

2013

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Recommended Citation

Rager, Joshua (2013) "Peyote and the Psychedelics: 20th Century Perceptions of the Religious Use of Psychoactive Substances," *Denison Journal of Religion*: Vol. 12 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol12/iss1/3>

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Peyote and the Psychedelics: 20th Century Perceptions of the Religious Use of Psychoactive Substances

Joshua Rager

When drugs are mentioned in the context of religious experience, the two most publicly and culturally salient are often peyote and the psychedelics—LSD and magic mushrooms. Despite their relationship by hallucinogenic association in the popular culture (as well as the DEA's), Peyote and psychedelic drugs are seemingly divorced on the basis of cultural and religious origins and uses. In light of this, the guiding question of this paper is what connection at all can be made between the Peyote faith that has been cited by some as having been practiced as long as 10,000 years and the flash-in-the-pan spiritual-religious movement of psilocybin, LSD, and the psychedelics in the 1960s? As Robert Fuller points out in his book *Stairways to Heaven: Drug Use in American Religious History*, the biggest concern for and attack on the religious use of drug-induced ecstasies is four-fold: (1) They “prompt individuals to confuse altered physiology with profound insight into truth,” (2) “their so-called insights fail to measure up to basic philosophical and scientific standards for establishing truth,” (3) “altered states might be understood as projections of the social or psychological realities underlying an individual’s conscious experience of the world,” and (4) “mystical ecstasies are just as determined by their cultural settings as any other experience.”¹ In addressing the question I have asked, the conclusion I have arrived at adds to Fuller’s list. The attacks and concerns of drug use in religious contexts I will argue are, however, much less scientific than Fuller’s and more visceral—harbored in cultural subjectivity and fear. The use of peyote and psychedelics by Native Americans and counterculturalists, respectively, has been fearfully perceived by the American government and the larger population as a “slippery slope.” But this “slippery slope” encapsulates more than popular notions of the consequences of drugs—the fear of these substances, especially when used in religious contexts, is that they manifest into hedonistic immorality, dropping out of institutionalized mainline religion, and anarchy where individual conscience trumps a greater good.

¹ Robert C. Fuller, *Stairways to Heaven: Drugs in American Religious History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 167,169,171,173.

Peyote as the Sacrament

"Tosamah, orator, physician, Priest of the Sun, son of Hummingbird, spoke: 'Peyote is a small, spineless, carrot-shaped cactus growing in the Rio Grande Valley and southward. It contains nine narcotic alkaloids of the isoquinoline series, some of them strychnine-like in physiological action, the rest morphine-like. Physiologically, the salient characteristic of peyote is its production of visual hallucinations or color visions, as well as kinesthetic, olfactory, and auditory derangements.' Or, to put it another way, that little old wooly booger turns you on like a light, man. Daddy peyote is the vegetal representation of the sun."

-N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*

Dating the exact time Peyote ceremonies were first conducted in the United States is a matter of debate among scholars studying Native American traditions. Robert Fuller in his survey of drug use in American religious history suggests that "Prior to 1890, peyote was rarely used north of the Rio Grande. Although peyote was common in Mexico, only five or six tribes inhabiting lands that are now within the borders of the United States used peyote in religious rituals."² Other scholars are hesitant to put an exact date on the diffusion of the ritual into Native American practice. One as such is Carolyn Long who places the start at the "end of the nineteenth century" when it became a more peaceful option to other Native movements such as the Ghost Dance and direct militant opposition that culminated at Wounded Knee.³ In contrast to these attempts, or lack of one, Thomas Maroukis notes, "In a sense it is inaccurate to ask when Peyote spread into the United States. When this region was annexed in the 1840s, Peyote usage was already several centuries old."⁴ What is most often investigated and relatively agreed upon is that from the time the peyote ritual was first documented by James Mooney in 1891, the peyote religion spread widely and quickly as Native American tribes became more in contact with one another in the New Indian territory and the Mexican tribes who practiced it.⁵ Fuller concurs in a similar fashion that "the most important factor in this northward migration of peyote rites was the systematic segregation of Indians onto government reservations."⁶ Fuller also suggests, in addition to his pragmatic rationale, that the spread of the peyote faith may be accounted for by

² *Ibid.*, 28.

