGENS AND THE FUTURE OF RELIGION

"Collectively, these essays constitute the best single inquiry into the religious significance of chemically occasioned mystical experiences that has yet appeared."

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The cover depicts a scene from the Eleusinian Mysteries wherein Demeter, Goddess of the Earth, has been reunited with her daughter Persephone, Goddess of Grain. Grateful for this reunion, and to celebrate rebirth from death, Demeter bestows upon the mortal king Triptolemus a stalk of grain and teaches him the conduct of her Mysteries – "holy rites that are awesome, that no one may transgress nor reveal nor express in words, for an overwhelming reverence for the gods stops his voice" (from the Homeric Hymn to Demeter). Photographed in Chicago by Martha Abelson. Retouched at MindSphere, Sausalito by Brooks Cole.

EXPLORATIONS INTO GOD

Brother David Steindl-Rast

For two weeks in December 1984, forty-five scientists and religious thinkers gathered at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California to discuss ways to better understand the psychedelic experience. Brother David Steindl-Rast came down from his mountain hermitage and gave this extemporaneous talk.

A lot was said this morning. Unfortunately, I only came last night. I was not here from the beginning of the conference. But what was said this morning really feels very comfortable. I think somehow I belong to this League for Spiritual Discovery.

The particular branch of the League that I belong to is fifteen hundred years old. That is how long we have been engaged on that Voyage of Discovery in Benedictine monasteries. From my own experience, for whatever that is worth, I give you my word: It works! The monastic experience in the form in which it is offered to us today (here in this country, or in other parts of the world that I have seen) is one possibility for discovering the things that we are all about. That is a great thing to know.

Of course, institutions are institutions with all their drawbacks. The monastic institution has all the drawbacks of an institution that is in our case fifteen hundred years old. And so the institution can also get in the way of achieving the goal. But in the optimal case, it works and brings about what we are looking for. I have seen it happen. I have known monks who have gone through this process. In many other cases, it is no guarantee at all and you can just waste your time in a monastery as you can waste your time anywhere else. You can hide behind the institution.

You can experience a kind of inoculation that Stan Grof spoke about. We have used that image ourselves. We have said that you can get little by little vaccinated against the Good News of Christ. So that the real thing does not hit you anymore. You have become immune to the great mind-blowing turn-

about. That is a real danger. But if the monastic experience works, it can get you to our deepest sense of unity and to a life that flows out of it.

I thought I would briefly sketch how I see the relationship between *spirituality* and *religion* and *theology* – all terms that have been tossed around here. In my understanding of it, and from the particular perspective from which I come to it, it all starts with our mystical experience. This is one point where I would question how John Perry meant his statement. I wrote it down and tried to capture it verbatim: "It is impossible to convince the general public that there is such a reality as a mystical experience."

Now I question that. I have had the opportunity to address all kinds of "general public." Some of them were most unlikely to be convinced offhand that there is such a thing as a mystical experience, let alone that they themselves had one. But I have never come across a group in which the majority could not be led to realize that they had had a mystical experience. In fact, I am convinced that our typical awareness as humans, our human consciousness, is based on the mystical experience, i.e., *the experience that we unconditionally belong*. This is my way of expressing the essence of a mystical experience: *an overwhelming sense of unconditional belonging*. I would be very interested in hearing how some of you express the same thing from different perspectives.

I always try to speak about it in common human language, in terms that anybody can understand. First, I get people settled and willing to listen, willing to look at themselves. Then I ask them: "Does it make sense to you that before you are aware of anything else, you have a sense of belonging? Not necessarily before *in time*, but *ontologically*. Is that sense of belonging not the basis of your awareness *that you are* and *who you are*? Is not the rock bottom of your consciousness a sense of belonging?"

"Belonging." That is the term I use. And I would say that ninety-nine percent of a typical audience agrees. The others are just a little uncertain if they have really understood. But there is no one who says, "No, this simply doesn't ring true." Almost everyone says "Yes." That is enough for me.

Mystical experience, mystical awareness, is practically universal when we focus on its essence, which is that sense of ultimate belonging. Of course, from here on there are many degrees of potential development. We can make progress in our sense of belonging. But it is healthy for us and helpful to remember that basically everybody shares that awareness. It is the one thing you can presuppose. There is nothing else you can presuppose with as much certainty among humans as mystical awareness.

It is not always crystallized in specific experiences, although surprisingly often even this is the case, and among unlikely candidates for a mystical experience. But at least the awareness is there. And from that awareness we come now to spirituality. By "spirituality" I mean that which makes a religion tick.

I call it "spirituality" rather than "religion" to avoid confusion with "the religions." Think rather of that *religiousness* which makes a religion religious. Remember, a religion is not automatically religious. In fact, my contention is that *religions*, left to themselves, turn *irreligious*. They have a tendency to become irreligious. If you are a member of a religious community, you have the responsibility to make your religion religious. This will not happen without your special effort.

Once we come to distinguish religion (in the sense of religiousness) from the various religions in which religion expresses itself, then we have the context in which to introduce "God." For most of us this is not absolutely necessary. There are many deeply religious people who would not use the term "God." But if we want to use it, this is where the term "God" comes in.

In some respects it is easier to speak about these things without using the term "God." It lends itself to too many misunderstandings. But if we want to use it as a kind of shortcut, it is in the context of our mystical awareness that "God" comes in. For anybody who uses that term "God" will agree: *God is the one to whom we absolutely belong*. We are back at that sense of belonging.

