Article

Catholicism, Psychedelics, and Mysticism: Correlations and Displacements

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Abstract: This article charts some of the conversations around psychedelics, mysticism, Catholicism, and the Catholic mystics. The first part, “Background and Orientation”, gives context for the current “psychedelic renaissance” and brings the focus to psychedelics and Catholicism. The literature’s frequent comparisons of psychedelic mystical trips with Catholic mysticism raises questions about the legitimacy of religious ways of knowing, the status of the discipline of theology in Western academic cultures, and how Catholicism is often depicted in the psychedelic literature. The first part closes with a survey of the challenges of defining mysticism and some of the patterns perennial to the Catholic mystical experience. In the second part, “Through the Eye of the Methodology Needle”, I look at the problem of methodological displacement, that is, how a researcher comes to conclusions with material that is formally outside of their discipline’s boundaries. This is a challenge for scholars of every stripe when they countenance subject matter that is beyond their expertise—and the lure to still read that material through their known methodology and worldview—but the problem of displacement is conspicuously compounded when the sciences countenance theological and religious themes. I provide concrete examples of displacement with psychedelic and Catholic mysticism, how it can be corrected, and how this would benefit dialogue. In the Conclusions, I outline persistent concerns and theological objections about some of the claims of psychedelic mysticism but hold onto the hope for further dialogue. My sustained attention is to the comparisons that are frequently made between the psychedelic and Catholic mystical experiences and whether these correlations are critically warranted.

Keywords: psychedelics; mysticism; Christianity; Catholic; psychedelics and Catholicism; theology; science; social science; methodology; epistemology

1. Introduction

Is it too early to call a sea change in the public perception of psychedelics?1 To be sure, its image is being recast by the recent spate of media attention to clinical studies showing that medically administered psychedelics can bring significant improvements for people with hard-to-treat depression, clinical anxiety, PTSD, psychological distress from a terminal diagnosis, and a range of addictions.2 Some of these interventions outperform conventional medical treatment and, in the not-too-distant future they could be absorbed into the mental health treatment array. In addition to showing promise from clinical trials, there is a significant surge of interest in pursuing altered states of consciousness for personal kicks (magic mushrooms and raves evidently make a nice spiritual cocktail) and for the ever-growing constituency of spiritual-but-not-religious and “just spiritual” seekers.

Yet this psychedelic resurgence is not as widely accepted as some might suppose—or hope. People are under the thrall of that ominous tone set in the early 1970s when the U.S. government declared its war on drugs with attendant shock and awe policies. Several generations were formed by that ethos and remained in its impressionable wake, even after that “war” had long been effectively lost. Hence, consciousness raising around psychedelics, including its therapeutic potential, is still needed, and until this reaches a critical mass,
many will continue to judge it by the twin standards of rebellious self-indulgence and a
dangerous game of mind-meddling roulette.

Admittedly, Western cultural appropriations of psychedelics can have a mammoth
shadow, a default that can be curbed with a commitment to self-monitoring and clear
ethical guidelines. Advocates should be ruthlessly vigilant for Pollyannanism—despite
themselves—even with the glowing but lopsided media reports and the positive anecdotal
signals from those who self-diagnostically microdose for anxiety and depression. Serious
questions about psychedelic’s safety and efficacy can be ignored in circles where its backing
is strongest; warnings “from the outside” ought not to be marginalized. Promising clinical
results are not proven results. The naivetés of the 1960s psychedelic movements with their
utopian and quasi-messianic undertones could also be rebranded as the panacea for our
precarious age of rapidly rising anxiety.

Care and preparation must be made for persons who could suffer a psychotic break
or trauma; are the risks that come with taking psychedelics really worth it? As someone
put it, “Drugs can provide intense pleasure, but who wants to face nightmarish images
we sought to flee since we were kids? Who wants to drop into an abyss called the dark
night of the soul?”3 Do intermediating agencies have protocols for those who experience
trauma or suffer a psychotic episode? Will the latter be dropped like a hot potato at the
emergency doors of the local psychiatric hospital? What is the therapeutic environment and
the competencies of its administrators, including the continued monitoring of practices that
safeguard its delivery? Do not be surprised when advertisements for weekend psychedelic
retreats become commonplace. Self-appointed, unaccountable coaches will arise, and some
of them will naively exploit the deep spiritual thirst of our time.

Putting aside the critical questions for medical science and practice, other ethical issues
for psychedelics include the range and flexibility of government policy, the influence of
the pharmaceutical company’s marketing strategies and money trails—what someone has
styled the “psychedelic industrial complex” (Welker 2023)—and last, but not by any means
least, how Indigenous communities perceive the commodification of some of their sacred
compounds. Is our adoption of their substances another check in the box for colonialism?
Are our practices akin to distributing Holy Communion by mail? Can someone call peyote
and ayahuasca a “sacrament” when they are not personally incorporated into an Indigenous
community and its Sacred Tradition? Are our current noble intentions with psychedelics
being gradually relinquished to the blind demands of the market economy?

One thing is certain: psychedelics cannot be a shortcut to maturity for persons who are
decidedly fair weather with their personal growth, though the trip—what Aldous Huxley
called Blakean “angels” with deeper purpose (Huxley 1954, p. 24)—could prompt someone
to take their potential for human flourishing more seriously. For others, it could inspire a
reconsideration of their faith tradition. All things being equal, though, there is no substitute
for the hard and painful psychological work that makes new stages of consciousness possi-
ble; self-transcendence is not conferred or bartered with but is fought for with sweat and
blood. Those who are susceptible to faddish-consumer-driven thinking and are nonchalant
with their psycho-spiritual development could easily repurpose psychedelics as “mysticism
in a vial” or a “God pill”. These latter concerns are on the radar of scholars and mature
practitioners.

2. The Moral Status of Psychedelics in Catholicism

How are adherents of religious traditions responding to the psychedelic renaissance?
For those who do not in any way identify themselves as religious, I am aware that this
question might be irrelevant and mildly irritating. But for a devout person, a not insub-
stantial constituency, and for Christians particularly, inserting oneself into the psychedelic
scaffolding can generate moral headbutting from incommensurate world views.

For good or for ill, Christian theology is playing catch-up with the psychedelic renais-
sance, as McCarthy acknowledges a perennial tendency in Christianity: “It will always
be important for church bodies to move prudently and sometimes, ipso facto, slowly in
expressing positions on controversial matters of great importance.” “Slowly” is perhaps a generous portrayal in view of the usual knee-jerk incredulity and nervous humor that one encounters when the topic of psychedelics is raised. Nevertheless, the churches have drawn some moral lines in the sand. With “street” or “recreational” drugs, which includes psychedelics, the ethical standard for most Christian Traditions is an unambiguous moral embargo (McCarthy 2023, p. 4). The Catechism of the Catholic Church, an official “off-the-shelf” compendium of its doctrine and morality, opposes the recreational use of drugs even where it is decriminalized. It states: “The use of drugs inflicts very grave danger on human health and life (U.S. Catholic Church 1997). Their use, except on strictly therapeutic grounds, is a grave offense.” (¶ 2291) This position might strike some people as draconian or snootily bourgeois, especially for those for whom marijuana consumption is legal, having already scouted the neighbourhood cannabis stores and who regularly microdose with psilocybin gummies. To be fair, the Catechism addresses a global membership where drug trafficking and organized crime have undermined city swaths and regional socio-economic systems. I am also well aware that there are Christians who do smoke pot and take psychedelics despite its social stigma and their church’s official moral position.

Even so, the Catechism’s proviso that Catholics may be administered morally illicit drugs “on strictly therapeutic grounds” is an open door—of sorts. There has been some movement in this direction by Catholic theologians and particularly by Catholic bioethicists. As an instance, in a short blog by the Jesuit theologian Joe Lorenz that was picked up by several respected popular Catholic publications, he emphasizes that “As Catholics, we should take seriously the possibility that psychedelics are morally permissible in a therapeutic context.” He touches on the clinical evidence and draws attention to psychedelic treatments that succeed where conventional medicines have failed, such as SSRIs inefficacy with hard-to-treat depression. His prognosis is solidly optimistic: “Psychedelics might not be part of the problem of drug abuse,” he writes, “but part of the solution—in other words, not just another drug, but a medicine” (Lorenz 2022).