³ Carolyn Long, *Religious Free and Indian Rights: The Case of Oregon v. Smith* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 8-9.

⁴ Thomas Maroukis, *The Peyote Road: Religious Freedom and the Native American Church* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 21.

⁵ Long, *Religious Free and Indian Rights*, 9.

⁶ Fuller, *Stairways to Heaven*, 40.

important characteristics of Native American religion. While there should be great hesitation to generalize about Native American religion and cultural, Fuller gleans that Native religions have two important beliefs: “belief in the existence of a supernatural world and belief that this supernatural world expressed itself in various forms of supernatural power.”⁷ Fuller claims that these beliefs provide reasons as to why American Indian societies cherish so immensely visions and other states of altered consciousness thus attributing to Native Americans a “religious complex that gave sacred meaning to botanical substances capable of assisting individuals in their quest for visionary contact with the spirit world.”⁸

Other reasons for the spread of the peyote faith have been proposed but come out of its institutionalization. The Native American Church was established in 1918 as the first fully incorporated group with a clear articulation of Peyote as a sacrament. While the NAC was “neither the first Peyote organization nor the first to incorporate...it was the first to publicly proclaim Peyote as a sacrament,” and because of this establishment and proclamation, it also became a means of the Peyote faith’s propagation.⁹ Maroukis cites three additional reasons why the Peyote faith spread so rapidly and widely: “First, church members believed in Peyote as a ‘medicine.’...A second reason for the rapid expansion of Peyotism is that people saw it as an indigenous American Indian faith, rather than a new phenomenon. Finally, Peyotism offered its adherents an ethical system to follow.”¹⁰ These reasons appear to give a deeper, perhaps more accurate meaning to the spread of the Peyote faith than just a case of rubbing elbows with new native cultures. The accuracy of Maroukis’ statements may be seen in their resonance with Native American descriptions of how integral the peyote ritual and the NAC lifestyle are and have become to the American Indian way of life, treatment, and sense of history. In a 1999 interview conducted by historian of world religions, Huston Smith, with Frank Dayish Jr., then the President of the NAC, Smith remarked on the peyote faith to Dayish that “the sustainment of your life was coming from this ancient form of worship, and it would be like *death to live without your religion*,” and Dayish concurred, “*That’s absolutely right, Huston.*”¹¹ This interaction gives insight into how essential and life-giving the ritual is presently for the Native American Church and thus lends itself to be better described by Maroukis explanations. The institutionalization helped to better connect the Native Americans, especially in

7 Ibid., 20.

8 Ibid.

9 Maroukis, *The Peyote Road*, 46.

10 Ibid., 9.

11 Huston Smith and Phil Cousineau, *A Seat at the Table: Huston Smith in Conversation with Native Americans on Religious Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 107.

the practice of Peyotism because it gave the ritual a certain uniformity where any NAC member could attend any Peyote ceremony and he or she would be familiar with the rite.¹² This universal structure would also seem to give the Peyote faith a degree of credibility from the outsider's examination. What is also important here for this study is that the Peyote faith did become institutionalized, but in the eyes of government agencies and other sectarian groups, namely Christian missionaries, it was the wrong kind of institution—perhaps an even more threatening and fear-invoking enterprise in that the Native Americans and particularly their religion now had the organization for mobilization and longevity.

Out of this observation, the Peyote faith's expansive spread did not go unopposed. As soon as reports about the spread of Peyotism reached the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the early 20th century, the BIA began to put in motion measures for prohibiting the use of Peyote by reservation Natives. Surprisingly, their efforts to get governmental support were fruitless. The BIA's petition to get the Customs Office to cease peyote importation from Mexico fell through as did attempts to get Peyote listed as an illegal substance on Congress' Harrison Narcotic Act of 1914. In a series of bills put forth to Congress in 1916, 1917, and 1918, the BIA with support from other groups such as the National Indian Association, Indian Rights Association, Society of American Indians, and Native American Student Conference attempted to get legislation to "save the Indian" from the Peyote faith that appeared to threaten the Natives' likelihood of becoming civilized and Christianized.¹³ The perception was also "that the use of Peyote was cloaked in a religious context as an excuse for taking drugs and avoiding legal sanctions."¹⁴ Despite the backing of the BIA's motions by these groups, the anti-Peyote legislations never passed and in fact, when reservation arrests were made, courts and even the BIA had to dismiss or release the Peyote possessors as no laws were officially being broken. It appears in this early context then that the BIA's fear of the spread of Peyotism was that it reinforced Native American notions of uniqueness, both communal and religious, as well as thwarted their ongoing "civilizing" mission, which was focused on Christianity.¹⁵ As Hubert Work, the Secretary of the Interior under the Coolidge administration said, "Christian missionary was the pioneer of civilization among the Indians."¹⁶ Thus, the Peyote faith was not the mainline religious medium that reservation managers and agencies alike had hoped for but it was instead a marginal, minority practice that they feared and assumed would stunt assimilation.