Before you fill this notion of God with anything else, you can say: Those who use the term "God" correctly mean by it the reference point of our sense of belonging. But with this sense of belonging goes a sense of longing. Check that out against your own experience.

Here this whole thing comes in motion. This is something I cannot explain further. It is an experiential fact. We long for that to which we most deeply belong. Poets have expressed this very beautifully. T.S. Eliot says:

*We shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.*

That is Home. Home is where one starts from. This tension of belonging and longing constitutes the dynamism of our inner quest.

Our whole spiritual journey, if I understand it correctly, is set in motion by our longing to go deeper, deeper, and deeper towards that center of our belonging which we mean when we say "God." We can identify this movement with a term coined by Christopher Fry, "exploration into God." This is another aspect of the religiousness within religion. We can explore together. We can make discoveries within the realm of divine reality. And tremendous discoveries have been made. Explorers have set up signposts throughout the millennia. These signposts mark insights beyond which one cannot go back.

But there is a question we must ask ourselves: "How does one get from religion to a specific religion?" This is a fascinating question for me: "How

does one start out with religiousness and end up with religions?" Are these not opposite poles? Yet, if you bounce it off your own experience, I think you will find it to be true that religiousness inevitably leads to a religion. This may be your own personal religion or a more traditional, established one. In either case, a religion always comprises *doctrine*, *ethics*, and *ritual*. And these three inevitably develop out of our religiousness, out of our deepest sense of belonging. Inevitably, because our intellect interprets this belonging, and so we get doctrine; our willing commitment to that belonging and to its implications inevitably leads to ethics; and our emotions cannot help celebrating the joy of that belonging, which inevitably creates ritual. Let us look at this process in greater detail.

The moment we become aware of belonging, we cannot help thinking about it. That means interpreting it. And the moment we have interpreted it, even in the most rudimentary way, we have the phenomenon of doctrine. Even in a negative way, if all we say is "this experience cannot be interpreted," that is also an interpretation. We have entered the realm of doctrine.

Doctrine belongs to every religion. But doctrine has a way of becoming *doctrinaire*, as we can immediately see. The more we say, the more we tend to become doctrinaire. Doctrine replaces experience. That is where religion become irreligious. But doctrine is originally meant to bring home to you your experience by interpreting it. Doctrine wants to lead to experience. By availing yourself of the interpretations that others have given to the mystic experience through the millennia, you can explore into God, map in hand. And I can assure you it is a great privilege that one can stand in traditions like my own and have its help. It is like having to invent the wheel all over again, or calculus, if you do not have a tradition that helps you understand.

Secondly, our sense of belonging calls for *action*. If you really feel your belonging so profoundly, then you have to act accordingly. You belong to every human being. You belong to all creatures. You belong to the earth. This imposes on you a *responsibility*. And that is the essence of *morality*, of ethics: living out of the religious responsibility that you have incurred by being human, by being aware of your limitless belonging. But now your moral obligations become codified and spelled out in do's and don'ts and soon *morality* becomes *moralistic*. That is another point where religion goes off and becomes more and more irreligious. *Moralism* is irreligious because in the end all these moral codes can prevent you from acting as one acts towards those to whom one belongs.

The third area is *celebration*. Spontaneously, you celebrate your mystical awareness. You cannot help it. Your emotions call for it. Religiousness leads to rituals. As long as ritual springs from a genuine awareness of belonging and cultivates that awareness by celebrating it, all is well. But when only hollow

forms remain and the experience is gone, or when the forms even block the experience, then we have no longer ritual, but *ritualism*, an irreligious phenomenon. It is our responsibility to fill the rituals we have inherited with new life, or else to allow the wellspring of life that created the old forms to bring forth new ones.

There is no religion that does not have doctrine, morals, and ritual. It must be so, as we have seen. Even for one's private religion, this holds true. For we cannot help it that our intellect, our will, and our emotions, each in its own way, deal with our mystical awareness. Nor, of course, is there anything wrong with doctrine, ethics, and ritual as such except for their tendency to harden into lifeless "isms."

The image I have in mind is that of a volcano. Our mystic experience is like a volcanic eruption. Fire, heat, light gush forth from our innermost depth. But the hot lava flows down the side of the mountain and cools off. The farther we are in space and time from the fiery eruption, the more this glowing magma turns into cold rock. Our task is to push through the "isms" of our particular religion as through thick layers of volcanic rock and to catch fire from the original fire. After all, that is what all the great masters and saints have done. If you stand in an ancient tradition, as I do, there is work to be done. But there are also incredible resources to be tapped if we push through the ossified encrustations.

That's my view of the relationship between religion and the religions. What does it tell us in the context of this conference? What is its relevance for our League for Spiritual Discovery? It tells us that we have an ally in the religious core of every religion, but we may have a real problem with religious institutions – at least until we help them become more genuinely religious than they tend to be. In this effort we have allies in every religious tradition – the truly religious people. They are to be found outside as well as inside any religious institution. It doesn't really matter if that is Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity in any of its brands, Judaism, or any other religion. They present a problem because they are so paradoxical in themselves. Religions can be channels for religiousness, and they can be dampers that squelch religiousness. It all depends on whether you indulge in them or go through with them – through the rock to the fire.

There are no shortcuts. It has been pointed out with regard to entheogens that they do their thing only if you work with them. That is equally true of religions. If you take a tool of that kind, it has to be used with the grain. That was the main point I wanted to share with you. Maybe some more specific questions on our agenda will take on a different perspective within this frame of reference.