Lorenz’ assessment aligns with some of the evidence. One of the benefits of psychedelic therapy is an augmented neuroplasticity (the mechanisms of which are not currently well understood) that allows or assists psychological breakthroughs. In other words, physiological changes in the brain can significantly facilitate constructive changes in thinking patterns and psychological complexes, a change that seems pronounced with the treatment of PTSD. Hence, psychedelics are not only a biochemical “fix”, but can prompt profound alterations of meaning that the ego is incapable of generating.

It is crucial to grasp the underlying significance of what is happening here. The psychedelic trip is not a solipsistic, subjectivist mirage that sees a Monet in every rain puddle; on the contrary, the trip taps into autonomous psychic mechanisms with inherent transformational potentialities—a telos of integration. Richards recognizes that the psyche has “an intrinsic wisdom. . . to facilitate healing or unfolding self-actualization” (Richards 2008, p. 190). Perhaps this teleological “intrinsic wisdom” is comparable to the role of the dream in psychoanalysis where the dream symbolism witnesses to the analyst and the analysand an integrative purpose stemming from unconscious psychic need. Like the dream, the intrinsic telos of the psychedelic trip is the integration of the self’s unknown or suppressed elements into consciousness. Unfortunately, the telos of this integration can also dredge terrors like the “nightmarish images we sought to flee since we were kids”.

Finally, and arriving now at the springboard for this article’s core theme, some psychedelic trips are correlated with the properties of existential harmony, peace, the embrace of a Greater Love, and an amplified ego porosity, features that are frequently identified as mystical experiences—and here I echo the moniker of not a few scholars and especially of practitioners. The term seems so fitting from the trip’s Numinous undertones, the changes in consciousness that occur, and the textures of reality that open up. These trips—and their mystical quality is not streamed on demand—circumvent the ordinary trajectories of inquiry that are forwarded by the ego’s deliberations. Looking back on these experiences practitioners maintain that they were “life changing” and “spiritually decisive”
because they were marked by the phenomenon of an epiphany, what they understood to be a “gift” that was disproportionate to their previous efforts and volition. For Huxley, who in 1954 wrote about his experience with psychedelics, the trip is described as a “Door in the Wall” of human awareness,

... from which the man who comes back through the Door in the Wall will never be the same as the man who went out. He will be wiser but less cocksure, happier but less self-satisfied, humbler in acknowledging his ignorance yet better equipped to understand the relationship of words to things, of systematic reasoning to the unfathomable Mystery which it tries, forever vainly, to comprehend. (Huxley 1954, p. 24)

With this excerpt, I am reminded that the metaphor of “door” is part of the mystical lexicon, along with concepts like fire, light, Beloved, union, night, desert, water, death, and birth. It is employed by the Catholic mystic Thomas Merton in “The Door that Ends All Doors” though for the Trappist monk that door is the person of Christ and not a threshold opened by a psychedelic trip. As this article will demonstrate, a term that is shared by two sets of mystical experiences does not indicate that they have the same meaning or stem from an identical phenomenon. Still, for more than a few researchers, and especially for psychedelic practitioners, mysticism is possibly the only term that best describes some of their trips. One of the prominent leitmotifs with these designations are the allusions made to the mysticisms of other religions, including the Catholic mystics.


The “mysticism” designation bestowed by partakers of psychedelics begs the question: “Who” or “what” in some of these trips invites that moniker? Do these experiences expose our unconscious depths to “God” and the ontology of the Transcendent realm, to our own kaleidoscopic projections, to archetypes of the collective unconscious, or to all the above? Whilst psychedelic experiences are self-transcending, that is, they surpass the horizon of ego-awareness, does it follow that these trapse into transcendence? Are we experiencing God in these trips or unknown parts of ourselves that overwhelm us as God-like? Would the mystical traditions of other religions recognize themselves in the mirror of psychedelic mysticism? Do the patterns of mystical experience that are charted in religious traditions such as the Abrahamic faiths intersect with psychedelic mysticism, or are they like chalk and cheese? Should the field’s evolving nomenclature promote a sturdier differentiation among states of consciousness that are proper to natural, aesthetic, or psychedelic mysticism “in contrast” to Catholic mystics like Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Merton, people for whom phenomenological comparisons regularly crop up in the literature? If psychedelics are a gateway to transcendence or to God, how can the sciences warrant that provenance with their obligation to empirical methodologies? Or are some researchers and practitioners implicitly “doing theology” with psychedelic mysticism, and if so, how reliable are their inferences without the procedures of transcendental theological method?

Now, I recognize that depending on region and culture just mentioning “theology” can raise some academician’s hackles. Again, depending on the locale, if one were to conduct a Rorschach test for scholars in the social and physical sciences—in this case the ink blot is the word “theology”—the results would be telling. Some academics will balk at the prospect of collaborating with a theologian, though a scholar of religious studies would more easily pass muster. Theology is not necessarily recognized as a bona fide discipline, and in many cultural contexts any potential for an exchange between the sciences and theology flies in the face of secularism’s bulldozing narrative which posits, as plain as the nose on your face, that enlightened individuals and societies inevitably outgrow religious faith, like children graduating out of primary school.

The enmity with the discipline of theology amplifies or reduces with the faith tradition that is countenanced. For instance, the Catholic Church’s teaching in bioethics and sexuality is so awkwardly out of step with the contemporary sentiments of Western cultures, to say nothing of its breathtaking moral bankruptcy served from the systemic concealment of
the sexual crimes of its clergy, that a Catholic theologian would be on the last line of that hypothetical list of potential collaborators—if they would be included at all. A different set of issues would arise with the Baptist, Anglican, and Pentecostal communities, and more so with the world’s major religions. Admittedly, in a culture that has become so disillusioned with organized religion, including the disillusionment of its own members, these considerations could be increasingly moot.

From a theoretical point of view, which comes closer to the aversion’s core rationale, most scholars do not recognize theology’s arch; namely, that God and the epistemology of faith are objective realms of being, an ontological realm that can be authentically, systematically, and intelligibly grasped. (Intriguingly, some scientists express more openness to the phenomena lumped under the category of paranormal studies as leverage for the possible existence of transcendence than they are with theology.) Theology’s status as a discipline is further eroded by its association with parent-mandated church attendance and memories of childhood Sunday school. Theology, it is generally thought, is about preparing future clergy for the esoteric crafts of ecclesial ministry as hyper-niched functionalists who are equipped with an archaic, eclectic, gobbledygook (ahem) “rationale” to keep people in the pews. Besides, granted that the Transcendent realm is accessible, it would have to be wrestled from the controlling hands of clergy and Church authorities to the extent that theology is seen as a mouthpiece of ecclesial polity. The contrasts with academic freedom and the values of personal autonomy could not be greater.11 Of course, “taking on” theology means having to eventually engage the cumbersome apparatuses of its sponsoring religious institutions and clergy. At the end of the day, maybe theology is one silo better left to itself.

Some scholars appeal to Numinous experiences that are allegedly shared by psychedelic trips and the mystics of different faith traditions, including the Catholic mystics, but they still refuse theology a seat at their table. In other words, by moving into the arena of comparative mysticism, they implicitly take the Catholic mystic’s testament seriously, but they do not recognize the theological roads that guided the mystic’s heightened psychological spiritual development. Others manage to dodge the dilemma by interpreting the mystical narratives through the hermeneutics of philosophical materialism, scientism, and a benevolent biochemistry (See Narby 1998). Some pivot their opposition to theological ways of knowing on the nonexistence of an immortal “soul”.12 Others describe encounters with religious and mythic archetypes that could empirically verify Jung’s thinking on the collective unconscious (Richards 2008, p. 192). Many will lean on the Feuerbachian thesis that all affirmations about transcendence are illusions unconsciously plagiarized from psychological projection. Others tap into Transcendent categories anyway—“doing theology”—without applying the transcendental method. And there are those who approach the inner boundaries of their disciplines, knowingly don a different epistemological hat, and contemplate what could be happening in psychedelic mysticism while maintaining that these ruminations cannot be accounted for by their discipline. They are circumspect with these sorts of speculations.