¹² Maroukis, *The Peyote Road*, 151.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

The biggest means of promoting the BIA's cause came in anti-peyote literature, pamphlets, and the testimonies of a Native American woman turned anti-peyotist named Gertrude Bonnin. Bonnin poised the Peyote faith as a practice against morality through which she claimed the use of Peyote led to belligerent intoxication and hedonistic orgies involving men, women, and children. In addition to these ethical atrocities, she invoked Prohibition worries by linking Peyote to alcohol abuse.¹⁷ Pamphlets distributed by the BIA during their push for legislation framed Peyote as "a harmful narcotic that led to addiction, immorality, and indolence."¹⁸ The BIA strategy was to produce and collect as much negative information about Peyote as possible and it, like Bonnin, often took the tone of immorality. Several agencies working under the auspices of the BIA concluded that under influence of Peyote, Native American men engaged in sexually inappropriate behavior with women and that using Peyote lowered "moral and mental efficacy." Sexual promiscuity was often employed by the pamphlets writers by referencing the natural transition from Peyote use to lust, orgies and unrestricted libertinism. Much like rum and other forms of alcohol were being demonized at the time, Peyote was referred to as the "devil's root." The anti-peyote literature also likened the practice, out of observations made by Spanish and American missionaries, as pagan worship.¹⁹ Maroukis' views this particular rhetoric as a means to attack Peyote "based on a good versus evil paradigm: Christianity versus paganism, the 'power of a drug' versus the 'elevating influence of the Cross.'"²⁰ There is little doubt that the BIA was attempting to persuade legislatures and other readers of their publications into believing that Peyote was not only a drug, although horrible in and of itself, but a drug that led to immorality as well as, and perhaps more appalling, a rejection of the dominant and civilizing Christian faith of America. More anti-peyote bills were proposed in 1922, 1924, 1926, and 1937 but they also met the same fate as their predecessors. Where the BIA's publications did find some success was at the state level. By 1938, thirteen states had outlawed all use of peyote and most of them were western, reservation states including New Mexico, Wyoming, the Dakotas, Arizona, and Texas. At this time, Maroukis remarks that "there were very few voices calling for the First Amendment protection for the Peyote faith. In spite of state laws, however, very few Peyotists were persecuted successfully. States had no jurisdiction on reservations."²¹

17 *Ibid.*, 53.

18 *Ibid.*, 104.

19 *Ibid.*, 105-108.

20 *Ibid.*, 108.

21 *Ibid.*, 115.

The irony of the charges of immorality to the Peyote faith is that they are in fact antithetical to the purposes of the Peyote ceremonies. The purpose of the Peyote ceremony is to “get on” or “get back on” the Peyote Road which is the righteous way of NAC ethics and these often include commitments to be faithful to spouses, to care for respective families, and to be an honest person.²² What also seemed to be missed by the BIA and other advocates of suppressing the Peyote religion was the use of Christian messages and symbols in the ceremony—particularly the Cross Fire ceremonies. Invocations of Jesus Christ and reading of the Christian Bible are found, even frequently, in this popular form of the Peyote ritual. If the task was to Christianize the Natives, this task would seem to have been completed. Perhaps then the fear of the spread of Peyotism is its “meddling” with Christian doctrines—it misconstrues traditional Christianity by taking the mainline religion and through psychoactive states, pushes it to the fringes of marginality. Perhaps the concern of Peyotism is also a fear of confronting and accepting their failure. The NAC was Christianized to the extent of accepting Jesus Christ as a holy figure but it did not “civilize” them in the fashion the government and other parties had expected. Native Americans were not reciting the Bible and praying to Jesus sitting on a red-cushioned, wooden pew near the altar. Native Americans were praying to Jesus by blowing an eagle-bone whistle first to the North, then East, South, and West while sitting on the ground, in a Plains-style tepee. Instead of requesting “Dear God, I pray for forgiveness,” the NAC Peyotists ask “Peyote, you have seen all the wrong things that I have done. In the name of Jesus forgive me.”²³ Maroukis remarks, “One would not question the sincerity of the commitment to Peyote, the Bible, and Jesus Christ...The articles of incorporation, their language, their integration of Christian elements were to...express a spirituality based on Peyote and the Bible, but all proclaimed the primacy of Peyote.”²⁴ In light of these things, the fears concerning the spread of Peyotism seemed to be harbored in latent superstitions and assumptions, no matter how unfounded, about Peyote use causing immorality and a supplanting of the Peyote faith for the Christian faith.