In the interest of clarity, the onto-transcendental realm of faith in its subjective dynamism and objective intelligibility—as differentiated from its familial, cultural, and ecclesial incarnations—is not an arbitrary blind leap (“I envy people who can just let go of reason and believe in Something greater”), a beefed-up collective version of Pascal’s wager, or naively swallowing a premise that is propagated through a chain of sociological and psychological interactions masquerading as transcendence. Are there sociological, psychological, familial, and ecclesial dynamics at play in the dissemination of religious faith? Absolutely. However, the intelligibility of faith is also culled from the innate “givenness” of transcendence that is within the grasp of human interiority, something for which familial, psychological, and other factors do not fully account. Experiences of transcendence can be noticed, differentiated, and, depending on a person’s capacity, disposition, psychological freedom, and education, these will be grafted onto their theology. The discipline of theology is, in part, the sustained systematic reflection on the cognitive operations that intelligibly
grasp transcendence and what this means for human beings and what the human experience fully entails. The acuity of theological method is tested by the systematic reflection on the patterns of inquiry as they occur in our subjectivity (Doran 2016, p. 20). Theology also “serves” other purposes. At times, it can subvert the sacred auras or quasi-religious dogmatisms that can permeate cultural, moral, and political agendas. It also mediates the role of religion within a cultural matrix, which involves disengagement, dialectic, and differentiation within those cultural mediations. Having a theological perspective is one way to not become the culture’s lapdog.

The givenness of transcendence clearly differs from the anthropologies and accounts of reality that are advocated by philosophical materialism, scientism, and empirical reductionism. Surprisingly, the exclusion or inclusion of transcendence and the question of metaphysics in psychedelic mysticism are debated within the scientific literature on psychedelics.  

But here is the upshot from this wide-ranging panorama of what has become the no-man’s land that lies between the sciences and theology: in the worst case academic cultural scenario, the features just described coalesce into an institutionalized reflex of contempt for theology, spirituality, and organized religion—and there is no better way to describe the academy’s collective sentiment than with that noun. That is the elephant in the room with discussions about the relationship between psychedelic mysticism and the sacred mystical traditions, including those belonging to Catholic Christianity.

4. Mislead by “Catholic” Touchstones

In addition to these undercurrents that deter prospects for dialogue with theologians, the likelihood for any kind of meaningful exchange is impeded by the literature’s unfortunate susceptibility to caricatures of Catholicism. To put it bluntly, I do not always recognize what is described as Catholic (or Christian) though I can understand the difficulties entailed in understanding a belief system that is not one’s own. Many Catholics do not grasp Catholicism, for that matter, and for “outsiders”, this is more difficult because the Catholic Church appears to be a monolithic constituency—which it is not. But for the sake of scholarship and dialogue, one would expect fewer strawmen. Three patterns in the literature become conspicuous.

First, many researchers stumble out of the starting gate with their selection of texts that ostensibly represent the Catholic ethos. For instance, when comparing the administration of psychedelics with the Catholic sacraments—a common theme with these sorties—one author refers to The Catholic Encyclopedia (“written in the early twentieth century”), a genre with a limited shelf life and a version that is deprived of the seminal theological shifts of the Second Vatican Council, while another launches a reflection on the sacraments from an Oxford English Dictionary definition. Sometimes the sampled texts are fringe and apocryphal, and nothing close to being theologically sound or current. Some of the cited works are wince-inducing didactic pitches for beginners. Other commentaries sadly betray a subtle but unmistakable parody of faith and of all things Catholic. But the overall impression I come away with is that the low hanging fruit of the chosen sources would not be picked by theologians for their research, classes, and publishing any more than Wikipedia can be the chief go-to for a PhD candidate’s research. I would not even recommend some of these texts to an inquiring fellow Catholic. I am forced to wonder if the literature selection reflects a confirmation bias that Catholicism is fundamentally dogmatic and intellectually truncated, and that there is nothing—nothing at all—behind the patchwork façade of archaic doctrine, self-deceiving piety, and a nomenclature without substance. “Pay no attention to the men behind the curtain”.

The second pattern is related to the first: an unwillingness to bushwhack through some of the cultural cliché coincidences about Catholicism. For instance, some scholars in the psychedelic field syllogistically apply the Galileo Affair, including the disastrous aftermath that cemented the centuries-long cultural notion that faith and science are like oil and water, to the Catholic Church’s current reserve with psychedelics. The idea that
“the Church always resists science” or is “suspicious of” and “threatened by” the scientific method means that as soon as the psychedelic renaissance appeared on the horizon it was predestined to rejection by Catholic authorities. The syllogism is left at that.

A closer examination of Galileo’s situation would establish that the conflict between the Catholic Church and the long-suffering proto scientist was more complex and nuanced than what is communicated by this frankly worn-out “faith verses science” trope, which will not die.

Few individuals in 1610 owned a telescope to verify Galileo’s observations of four bright satellites orbiting Jupiter, observations from which he would advance a cosmology that parted from the accepted cultural orthodoxy (the stout distinctions between religious institutions and secularity were yet to develop). Today, anyone can confirm Galileo’s discovery with a cheap telescope from Toys “R” Us that surpasses the optical quality of his instrument, though they would likely not make the greater cosmological inference. The point is that 17th-century Europe could not accept a new cosmological worldview based solely on the profile of his testimony and those who shared his intellectual company. Galileo was contesting the matter-of-fact cultural orthodoxies and not just a few Churchmen.

As is often the case with disagreements, the conflict between Galileo and the Church’s upper echelon clergy was exacerbated as much from his hot-headedness—he was not diplomatic by temperament—as from Pope Urban VIII’s political pragmatism and the theological ignorance of the Inquisitors and the Vatican cardinals charged with investigating his case. The churchmen were unaware, tragically, it turns out, of the teaching of the 4th-century theologian Augustine who warned about reading into the Scriptures matters that did not belong there: “The Spirit of God, who spoke through [the inspired authors of the Scriptures] was unwilling to teach men [sic] things of no profit for salvation. God has given us Sacred Scriptures not to make us into mathematicians [scientists] but Christians.” (On Genesis, 389 C.E.) The 13th-century theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas advanced a similar caution. This plank in Christian Tradition—that the Bible is not a scientific document and could not have been intended for that purpose—is not known by many Christians. The stakes are higher in a culture that anachronistically projects its historical consciousness onto the past, which is sometimes evident with attempts at remedying colonial injustices.

Now, it is undeniable that Catholic institutional history is populated with rabbit holes of protectionism, grotesque abuses of power, moral megalomanias, pathological intentions to control and dominate, religious and political persecution, reactionary condemnations, dubious power alliances, institutional exclusivism and arrogance, withdrawals into dogmatic security, every conceivable sleaze with money, power, and sex, and, in the nineteenth and early 20th centuries, the catastrophic failure to recognize the significance of the dawning of the modern age. To be fair, there were always believers who lived their faith outside of these power schemes and held the hierarchy to a higher moral and intellectual standard. But the idea that Catholicism views science as a clear and present danger is not held by the Catholic Church. The indictment that “the Catholic Church always resists science” as the reason for its hesitancy with psychedelics is simply incorrect. If there is resistance it comes from reasons other than an alleged anti-science reflex.

Finally, some scientists uncritically slap aspects of the psychedelic trip with the “transcendence” label, a provenance that raises questions not only from a theological perspective, but as previously mentioned, garners reproach from within the scientific community. The attribution of transcendence to these experiences puts the social and physical scientist in a bind, if and when they make that attribution; the ability to name God or metaphysics is beyond their field’s competencies. The methodologies of the social and physical sciences cannot recognize transcendence (Doran 1997, p. 66; Armout Garb and Earleywine 2022). Yet, as we will see, this contradiction is typically set aside by the blanket claims about the nature and scope of human existence: reality is either wholly explained by the philosophical materialist/empirical template, or it is imbued with transcendence that is indigenous to...
human nature and can be intelligently and objectively grasped. This question hangs over
the entire discussion of psychedelic mysticism.