The appointment of John Collier as the new commissioner of Indian Affairs by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 initiated a new era of the rights of Native Americans, especially in the First Amendment Protection of the American Indian practice of the peyote ritual. While the Collier era was by no means a millennial bliss free of opposition, it was a relatively calm period that marked a shifting of tolerating attitudes toward Native religion and also witnessed more expansion of the Peyote

22 Garrett Epps, *Peyote vs. The State: Religious Freedom on Trial* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 2009), 56.

23 Maroukis, *The Peyote Road*, 182.

24 *Ibid.*, 125.

faith.²⁵ In the late 1950s and 60s there was a growing concern about the recreational use of Peyote by non-American Indians counterculturalists and there was a fear by NAC members that a “war on drugs” could lead to restricting ceremonial Peyote use. In 1970, Congress passed the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act which cited Peyote as a Schedule I hallucinogen thus placing it among other substances like heroin, LSD, and psilocybin. The Act was careful, however, to not direct the prohibited use towards the NAC but instead the Act was aimed at non-spiritual use by non-Indians. In 1962, the California Supreme court ruled in favor of Peyotist Jack Woody after being charged with possession and use of Peyote thus overturning the California state law and also setting the precedent for ruling on Peyote cases.²⁶

These favorable acts towards the Peyote faith all came to a screeching halt when the United States Supreme Court ruled against the ritual use of Peyote in *Employment Division v. Smith*. Al Smith, an NAC member of the Klamath tribe in Oregon, worked as an alcohol and drug abuse counselor for a rehabilitation facility in Douglas County. In 1984, Smith participated in a Peyote ceremony and, after admitting that he had ingested Peyote at the tepee meeting to his employers, he was terminated and subsequently applied for the collection of unemployment from the state of Oregon. This was after another substance abuse counselor, a non-Indian but member of the NAC, Galen Black, was also fired for ingesting peyote at a similar ceremony. Smith was denied unemployment benefits due to the drug-related nature of his termination as had Black. After a series of court trials in the Oregon judicial system, the Oregon Supreme Court ruled in favor of both Smith and Black (as conjoined cases) thus granting them unemployment compensation. The state of Oregon then appealed to the United States Supreme Court where arguments were first held in 1988 but the Supreme Court remanded the case back to Oregon to decide on the legality of Peyote in the state. In the second trial at the Oregon Supreme Court, the Court ruled again in favor of Smith and Black saying that the religious use of Peyote was protected by the free exercise clause of the First Amendment. The U.S. Supreme Court began to hear oral arguments again on the *Smith* case in 1989 and then ruled in 1990 that Black and Smith’s actions were not protected by the free exercise clause of the First Amendment.²⁷

Justice Scalia delivered the opinion of the court in its 6-3 decision. Scalia’s words are indicative of a type of “slippery slope” perception that even the Oregon defensive attorney, Dave Frohnmayer, invoked in his argument but the “slippery