5. Not All Mysticisms Are Alike

What is mysticism? What are its markers? Although most religions generate mystical
tributaries it does not easily yield to classification even within homogeneous faith traditions.
One reason for this opacity is that mystical awareness comes with being an outlier in one’s
religious and social systems. Mystics suffer from ego-dystonia because they grasp realities
that others frequently do not; they do not expect to be summarily understood by their
peers and have painfully learned discretion with the pearls of their psycho-spiritual lives.
Nor do mystics feel compelled to propagate their views, a quality that Richards picks up
with a citation from the *Tao Te Ching*: “Those who know do not speak; those who speak do
not know.”

The role and status of their religious institution are also relativized; the system is
integral, to be sure, but not as some of their colleagues and leaders might envision. Mystics
rely less on the institution’s mediations and have sworn off its recognition systems, a
distanciation that can be the grist for the hierarchy’s suspicion. This healthy (and holy)
indifference to the religious institution’s mediations and their relative independence from its
recognition currencies is possible only by suffering themselves into a deeper psychological
freedom that is epitomized by people like Saints Benedict and Teresa of Avila. With
this freedom, they could become an “internal proletariat” (Arnold Toynbee). The mystic’s
dreams for change seldom go beyond changing themselves and their religious communities,
but sometimes, something far greater and unpredictable is released from their lives:

Historians have vied in praising [Benedict’s] genius and clear-sightedness; they
have supposed that he intended to regenerate Europe, to stop the dissolution
of society, to prepare the reconstitution of political order, to re-establish public
education, and to preserve literature and the arts. . . I firmly believe that he never
dreamt of regenerating anything but his own soul and those of his brethren,
the monks.

Trying to pin down a definition for mysticism raises other questions too. Are all
religious experiences mystical, or are they a distinct species of transcendental experience?
Some reckon that any experience of God ought to be considered mystical no matter what
the mediating form or content; how could it be otherwise? Is mysticism primarily signaled
by uncommon phenomenon? Is it “ordinary” or exceptional—and is what seems to be
extraordinary supposed to be more widely accessible? Is it a matter of degree and not of
its presence or total absence? For Catholics in general, the term is cryptic, lying somewhere
between some kind of eccentric and William James’s mystopath characterization. For
those for whom awareness of having a “personal experience” of God is a litmus test for “real” faith (in contrast to those who “just go to church on Sundays”), mysticism
is suspicious due to its historical associations with flaky Catholic hagiography (some
Evangelicals are hardwired to suspect mysticism beginning from The Great Awakening’s
unorthodox religious experiences that were then considered similar to the visions and
trances of the “Papist” saints). In the end, the critical consensus on mysticism is probably
best summarized by Bernard McGinn, a prolific scholar and authority on the subject who
writes that it “def[ies] conceptualization and verbalization” (McGinn 1994, p. xvi). The
oft-cited adjective “ineffable” is apt.

Among other snares that come with the field of mysticism are romanticism, idealism,
reading the mystics too early (a metric that is not always equal to age), and an inordinate
attraction to “bling” phenomenon such as visions and inner locutions. Each of these in their
own way truncates mysticism by glancing off of the asceticism of the hidden, painful, daily
walk. In fact, there is surprisingly little about Catholic mysticism that is “hallucinogenic”,
and our spiritual traditions warn against pursuing religious experiences for their own sake,
which can come from neurotic need, entitlement, and spiritual tourism. Mystics eventually
recognize these impulses within themselves and refuse to give them full throttle—for
neurosis and egocentric spiritual thrill-seeking are common propensities—and by the renunciation of these impulses they inaugurate processes that purify their intentionalty. They understand, at least in principle, that the object of their seeking ought to be God and only God, and that this unequivocal calling will always eventually require pain and spiritual darkness to wean them from the ego security and affective consolations of mystical illumination: “Moses’ vision of God began with a light. Afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness.” (Gregory of Nyssa, 335–395 CE.) It is the universal pattern for spiritual maturation. Mystics can go for years without any “tangible” spiritual experience of God.

The “effects” of Catholic mysticism are likewise different from the measurable benefits of psychedelic mysticism. The majority of mystics do not write about mysticism, and, for the most part, their lives are secreted from the spotlights of notoriety and posterity. The religious traditions, including the mystical tributaries of Catholicism, identify mystics as persons with highly developed states of consciousness with the quotidian, which is paradoxically experienced as extraordinarily iconic of transcendence. They possess a heroically persistent neuroplasticity, if I may put it that way, that is their continuing free response to God. It is this radical openness to God and self-transcendence that accelerates their psycho-spiritual development. They become mystics through continual revolutions of meaning with relationships, power, evil, ego, altruism, the poor (what we would call social justice), suffering, spirituality, the shadow, money, recognition systems, religious institutions, enemies, love, intimacy, and success. Sometimes their readings on these realities subject them to misunderstanding and alienation within their religious institutions and cultures.

With some notorious exceptions (such as Saints Margaret Mary Alacoque and Alphonse Liguori, the founder of the Redemptorists), the mystics are hardly mystopaths or wounded puppies but tend to be socially and psychologically well adjusted. Indeed, we would find some of them very attractive as persons.23 Their baseline is their free choice, made again and again and again to relinquish their horizons of self-knowledge, along with the ego’s hegemonic propulsions, and to shoulder their awareness of the widening discrepancy between who they know themselves to be and who they believe they are capable of becoming. Their ego becomes less self-absorbed and more centrifugal. By accepting the contradictions of their humanity in faith, love, and hope, and by not giving in to the paralysis of discouragement or despair, they painfully and gradually surrender themselves to God and come to discover a new self that is singular, unequivocal, and astoundingly authentic—a diamond in the rough of their still-fickle humanity.

Mystics become more themselves than most of us will ever dare, as someone once expressed the difficulty entailed with this deepest of human callings; “We’re born original, but many of us become photocopies.”24 No one “finally arrives” developmentally but they do come home to more of themselves through continuing self-transcendence. This is what Pope Gregory the Great (540–604) and a long line of eminent spiritual teachers have affirmed about the spiritual life (which is also a psychological reality) without reservation; that it is prolixitas mortis, “the act of dying, long drawn out”, or, to put it colloquially, learning how to die before we actually die. This universal pattern for growth is identified by Jesus in the Christian Gospels: “I tell you the solemn truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single kernel; but if it dies it produces a great harvest” (John 12:24).

But what defines the mystic above all is their free choice to live their personal narrative more from God’s self-revealing intimacies than from their interpersonal networks and religious systems; they are more or less willing to suffer in themselves the disparity of who they know themselves to be in the mirror of God’s love and, as an instance, their continuing need for other’s approval. They are not die-hard sycophants of the culture, and they know that one cannot be a man or woman of God and also be a poster child of the religious system. Though they are clearly conditioned by their culture and time they also
have some critical distance with it. A window into the inner freedom that comes from living the protracted renunciations of the False Self is provided by Merton:

To belong to God I have to belong to myself. I have to be alone—at least interiorly alone. This means the constant renewal of a decision. I cannot belong to people. None of me belongs to anybody but God. Absolute loneliness of the imagination, the memory, the will. My love for everybody is equal, neutral and clean. No exclusiveness. Simple and free as the sky because I love everybody and am possessed by nobody, not held, not bound. In order to be not remembered or even wanted I have to be a person that nobody knows. They can have Thomas Merton. He’s dead. Father Louis—he’s half dead too. For my part my name is that sky, those fence posts, and those cedar trees. I shall not reflect on who I am and I shall not say my identity is nobody’s business because that implies a truculence I don’t intend. It has no meaning. (Merton 1953, p. 253)

The mystical treaties of the giants of interiority such as Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Ignatius of Loyola—and Merton—have mapped the spiritual and mystical life in its myriad, complex, psychic and transcendental patterns, but all of them converge on the significance of the daily grind. The role and status of their mystical “trips” are negotiable, and, if anything, they undergo a purification of the idolatry of wanting to have a spiritual experience. The gold that they mine is not their mystical experience but the discovery of their hidden selves; “To belong to God I have to belong to myself”, as Merton puts it. They become singular persons who fill our imaginations with a different vision of what it means to be human.