25 Ibid., 126.

26 Ibid., 185-195.

27 Long, Religious Freedom and Indian Rights, 282-286.

slope" found in Scalia's opinion (unlike Frohnmayer's "drugs are bad") was framed more out of a societal concern for law and order in America.²⁸ The main reason for ruling against the unemployment compensation for Smith and Black was that the Oregon state law against the use of Peyote was generally applicable to the population and because it was not directly prohibiting the religious use of peyote, the "incidental effect" it had on suppressing the religious ceremony was not a violation of the First Amendment.²⁹ Another important aspect of Scalia's opinion was that it weakened the "compelling state interest" test by deeming it inapplicable to this situation given that no other First Amendment rights were being disputed—a qualification Scalia saw for applying the *Sherbert* standard. Carolyn Long affirms this reading of the opinion and describes that "Under this [*Sherbert*] standard, if the state was unable to prove that the regulations served a compelling state interest, achieved in the least restrictive manner, the religious adherent should be granted an exemption to the law."³⁰ It is the use of this test and what using it may have meant for a ruling on the Peyote case that Scalia had the most restrictions about. Scalia wrote:

Any society adopting such a [compelling state interest] system would be courting anarchy, but that danger increases in direct proportion to the society's diversity of religious beliefs, and its determination to coerce or suppress none of them. Precisely because "we are a cosmopolitan nation made up of people of almost every conceivable religious preference," *Braunfeld v. Brown*, 366 U.S. at 606, and precisely because we value and protect that religious divergence, we cannot afford the luxury of deeming *presumptively invalid*, as applied to the religious objector, every regulation of conduct that does not protect an interest of the highest order.³¹

The fear harbored in Scalia's writing seems to partly be a fear of the flood of free exercise cases filing for petition at the Supreme Court level. Long suggests however that the *Sherbert* test had a built-in cap on the number of claims.³² It also seems likely to deduce that in Scalia's writing is a fear that by allowing Peyote to be used for religious practices via application of the *Sherbert* test, the Court allows individual conscience to triumph at the detriment of law, order, and a structured, cohesive society. This is evidenced best by Scalia's mention of "anarchy" and citation of *Reynolds v. United States* that by applying the *Sherbert* test, the Court per-

28 Frohnmayer's remarks are found in Epps, *Peyote vs. The State*, 1.

29 "It is a permissible reading of the text, in the one case as in the other, to say that, if prohibiting the exercise of religion (or burdening the activity of printing) is not the object of the tax, but merely the incidental effect of a generally applicable and otherwise valid provision, the First Amendment has not been offended." *Employment Division, Oregon Department of Human Resources v. Smith*, 494 U.S. 872 (1990).

30 Long, *Religious Freedom and Indian Rights*, 55.

31 *Employment Division v. Smith*.

32 Long, *Religious Freedom and Indian Rights*, 200.

mits a person, “by virtue of his beliefs, ‘to become a law unto himself.’” Perhaps the most unusual suggestion by Scalia in his opinion is that people should look to and rely on more specific legislation from their governments with the likely consequence “that leaving accommodation to the political process will place at a relative disadvantage those religious practices that are not widely engaged in; but that unavoidable consequence of democratic government must be preferred to a system in which each conscience is a law unto itself or in which judges weigh the social importance of all laws against the centrality of all religious beliefs.”³³ In this statement, Scalia is acknowledging the fact that minority and marginal religions will be “disadvantaged” which seems to be a fancy way of saying suppressed or burdened.

What occurs after the *Smith* ruling adds another interesting fold into the already perplexing yet thought-provoking story. However, leaving Peyote for a moment and switching gears to the claimed religious use of psychedelics by the counterculture in the 1960s will enhance and deepen what has been presented here—the nature of what lies in the American fear of the religious use of drugs.

Psychedelics as the Eucharist

*“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
starving hysterical naked,/dragging themselves through the negro
streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,/angelheaded hipsters burning
for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the ma-
chinery of night,/who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high
sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating
across the tops of cities contemplating jazz,/who bared their brains
to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering on
tenement roofs illuminated,/who passed through universities with ra-
diant eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the
scholars of war,/who were expelled from the academies for crazy &
publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull,”*

-Allen Ginsberg, Howl!