6. The Displacement Trap

If proponents of psychedelic mysticism are unaware of some of these universal patterns in the lives of the Catholic mystics, phenomenological comparisons will inevitably slip into methodological displacement. With displacement, researchers and practitioners superimpose their hermeneutic framework onto material that is formally beyond their discipline’s reach and come away with conclusions that rupture the object of their inquiry from the pedigree in which it is customarily investigated.

This is a risk for scholars of every stripe (including this writer) when they venture onto a field that is not their home turf. But when the human and physical sciences countenance that strange landscape of faith and religion, and especially with anything pertaining to organized religion, an honest-to-goodness displacement paroxysm is triggered that is unparalleled by other interdisciplinary snags. With faith and theology, the problem of displacement is not as straightforward as mistakenly reading something through, say, an economic lens when the material requires a sociological analysis. Despite significant differences among the disciplines, they converge with a “corrective methodology” of unmasking the religious material’s true nature. Whether from the epistemological touchstones (and their associated worldviews) of empiricism, scientism, or philosophical materialism, through the disciplines of economics, sociology, biochemistry, or psychology, they correctly identify what theology and religious persons continue to misconstrue.

Science’s unmasking of theological claims permeates the history of the philosophy of science and receives a boost from the cultural biases about the alleged enmity between faith and science that are stealthily absorbed by our socialization. Hence, the unmasking by the Feuerbachian thesis that all theology is truly an unconsciously projected anthropology (juxtaposed with a conscientious person of faith who is sorting through their familial transferences onto God), that one’s claim to having an experience of God is in fact a misinterpretation from one’s brain chemistry (in contrast to accounts of reality that include and critically differentiate transcendence and the scientific method), and the classical Freudian doctrine that all religious faith is actually unconsciously projected psychological neuroses (differentiated from conscientious religious persons who are working through their “issues” and who more or less differentiate caricatures of God from a critical theology, psychological work, and their experience of God).
From one perspective, one can understand why a researcher or practitioner would not set out to systematically analyze the religious material; their uncontestable worldview removes the need to take those methodological steps. It would otherwise mean accepting theology on its own absurd metaphysical turf. When someone visits Disney’s Magic Kingdom theme park (forgive this poetic license) do they suspend their judgment that Mickey Mouse is an imaginary character? It would be ridiculous to fund a study of Mickey’s patterns of meaning making, his spiritual life, and the properties of his mystical experiences. For that matter, do scientists set motion-capture cameras in children’s bedrooms to disprove the Tooth Fairy’s existence? These illustrations are not too outlandish in a culture where people can equate faith in God with fictions such as Santa Claus, the Easter Rabbit, and an old, bearded man in the sky. Why investigate something or someone that does not exist? Why would they validate any of the methodologies associated with these data fictions?

The recognition of science’s displacements with theology by correction is not new. In the 19th century, Hegel witnessed the scientific community’s inclination to project its epistemological reference points onto religious objects because “… it first re-constructs religious statements… in terms of its own concept of reality…. [and] in so apprehending the object of belief as if it were its own object.”27 This is the DNA of the science’s methodological displacement with faith and theology; decoding the religious object with the legitimate empirical epistemology. Hegel also maintained that the laws of human behaviour culled by the sciences were overstepping their epistemological boundaries: the “methodical autonomy of empirical research was often (mis)interpreted as implying that the ‘laws of Nature represent something ultimate.’… [claiming] that any statement for which no empirical evidence could be provided had to be rejected as un-warranted.”28 Today as then, the science’s methodological displacements with faith and theology are leveraged by the premise of the superior, hegemonic, bird’s-eye worldview that negates a methodical investigation of religious material. As long as this pattern continues, theology and science are destined to be incommensurate.

Perhaps the impasse can be overturned with a grandfather clause: if scientific method cannot and ought not grasp Transcendent categories, scientists as human beings are not similarly constrained. The task that remains for them is a willingness to investigate the internal properties of the religious component. How this might unfold is demonstrated in the next section.

7. An Illustration of Displacement in Mysticism: Ecstasy or Orgasm?

It may surprise the reader that some Catholic mystics deploy erotic imagery to describe some of their experiences of God. Some commentators go so far as to explain spiritual ecstasy, a rare mystical phenomenon, as an actual orgasm. For proof, they might point to the ecstatic facial expressions depicted in religious art, such as Bernini’s famous Ecstasy of St. Teresa. To be fair, the pedagogical intent behind the allusion underscores the importance of bodily/sexual and spiritual/religious integration. But the question remains: do the mystic’s erotic descriptions of their experiences of God correspond with the commentator’s explanations of them?

Not really. We cannot presume that the mystic’s spicy imagery conforms with the common denominator of our sexual experience. Spiritual ecstasy is not tantamount to sexual pleasure though the descriptive images can be identical. Pain and pleasure also register similar facial expressions—and the descriptions of the respective faces would match—but the explanations for each obviously diverge. Religious ecstasy and sexual orgasm are analogous not by the (for us) highly conspicuous property of pleasure but by the less conspicuous property (again—for us) of ego displacement. This simple cognitive act of differentiation of the properties internal to the mystic’s experience is the first step to mitigating displacement.

Analogies marshal shared properties, but they also preserve differences. And it is not just the major elements of “A” and “B” but also “a” and “b” that seem to be minor, secondary, or “accidental” properties that can be disproportionately highlighted, while we
minimize, suppress, disregard, or overlook discordant properties that are actually closer to the core of the experience. These kinds of oversights distort the overall meaning of an experience because by the absence of earnest investigation it is prematurely forced to align with its counter-phenomenon. This is significant for discussions about psychedelics, spirituality, and mysticism. Mistakenly minimizing the essential property from a lack of methodological engagement (which in the case of erotic language happens to be the mystic’s ego displacement) while amplifying the minor one (the facial register of pleasure which “must” be an orgasm) is avoided only by investigating the internal properties of an experience, including its meanings, and then working out a scale or hierarchy of ostensibly parallel properties within it and with another experience.

Tight analogies can open new conversations; shoddy ones will undermine them, and for someone with little understanding of theology, these methodological steps are hard to find. A sexologist who is unfamiliar with Catholic theology and who does not accept its epistemology would have a displacement heyday with some of the mystic’s erotic descriptions.

So, the term “mysticism” is shared by multiple disciplines and understandably sparks a curiosity about phenomenon that bear a strong family resemblance, but do they share essential properties? Are the paired phenomena only apparently related? Do those properties include subjective (but not subjectivist) and collective (but not uncritical) meaning? Has the researcher methodically worked through a hierarchy of properties internal to the matched experiences, and if so, what is the logic of their correspondences? Have they erroneously prioritized a minor property in one experience, or have they minimized or overlooked an essential one in the other? But again, if the final judgment on the theological data is determined by the unmasking corrective of empiricism, biologism, and philosophical materialism, then no investigation of those internal properties is required. One need not study Mickey’s mystical experiences. Consequently, “sacrament” and “mysticism” become disenfranchised from their moorings and function more as metaphors and typologies that are abstractions that lose sight of some of their respective internal properties, and this loss can be critical.

The risk with these sorts of comparisons (analogies and typologies) between religious experiences is that they can be “cheats”. One does not become a mystic via the highest tiers of abstraction but by yielding to the concrete disciplines of a Sacred Tradition. Transformation comes from within a Tradition and not outside of it with the luxury of cherry picking, where the ego is free to play out its masterful stonewalling strategies. This does not mean that one adopts an uncritical relationship with their Tradition; on the contrary, it is for good reason that they are called “Wisdom Traditions”. One way to understand this term is that we need wisdom to know what to take from a Tradition. People who are transformed by their religious traditions also undergo a transformation of the meaning of its content. Spiritual practices can otherwise be pious personas that leave the self bereft of change. As someone once quipped, “the brighter the halo, the smellier the feet”. Strip away the mystic’s visions and the psychedelic mystical trips, we should see underlying ascetical practices that leverage the “False Self’s” (Merton) abdication that allows a new identity to arise.

The devil really is in the details; we must nail our feet to “one way” though there are many that are open to the human family. We must eventually discover and yield to “A Way” that is stronger than our imperial, promiscuous ego. How could a Buddhist and Catholic otherwise engage in constructive interreligious dialogue? Or a Catholic with a psychedelic practitioner? Could they wisely represent their respective Traditions? This is why a Buddhist and Catholic mystic can feel more resonance with each other than both might find with members of their own faith communities. In their earlier years, both were probably more tribal and generally kept to their own. At the beginning of their faith pilgrimage, it was more important what they believed, which was partially defined over and against others, than who they were. Yet cracks in the illusion eventually appeared within themselves and within their religious circles, and they discerningly yielded the
discovery of these illusions to their Tradition’s feet-on-the-ground asceticisms and spiritual practices. They accepted the painful psychological work that accompanies these practices which gave mass and momentum to their transformation.

So, if one is willing to move past the Disney threshold, an investigation into the inner properties of Catholic mystical experience would necessarily lean on the expertise of sound theological scholarship. Among these sources could be the eminent Bernard McGinn or Evelyn Underhill, the latter being one of the 20th century’s most insightful scholars of mysticism, who in her day recognized the imposition of the then-prevailing cultural ethos onto erotic mystical prose. She recognized that her contemporaries failed to differentiate the inner world of meaning in mystical phenomenon (what transpires between God and the person) from what can be described by an observer. Her contemporary’s had domesticated spiritual ecstasy with an explanation that suited their own framework (“St. Teresa is having an orgasm”), an explanation that persists to this day. In her esteemed classic, Mysticism, she writes:

The great saints who elaborated and adopted this [erotic] symbolism, applying it to their pure and ardent passion for the Absolute, were destitute of the prurient imagination which their modern commentators too often possess. They were essentially pure of heart; and when they “saw God” they were so far from confusing that unearthly vision with the products of morbid sexuality, that the dangerous nature of the imagery which they employed did not occur to them. They knew by experience the unique nature of love: and no one can know about it in any other way. . . . In the place of that “sensuous imagery” which is so often and so earnestly deplored by those who hardly have a nodding acquaintance with the writings of the saints, we find images which indeed have once been sensuous, which are . . . carried up, transmuted, and endowed with a radiant purity, an intense and spiritual life. (Underhill [1911] 1993, p. 137)

It is ironic that some saint-mystics were unwittingly instigating displacement for their eventual readers because, as Underhill underscores, they were unaware of the “dangerous nature of the imagery which they employed”. It never dawned on them, which perhaps is a quality of their humility, that they had been uncommonly transformed by unceasing iterations of meaning through their heroic “neuroplasticity” with self-identity, weakness, love, the poor, power, service, suffering, money, recognition systems, enemies, religious institutions, success—and sexuality. For McGinn, this is the heart of Christian mysticism; an “awareness of God’s presence which, by definition, transcends description and results in a transformation of the subject who receives it.” (McGinn 1994, p. 26).

8. Description or Explanation?

Displacement can be averted when the researcher distinguishes the cognitive operations that describe an experience from those that explain it. A description taps into a reservoir of sanctioned methods that are the “discipline” of a Discipline. It is why scientists practice an asceticism with their methodologies. In principle, description happens “before” the data are explained, which is not as much a sequential order as a cognitive distanciation, whether it be aesthetic or emotional. The description does not remain solipsistic or atomized. The researcher makes judgments about the descriptions of data with explanations that connect it to a constellation of meaning such as its implications, other studies, and the need for further research. One way to avoid confusion with these different sets of cognitive operations is being vigilant for the impulse to draw connections between phenomenon based solely on undiscriminating word-association, stream of consciousness corollaries, and an awareness that the inner properties of one experience can be analogous to another, but holding out on a final judgment until the methodical investigation concludes.

In this regard, I am struck by Richards’ care with his description of the properties of mystical consciousness as “ineffability, unity, intuitive knowledge, transcendence of time and space, sacredness and profoundly positive mood” (Richards 2008, p. 195). What is so telling is how far he takes his description. Richards is rightly cautious about linking his
description of these mystical properties with the explanation of their origin in God or with a corrective methodology. But this strategic restraint is not practiced by all his peers.

Interestingly, theologians would readily accept Richards’ description at face value but would arrive at a different explanation if the same description came from a Catholic mystic. With psychedelics and theology, methodological displacement occurs when a researcher unknowingly steps from description into explanation (and vice versa) with a description of a psychic phenomenon and explaining it as an experience of God, a psychology of religion and speaking about God, psyche and spirit, a psychological projection and an Encounter, feelings, aesthetics, and ego states and a metaphysics/ontology, and a psychology of religion from Transcendent spirituality.

Theologians are generally much better equipped to engage the social and physical sciences than scientists are with theology—if I may be so bold. A theologian’s research routinely distinguishes between description and explanation across the disciplines and, more crucially, recognizes their alternating epistemologies. As an instance, theologians take insights from a variety of psychological schools as diagnostic tools for faith and moral development, and we critically engage the mechanisms of ego, superego, persona, and the id. However, we do not agree with Freud’s explanation that all religious faith is rooted in unconscious neurotic need. Yes, religious persons can tragically lack self-knowledge and be neurotic beyond words. But a well-formed Christian clergyperson recognizes when a congregant needs a psychologist and not spiritual counsel, or when someone is dodging a psychological issue with escapist religious practices. Clergy and theologians are aware of the overlap of psychological and spiritual phenomena, including extraordinary events such as visions which share some properties with the psychotic spectrum. As a biographer of the mystic Simone Weil expresses, “He who believes in God is in danger of [an] illusion—that of attributing to grace what is simply an essentially mechanical effect of nature” (Weil [1947] 1999, p. 30).

Since theology is related to everything that concerns human beings—everything—theologians have more than a passing acquaintance with the methods and themes of economics, psychology, the physical sciences, and politics as they operate at their deeper layers. Some theologians are card-carrying psychologists, astronomers, physicists and cosmonologists, geneticists, physicians and biologists, sociologists and anthropologists, political scientists, philosophers, and economists—and some of them reciprocate between their scientific guilds and theology. It is paradoxical, therefore, that the theologian’s professional formation is one reason why they might be underrepresented in dialogue around psychedelics and mysticism. They are among the first to recognize methodological displacement when it occurs because their research routinely takes them across disciplinary and epistemological borders. They know when and how to shift gears.

Theologians and theologically tuned Christians and Catholics also wonder, quite frankly, how psychedelic communities can borrow religious terminology to describe something that the sciences cannot—and continue to use these concepts without theological method and the wisdom of a Sacred Tradition, whatever that might happen to be. If this is a new moment for Western religious consciousness, how can it be so bereft of religion and the critical apparatus of a specialized discipline?

9. Conclusions: Risking Some Provocations

A relatively muted observation akin to Hegel’s critique of the scientific community of his day, which, as a reminder, was not a critique of the scientific method but of those who applied it hegemonically, was recently offered by Thomas Hertog, a physicist and collaborator with the late Stephen Hawking. He remarked that Hawking underwent a “paradigm crisis” with A Brief History of Time because, as he put it, the great physicist theorized a “perspective [on all of reality] from the outside”. (My hope is that the absurdity of this boundary will someday dawn on us with a cultural shift no less significant than Galileo’s eventual impact.) Hertog also pondered what this “crisis” could mean for the physical sciences: “Maybe there are limits to science…” he considered, “[that] leaves room
for some mystery.” (Hughes 2023). Now, what Hertog exactly meant by “mystery” is to some extent nebulous, but his recognition of the need for a new paradigm in science is an astonishing admission. For theology, mystery does not mean that something is perpetually beyond intelligibility or that it is only a matter of time that what is now unknown will be completely understood. When I drive past a remote lake, what lies at its bottom is a mystery to me. But with investigation, that unknown can be conclusively established. The richer connotation for mystery is a vector of inquiry where the momentum of intelligibility continues to unfold—in other words, insight and understanding do occur—but the inquiry never arrives at the final question and the end of wonder. In its better moments, this is the territory of the world’s religions—and the dynamism of personal faith. God is Mystery, and the mystics are God’s best cartographers.

In his later years, Karl Rahner, one of the 20th century’s greatest Catholic theologians, made the now-famous prognostication that “the Christian of the future will be a mystic, or he or she will not exist at all.” For many, his presage has been a canary in the mine. People presumed that this would come to pass because the culture would no longer sustain Christian faith. What we could not foresee was that the need for mysticism would also be pressing with the loss of our religious institution’s moral credibility that today seem to be falling “like a house of cards”, as Pope Francis warned about the future of the Catholic Church in the early months of his pontificate.