It may be useful at this point to remind ourselves of the thesis for this exploration into psychoactive substances and religious experience in America: The use of peyote and psychedelics by Native Americans and counterculturalists, respectively, has been fearfully perceived by the American government and the larger population as a “slippery slope.” But this “slippery slope” encapsulates more than

³³ Employment Division v. Smith.

popular notions of the consequences of drugs—the fear of these substances, especially when used in religious contexts, is that they manifest into hedonistic immorality, dropping out of institutionalized mainline religion, and anarchy where individual conscience trumps a greater good. What will be shown in this section is that akin to Peyote use, although limited to isolated situations and events, the use of psychedelics in the 1960s counterculture struck similar chords of concern but perhaps this time, some of the deepest fears were realities.³⁴

For these purposes, the story of psychedelics and religious experience begins outside of the States and with the Swiss pharmacologist, Albert Hofmann in 1943. While revisiting an investigation into the ergot alkaloids found in rye fungus, Albert Hofmann synthesized the twenty-fifth substance in his series of lysergic acid derivatives. During the synthesizing process, Hofmann began to become restless and dizzy and on his historic bike ride home, began to perceive fantastic colors and shapes. Hofmann had in fact experienced the world's first "acid trip." Later in his memoir entitled *LSD: My Problem Child*, Hofmann remarked that the greatest contribution of LSD was more so religious than scientific. LSD-25 had apparently given Hofmann an experiential basis for the foundation of his Christian beliefs and provided elucidation on John 14:20 which states "At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you."³⁵ Hofmann seems to be describing in these terms a true entheogenic experience—that god, for Hofmann at least, was being revealed from within him. This experience, how ever enriching it may have been for Hofmann's faith, was also a catalyst for his disillusionment with the institutionalized aspect of Christianity and Hofmann in fact advised the Western world to consider Eastern religions instead.³⁶ Even then from its inception, it appears that the use of LSD conjured up religious sentiments but more importantly, the LSD experience seemed to deemphasize institutionalized, mainline religion and instead support the esoteric and mystical ones.

17 years later after a Mexican, mushroom-consuming vacation by Harvard psychologist, Timothy Leary, American social and religious history would be forever changed by the psychedelic gospel. In 1960, Leary, along with colleague Richard Alpert, began conducting research on the use of psychedelics for their Harvard Psychedelic Drug Research Project. Experimenting on more than 1,000 participants—including sixty nine clergymen and women—the Leary and Alpert studies on environment and the psychedelic trip indicated that when the setting

34 As a note, in using the word "psychedelics" in the context of this essay, I am talking directly about LSD, mescaline, and psilocybin—the psychoactive ingredient of magic mushrooms.

35 Fuller, *Stairways to Heaven*, 61-63.

36 *Ibid.*, 63.

was implicitly spiritual, 40 to 70 percent of their participants reported “life-changing religious experience” and an additional 90 percent reported “illuminating or mystical experiences” when the setting was explicitly spiritual.³⁷ It appears that early on in the Harvard psychedelic experiments, results seemed to support conclusions that LSD and other psychedelics were capable of inducing self-described religious and spiritual experiences—the authenticity of such claims was and still is a matter of debate but irrelevant from this essay’s perspective. These results also dovetailed nicely with the sixties and seventies excitement of discovery. Robert Fuller writes about this time that:

“People were discovering new aspects of themselves. They were discovering new worldviews that told of other realms or levels of existence awaiting our exploration. Psychedelics contributed to the excitement of this discovery process...That is, the results of psychedelic research were understood to have substantiated the claim that there are whole new worlds awaiting to be discovered right within ourselves.”³⁸

Perhaps the most notorious and written about psychedelic experiment of the 1960s was the Good Friday Experiment. The Good Friday Experiment was conducted by Harvard divinity student, minister, and medical doctor, Walter Pahnke. On Good Friday, in 1962, twenty students from a Boston theological seminary were subjects as well as some infamous “guides” in a double blind experiment that attempted to determine if psilocybin could induce an authentic religious experience. In the basement of Marsh Chapel with the audio of the Protestant service being piped in through speakers, ten students were dosed with psilocybin and ten were given a placebo. Present at the experiment was Huston Smith, MIT professor of philosophy and historian of world religions. He was one of Pahnke’s preselected guides but he too, did not know who was getting the psychoactive substance. Smith would however get it and for Smith, his “encounter that Good Friday was the most powerful he would ever have of God’s personal nature...he had never *experienced* [God’s] love in such a profound and personal way.”³⁹ After the experiment had ceased, Pahnke distributed questionnaires asking the subjects to what extent they experienced “a sense of unity, transcendence of time and space, a sense of sacredness, a sense of objective reality, a deeply felt positive mood, ineffability, paradoxicality, and transiency,” and Pahnke reported that ““eight out of ten of the experimental subjects experienced at least