It is beyond obvious that people cannot look to the culture to integrate the transcendental functions of faith. The Catholic philosopher Louis Dupré describes how the conditions for belief in the West have passed into a new cultural reality, even if there are traces of the old order of Christendom: “To survive as a genuine believer, the Christian must now personally integrate what tradition did in the past” (Dupré 1997). For both Rahner and Dupré, and for too many to mention here, having religious faith demands that one responsibly appropriate and live from the authority of one’s inner experience of God and not its institutional, familial, or ethnic buttresses. Aside from the therapeutic potential for psychedelics, living from the authority of inner experience has enormous appeal for psychedelic spiritual seekers and, as I have argued, is one of the chief attributes of the Catholic mystics. Could the implications and meaning of the authority of “inner experience” be common ground for dialogue?

This is not to say that dialogue between theology and psychedelics is clear of stumbling stones. Most theologians would share Merton’s now well-known misgivings about psychedelic mysticism that he laid out in his correspondences with Huxley in the salad days of psychedelic experimentation. Merton’s objection then—as it is for Christians today—is that psychedelics seem to compel the mystical experience. This objection cannot be overstated, even with the qualification that at the commencement of the trip a mystical experience is not summoned at will. The reason for this misgiving lies with a fundamental tenet of the Christian theology of grace; God is absolutely sovereign of human volition and any mediating form including the agencies of prayer (and, by inference, psychedelics). This tenet is dramatically articulated by the Protestant theologian H. Richard Niebuhr: “[we] can only prepare receptive hearts; [we] cannot force the gift. And the gift may come to a thief on the cross before it is extended to the righteous citizen or the ascetic monk” (Niebuhr [1951] 2001, pp. 134–35).

Richards picks up on the gravity of this lynchpin in the theology of grace when he remarks that “As religious scholars are right to remind us, such sacred events always are experienced as gifts received and never as feats of the ego to be attained” (Richards 2008, p. 195). Frankly, in a culture of religious illiteracy, the proposition that through psychedelics God can be “pulled” out of the Mystery that is God’s ontology strikes religious folk as nonsensical.

This misgiving is not extended to Indigenous religious practices because people are organically connected to a Sacred Tradition that grounds them in a way of life and contextualizes their psychedelic use. Jung once reflected on his time with the Pueblo Indians and prefaced his encounter with a crucial observation: “We always require an outside point
to stand on, in order to apply the lever of criticism” (Jung [1961] 1989, p. 246). His time with the Indigenous People was, in part, his strategy to distanciate from his European perspective. Say what you will, by wisely nailing one’s feet to a Sacred or Wisdom Tradition one gains some leveraging distance with their culture—and with the psychedelic trip. By contrast, there are aspects of the psychedelic movement in the West that come across as a self-styled religion flowing exclusively from the postmodern secularist worldviews with “a new cohort of secular priests” (Glausser 2018, p. 4).

There doubtless will be Christians who will avail themselves of the nontherapeutic use of psychedelics despite the official moral stance of their religious institutions. Taking a psychedelic is not necessarily a faith commitment. It seems to me, however, that the clearer the borders between types of mysticism and further clarification with what people claim is transpiring, the more confident religious people could feel in crossing them. Sadly, and far from forwarding their cause, some Christian clergy with their boots in the psychedelic field have been grafting psychedelic mysticism onto the Christian mystical traditions with bombastic assertions that it will “revolutionize” Christianity. This is not the pattern of renewal in the history of Christianity, and to be honest, these sorts of dispatches repel their co-religionists and particularly the leaders of their faith communities. There are always outlier clergy who incur marginalization not because they are cutting-edge, prophetic, or visionaries, but because they are not always knowledgeable and judicious with their Sacred Traditions. Does the integration of the content of some of their trips with their Traditions hinge exclusively on what happens in the trip, or is there a deeper spiritual and psychological maturity that is moving them forward without the trip’s spiritual experience—even without one for years? This is the experience of Catholic mystics. Perhaps Christian psychedelic practitioners ought to adopt Saint Paul’s admonition: “So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. . . The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God” (Romans 14: 16, 22a).

The involvement of religious people with psychedelics raises other “leveraging” questions which concern not only inquiring and curious Christians but, in a roundabout way, the wellbeing of the psychedelic communities. Are the emerging psychedelic communities doppelgangers of the academy’s occasional diffidence or even contempt for organized religion? Will explorers, seekers, and curious visitors meet seasoned Elders and communities of wisdom that understand the universal spiritual patterns of new life through dying, the archetypal wildernesses, the Trickster and self-deception, the need to discern the progenitors of these spiritual experiences, love for others, forgiveness, wisdom with weakness and the importance of failing, the machinations of the ego, and suffering oneself into transformation? These questions can be posed to Christian communities, by the way. Steinbock reminds us that mystical awareness has a cost. In his work on the phenomenology of comparative mysticism, he offers a sobering reminder to the reader:

... we fail to appreciate the radical nature of self-abandonment, the moral rigor required for spiritual and material nonattachment, the unique demands placed on a life oriented in this way (and not just occasionally) that affords little time for squander or pause—and all this without any guarantee that something will come of it. (Steinbock 2009, p. 26)

Despite these concerns, and apart from its therapeutic potential, something is happening with psychedelics that is evidenced in changed lives. Whether this is a result of self-transcendence or an encounter with transcendence is not just another question but is the question for dialogue between psychedelic and Catholic mysticisms. Meanwhile, we are free to label our counterpart as naïve, deluded, and out to lunch, but people on both sides of an epistemological divide are experiencing something that belies the other’s frameworks. We must grapple with these questions not in the isolation of our separate echo-chambers but in mutually respectful forums for dialogue.

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Theologians are accused of having a “willful ignorance of reality” as “a new round” or a “re-enactment of the age-old pattern in
13

Some maintain that LSD and psilocybin treatment for anxiety and depression for terminally ill cancer patients is analogous to the
12

On 20 September 1966, Sullivan (2007, p. 242). In respect to childhood trauma, the American comedian Bill Burr in a Netflix special Live at Red Rocks
11

The principles and rights of academic freedom are practiced and respected in Catholic universities with extenuating conditions to
10

For example, Glaz states that “Natural ecstasy is often linked with using psychedelic substances, techniques manipulating the
9

Merton writes: “Although the ego is still extant as the observer who beholds the vision, it subsequently may become incorporated
8

See (Ko et al. 2022, pp. 1–12; Kangaslampi 2023). As is to be expected, the scientific research on psychedelic mysticism uses
7

Merton takes the door metaphor in a direction that differs significantly from Huxley’s conceptualization. Merton writes: “The
door without sign, without indicator, without information. Not particularized. Hence no one can say of it ‘This is it! This is the
door.’ It is not recognizable as a door. It is not led up to by other things pointing to it: ‘We are not it but that is it—the door.’ No signs
saying ‘Exit.’ No use looking for indications. Any door with a sign on it, any door that proclaims itself to be a door, is not the
door. But do not look for a sign saying ‘Not-door.’ Or even ‘No Exit.’” (Merton 1968).
6

It is futile to look for an autonomous “soul” that would infer God’s existence and the perpetuation of life after death (a notion
5

(Ko et al. 2022, p. 9). Whether this mechanism is meaning making or meaning finding will not be pursued here.
4