37 Ibid., 67.

38 Ibid., 75.

39 Don Lattin, *The Harvard Psychedelic Club: How Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Smith, and Andrew Weil Killed the Fifties and Ushered in a New Age for America*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 77.

seven out of nine categories. None of the control group, when each individual was compared to his matched partner, had a score which was higher."⁴⁰ There was feeling among the experimental group and the researchers alike that these psychoactive substances were able to give those willing to partake an opportunity to give their faith an experiential component. Lattin reflects on the outcomes of some from the experiment that "Smith saw the love of God on Good Friday. Leary saw something more sinister in Pahnke's subsequent problems getting support for his research... 'We had run up against the Judeo-Christian commitment to one God, one religion, one reality that has cursed Europe for centuries and American since our founding days... We sensed that the time for a new humanistic religion based on intelligent good-natured pluralism and scientific paganism had arrived.'"⁴¹ In Leary's mind then, the religious validity of psychedelic use was being challenged by mainline religion through lack of acknowledging any merit in the experiments the Harvard Psychedelic Club was conducting. Likewise, Leary's claim to "paganism" and "humanistic religion" fostered perceptions of anarchy and chaos through its emphasis on the individual conscience. Fuller remarks that "the spiritual awakening of the sixties was committed to the belief that the sacred is already implanted in the human heart and the natural world."⁴² The consequence of such a statement and Leary's experiments is that the individual is ultimately elevated to a sacred status it was not before. Entheogenic substances, by revelation of the divine coming from within, assume the divine is already within. The human being reached a new level of emphasis in the sixties and Leary was the movement's egotistical Messiah.

In the spring of 1963, Leary and Alpert were fired from Harvard after stories of "ribald partying and sexual dalliance" occurring in Leary's office came out and subsequently, the Harvard Psychedelic Drug Research Project was shut down. These reports would account for many outside observers to perceive the use of psychedelics, especially in the context of religious experience, as immoral and leading to pompous pleasure-seeking. While immoral was debated by Leary, hedonistic behavior was not. In fact, Leary openly chided what he considered to be a Puritanical, anti-pleasure strain in American culture. Leary saw pleasure, even in its most extreme form, as a basic human right and perhaps even a *moral duty*.⁴³ Leary's post-Harvard home was the donated, Millbrook Mansion which "provided the perfect setting in which to engage in outlandish behaviors that ranged from se-

40 Ibid., 79.

41 Ibid., 82.

42 Fuller, *Stairways to Heaven*, 85.

43 Ibid., 71.

rious research to bacchanalian debauchery."⁴⁴ Later, the "organization" at Leary's Millbrook Estate would become the League for Spiritual Discovery (LSD)—a new but ancient mode of religion. Leary remarked that the LSD was "'a religion in the basic primeval sense of a tribe living together and centered around shared spiritual goals...In our religion the temple is the human body, the shrine is the home, and the congregation is a small group of family members and friends.'" The humanistic individual is once again emphasized here in context of community but Fuller suggests that what "Leary failed to add [was] that his League for Spiritual Discovery (LSD) might also provide a smoke screen under which persons could use drugs without government prosecution."⁴⁵ Leary was then at once declaring the use of psychedelics as religious, affirming hedonism, and emphasizing the individual in context with community.

Leary's famous words of "Turn on, tune in, and drop out" give great insight into what the psychedelics and sixties seemed to champion. Paying particular attention to the "dropping out," Fuller sees dropping out as "an act of religious affirmation."⁴⁶ Citing the establishment of psychedelic churches as The Shiva Fellowship Church, the Psychedelic Venus church, the Fellowship of the Clear Light, the American Council of Internal Divinity, and the Psychedelic Peace Fellowship, Fuller claims that Sixties "authentic spirituality, therefore, necessitates dropping out of institutional religion. This logic, whether expressly stated or not, permeated the argument to its conclusion and drifted away from the churches...This is not to say, however, that they had turned their backs upon religion altogether. Instead, they had arrived at an alternative, and more personally compelling, spiritual awakening."⁴⁷ Thus, the religious use of psychedelics by Leary and his cohorts were direct attacks on institutionalized, mainline religion.

The psychedelic era seemed to fizzle out as quickly as it sprung on the scene. Laws were large catalysts for its end. In 1967, California made the manufacture and possession of LSD illegal. Later in 1970, Congress would outlaw all psychedelics as controlled, Schedule I substances.⁴⁸ This was then a short-lived religious experiment but its legacy was great and still continues to mesmerize scholars and curious readers, alike. Lattin suggests that "the Rosetta stone that brings together the work of the Harvard Psychedelic Club...did nothing less than inspire a generation of Americans to redefine the nature of reality"⁴⁹

44 *Ibid.*, 65.

45 *Ibid.*, 65.

46 *Ibid.*, 81.

47 *Ibid.*, 84.

48 *Ibid.*, 70.

49 Lattin, *The Harvard Psychedelic Club*, 214.

Conclusions: Implications and Questions for Religious Pluralism and American Identity

It is hard to call sacramental Peyote and eucharistic psychedelics two sides of the same coin. Perhaps the better analogy is that they are opposing faces on a die—they are chemically connected but culturally disconnected with other things to better associate them with in between. Other differences exist as well. The NAC's use of Peyote claimed that it helped get members back on *the way*—the set of ethics they had established—while the use of psychedelics by the Leary and the counterculturalists claimed it opened up *multiple ways* of reality. The intensity of the psychoactive substances used by Leary and others were also much greater than the Peyote used by the NAC—some put the difference on an order of two thousand times greater.⁵⁰ But what has been presented here is that the claim to religious use of these substances churned up and brought out in the American government and population fears that these hallucinogens were “slippery slopes” leading to hedonism, rejection of institutionalized and mainline religion, and societal chaos. What this study may be then is a lesson on American perceptions of the religious and the marginal other. Granting this, what we have is a rather dismal outlook on religious pluralism in America. The use of psychoactive substances for religious purposes was confronted by latent, cultural fears of what drugs were perceived of doing—their religious context often invalidated. While some of the attacks on these two cases were unfounded, such as the immoral behavior caused by Native use of Peyote, others hit the nail on the head. But Leary and the psychedelic gospel saw their hedonism not as immoral but instead a moral duty to their humanistic cause—their own ethical system—no matter how promiscuous or dangerous, they were still strongly held. Similarly, neither the NAC nor the LSD seemed to argue against the fact that they were embracing a non-institutional, non-mainline religion, and while the individual may be elevated by use of entheogenic substances, it was often seen in context of community building—a bridge Courts and American culture have seemed to missed. Fuller states that “the spiritual use of such drugs have factored significantly in both the sacred worlds of personal experience and religious community” and that when these substances are taken in a certain setting, they are “avenues of communal bonding and communal affirmation. Throughout the course of American religious history, drugs of various kinds have repeatedly factored in the process whereby individuals are inducted into the sacred world of a living religious community.”⁵¹ Thus while the perception may be that drug use leads to societal destruction and anarchy, in the context of religion,

50 Maroukis, *The Peyote Road*, 221.

51 Fuller, *Stairways to Heaven*, 9 and 11.

often found in the context of community, the exact reverse is true. Fuller adds that the American culture and legal courts have “attempted to assess the likelihood that drug use will contribute to an individual’s spiritual development.”⁵² The perception is that psychoactive substances are only individually important.

These fears suggest two things: first, by a culture affirming fears, they are also affirming what it doesn’t fear and thus what likely dominates in that culture. That is to say, by harboring fears of hedonism, marginal religion, and anarchy, the culture may be seen as the opposite—frugal, institutionalized, and ordered. Secondly, fears are only fears—misconceptions of the unknown may be corrected when informed properly of what that unknown is through education and social interaction. Pluralism as a declaration that diversity is good is then possible on these bases. This study is indeed a historical one looking at the events of the past as a means of describing 20th century perceptions of psychoactive substance use by marginal religious groups. While it may begin to get at what Americans carry into the 21st century and today, it does not reprimand the current state of affairs. This exploration may be seen optimistically, if one so chooses, in the sense that once Americans are able to know themselves, perhaps out of knowing the other, they can begin to be informed through interaction and to accept the other despite what intoxicated dressing it may appear to have.

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⁵² *Ibid.*, 192-193.