Notes

1 Unless stated otherwise, “psychedelics” is the umbrella for psilocybin, LSD, ayahuasca, mescaline, MDMA, ketamine, etc.
2 It is not feasible to list the extensive studies on these clinical trials, and it is not my intention nor my competence to venture into
an analysis of the science, though I cite from many of these studies in the body of this article. For studies on psychedelics and
medicine, please see The New England Journal of Medicine, Journal of Psychedelic Studies, Journal of Psychedelic Drugs, and
Psychedelic Medicine.
3 Sullivan (2007, p. 242). In respect to childhood trauma, the American comedian Bill Burr in a Netflix special Live at Red Rocks
(USA, 2022) relates his recent trip with magic mushrooms in a nonclinical environment. As he tells it, the trip turns into a yawning
abyss of loneliness and despair, but he manages to turn the enveloping darkness into an insight about his early childhood trauma.
At the beginning of his account the viewer can feel the ambiguity of the trip ever coming to a positive outcome even though he
prefaces his story by saying “I am a changed person”. It could be Burr’s not inconsiderable ego strength that saw him through,
but overall, his account is by no means a glowing endorsement for psychedelics. It is a perfect example of “nightmarish images
we sought to flee since we were kids”.
4 (McCarthy 2023, p. 34). As a point of clarification, Catholic Tradition is closer to a collective memory of wisdom than it is a
preservation of pat answers. It is somewhat analogous to Knowledge Keepers and Elders in Indigenous communities.
5 (Lorenz 2022). The blog was printed in America, one of the leading English language Catholic magazines.
6 (Ko et al. 2022, p. 9). Whether this mechanism is meaning making or meaning finding will not be pursued here.
7 Merton takes the door metaphor in a direction that differs significantly from Huxley’s conceptualization. Merton writes: “The
door without sign, without indicator, without information. Not particularized. Hence no one can say of it ‘This is it! This is the
door.’ It is not recognizable as a door. It is not led up to by other things pointing to it: ‘We are not it but that is it—the door.’ No signs
saying ‘Exit.’ No use looking for indications. Any door with a sign on it, any door that proclaims itself to be a door, is not the
door. But do not look for a sign saying ‘Not-door.’ Or even ‘No Exit.’” (Merton 1968).
8 See (Ko et al. 2022, pp. 1–12; Kangaslampi 2023). As is to be expected, the scientific research on psychedelic mysticism uses
empirical methods such as the Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ).
9 Richards writes: “Although the ego is still extant as the observer who beholds the vision, it subsequently may become incorporated
and transcended in a unitive state, for which most scholars in the psychology of religion today would reserve the word ‘mystical’.
(Richards 2008, p. 192).
10 For example, Glaz states that “Natural ecstasy is often linked with using psychedelic substances, techniques manipulating the
human psyche.” in Stanislas Glaz (2014, p. 1149). Bradley Armout Garb and Mitchell Earleywine make a similar point and
note the paradox of the therapeutically beneficial effects of mystical experiences that are tracked by clinical studies and their
epistemological limitations with mysticism. They propose the term “mystical fictionalism”, a term that honors the person’s
subjectivity and respects the limits of empiricism. See (Armout Garb and Earleywine 2022, p. 48).
11 The principles and rights of academic freedom are practiced and respected in Catholic universities with extenuating conditions to
those principles. These will not be discussed here.
12 It is futile to look for an autonomous “soul” that would infer God’s existence and the perpetuation of life after death (a notion
that is derived from Aristotle). Christianity borrows its understanding of soul from its Hebrew roots; namely, that ontological
dimension of humanity that is “activated” or “proved” to exist not as an independent entity but as subjectivity experiencing
oneself being grasped by God.
13 “A possible limitation of the hypothesis [the positive therapeutic effects of psychedelic mystical experiences] is the controversy
among scientists regarding the metaphysical nature of mystical experience”. (Ko et al. 2022, p. 9).
14 On 20 September 1966, The New York Times reported that Timothy Leary applied the term “sacrament” to psychedelics with an
appeal for all the rights afforded to a recognized religion.
15 Some maintain that LSD and psilocybin treatment for anxiety and depression for terminally ill cancer patients is analogous to the
Catholic sacrament of the sick, or “extreme unction” (previously known as the Last Rites). Wayne Glausser writes: “The new
therapy [LSD and psilocybin] shares both the high purposes of the old last rites and some of the problems that have surrounded it... A secular counterpart of extreme unction has emerged within the world of psychedelic drug research.” (Glausser 2018, p. 2).
Throughout the chapter the author accentuates the analogical properties of the sacrament of the sick with the administration
of psychedelics for those who are dying. He does equivocate the sacrament’s efficacy and psychedelics as a “pseudo spiritual
coercion”. (p. 3).
16 Theologians are accused of having a “willful ignorance of reality” as “a new round” or a “re-enactment of the age-old pattern in
the conflict between science and religion.” (Smith 1964) cited by (Cole-Turner 2022, p. 1).
Philosopher Charles Taylor has a different take on the shifting cultural foundations at the time: “The new interest in nature was not a step outside of a religious outlook, even partially; it was a mutation within this outlook. The straight path account of modern secularity can’t be sustained. . . . That the autonomy of nature eventually. . . . came to serve as grist to the mill of exclusive humanism is clearly true. That establishing it was already a step in that direction is profoundly false. This move had a quite different meaning at the time, and in other circumstances might never have come to have the meaning that it bears for unbelievers today.” (Taylor 2007, p. 95).

One fascinating voice from the protesting chorus is Niccolo Machiavelli, who in 1517 at the cusp of what would become The Reformation, made this unusual prognostication: “And certainly, if the Christian religion had from the beginning had been maintained according to the principles of its founder, the Christian states and republics would have been much more united and happy than what they are. Nor can there be a greater proof of its decadence than to witness the fact that the nearer people are to the Church of Rome, which is the head of our religion, the less religious are they. And whoever examines the principles upon which that religion is founded and sees how widely different from those principles its present practice and application are, will judge that her ruin or chastisement is near at hand.” Book I, Chapter 12 in (Machiavelli 1992, p. 99). One could also mention the reforming efforts of prominent Catholic intellectuals such as Erasmus of Rotterdam.

In reference to (Sander and Zijlman 2021) and (Jylkka 2021) scientific “instruments place specific interpretation on the subject’s experience and are not sufficiently secular, and therefore more neutral instruments are needed. Alternately, others critique Sanders and Zijlman for “solely valuing biological experience as reductionist”. (Ko et al. 2022, p. 2).

In (Richards 2008, p. 192). This was one of Merton’s deepest struggles, who wrote at the bequest of his religious superiors. His best-selling autobiography The Seven Story Mountain (1948) brought him fame that did not sit well with his sense of vocation as a Trappist monk. The absurdity of that contradiction never left him, but he learned to accept it.


Huxley makes an interesting observation on the apparent paucity of mystical consciousness: “... spontaneous experiences of a premystical or fully mystical nature [are rare]; still fewer have been willing to undergo the psychological disciplines which prepare an insulated individual for this kind of self-transcendence”. (Huxley 1958).

“Great ecclesiastical mystics... were people who worked well in social life, [and] had the courage to live in accordance with their vocation. ... Their experiences contributed to accelerated personality development. All this would not have been possible had their experience had a psychotic background.” Glaz (2014, p. 1147). Glaz is quoting from (Nowak 2000, p. 174).


This metaphor for growth pivots on some kind of self-emptying—kenosis in theological parlance. But what is “it” that must die to make room for growth? Our plans? Our desires? Our hopes? Our dignity? Our will? The Self? And what does this mean for people with an already impoverished or crushed sense of personal agency? How does this translate for someone with depression? An idealistic adolescent? Or the victim of systemic evil? It is helpful here to employ psychological distinctions such as the range of ego conditions (weak, inflated, and somnambulism) and persona (too thick, too thin, and unconscious) that can constitute a false self construct. This false self, or inauthenticity, is what needs to die. Indeed, without these differentiations from psychology, individuals can translate Jesus’ teaching into catastrophic strategies for growth.

As was customary at the time for his monastic order, “Fr. Louis” was the name given to Merton upon his ordination to the priesthood in 1949.

(Nagl-Docekal 2012, p. 164); Quoting from (Hegel 1967, p. 571).


The same issue came up recently for Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez, the Prefect for the Vatican’s Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, arguably the Vatican’s most prominent administrative wing. In an academic work written in his younger years, he identified the Catholic mystic’s sensuous religious experiences with a couple’s experience of orgasm. He later regretted the comparison and lamented “a book of my youth that I certainly would not write now”. See (McLellan 2024).

The distinction between description and explanation touches on the is/ought and subject-object dichotomies that I will not pursue here. For more on the distinction between description and explanation, see (Doran 1997).

The Pope stated in an America interview that “We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel. The proposal of the Gospel must be more simple, profound, radiant. It is from this proposition that the moral consequences then flow.” (Spadaro 2013).

References