

The Immortality Key: The Secret History of the Religion with No Name

By Brian C. Muraresku, Foreword by Graham Hancock
New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2020, PP. 480.

Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

Central to any discussion of entheogens is the quandary in which we currently find ourselves. We live in a time of extremes that are visible everywhere; not only do things not appear to be in their rightful place, but they seem to be going abysmally wrong. To overlook the emergence of the *psychedelic renaissance* within this historical moment is to ignore the spiritual crisis of the modern world and its severe impact on the collective psyche. We need to acknowledge the momentous developments that led to the post-Enlightenment world and its desacralized outlook which has fueled the dominance of *scientism* and *materialism*. Unless we do so, it becomes difficult to properly assess the claim that psychedelics are the panacea for all the maladies of our time.

The book under review has become a bestseller and has captivated modern minds. It reads much like a work of fiction, something akin to *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) with its entertaining and detective-like narrative. *The Immortality Key* aims to disclose the secrets of the ancient mysteries, which required a twelve-year odyssey in search for the roots of religion. Brian Muraresku embarked on a quest to substantiate his thesis that all religions have their foundation in

mind-altering substances which, for Western civilization, begins in Greece at Eleusis. He boldly claims that entheogens “founded Western civilization” (p. 353) and, elsewhere, speaks of “the psychedelic reality behind Western civilization’s original religion” (p. 21).

When the doyen of comparative religion, Huston Smith (1919–2016), wrote that the sacred uses of mind-altering substances are the “best kept secret”² in the history of humanity, we can be sure he was referring to a hidden knowledge about the use of entheogens within diverse spiritual practices, not that psychedelics formed the basis of religious belief.

According to Muraresku, this work – which “presents the pagan continuity hypothesis with a psychedelic twist” (p. 14) – addresses two key questions: (1) “Before the rise of Christianity, did the Ancient Greeks consume a secret psychedelic sacrament during their most famous and well-attended religious rituals?”; and (2) “Did the Ancient Greeks pass a version of their sacrament along to the earliest, Greek-speaking Christians, for whom the original Holy Communion or Eucharist was, in fact, a psychedelic Eucharist?” (pp. 14–15). Muraresku summarizes his research (along with Carl Ruck’s grand theory) when he attempts to explain

How psychedelics were the shortcut to enlightenment that founded Western civilization: first in the Eleusinian Mysteries, then in the Dionysian Mysteries. How paleo-Christianity inherited this tradition from the Ancient Greeks, later passing it to the witches of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. And how the Vatican would repeatedly suppress the original, psychedelic Eucharist to rob Christians of the beatific vision—first in Europe, and then around the world after the Catholic colonization of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. A truly global conspiracy. (pp. 353–354)

² Huston Smith, “Preface,” to R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hofmann, and Carl A.P. Ruck, *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries* (Los Angeles, CA: Hermes Press, 1998), p. 10.

Muraresku informs readers that what motivated him to write this book on the study of the present-day uses of entheogens was the mystical experiences reported by the many volunteers engaged in clinical trials with psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy (including the therapeutic value of these sacred medicines for trauma, anxiety, depression, addiction, end-of-life distress, and other ailments). Indeed, the author was fascinated by the ostensible similarities between the mystical element and transformative power found in ancient mystery religions, and contemporary uses of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy.

The claim that religion itself had its genesis in entheogens is not original to Muraresku, but has been advocated for some decades.³ In particular, it has been suggested that these compounds were the key ingredients of both the *Soma* mentioned in the Ṛgveda and the Avestan *Hoama* of the Zoroastrians. According to the Hindu tradition, “We have drunk Soma and become immortal; we have attained the light, the gods discovered”⁴ (Ṛgveda 8:48:3). Some have identified this substance as the mushroom *Amanita muscaria*⁵ or the fungus ergot (or *Kykeon* of the Eleusinian Mysteries), which contains psychoactive alkaloids such as LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide).⁶ It has also been asserted that the *Manna* of the Old Testament was a psychedelic,⁷ as well as the psychoactive

³ See R. Gordon Wasson, Stella Kramrisch, Jonathan Ott, and Carl A.P. Ruck, *Persephone's Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

⁴ Ṛgveda 8:48:3, *The Hymns of the Ṛgveda*, trans. Ralph T.H. Griffith, ed. J.L. Shastri (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1999), p. 198.

⁵ See R. Gordon Wasson, *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969).

⁶ See R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hofmann, and Carl A.P. Ruck, *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries* (Los Angeles, CA: Hermes Press, 1998).

⁷ See Dan Merkur, “Manna, the Showbread, and the Eucharist: Psychoactive Sacraments in the Bible,” in *Psychoactive Sacramentals: Essays on Entheogens and Religion*, ed. Thomas B. Roberts (San Francisco, CA: Council on Spiritual Practices, 2001), pp. 139–144.

mushrooms associated with the cult of Mithras⁸ (said to be used in ancient Egypt).⁹ Even the origins of Christianity have been ascribed to *Amanita muscaria*¹⁰ or *Psilocybin* mushrooms.¹¹ Needless to say, such flagrant reductionism is open to serious challenges.

These sacred plants are thought to have been used from around 5000 BC;¹² that is, at the beginning of what the Hindu tradition calls the *Kali-Yuga* or ‘Iron Age’ – the culmination of our current temporal cycle, or, at best, the preceding *Dvapara Yuga* or ‘Bronze Age.’

Thus, it could be said that the use of sacred plants occurred late in the cosmic cycle (*manvantara*) and not at its inception – namely, the *Krita-Yuga* or *Satya-Yuga* (known as the ‘Golden Age’ in Western cosmology). The oldest known spiritual tradition of Hinduism (the *sanātana dharma* or ‘eternal religion’) existed in the ‘Golden Age’ and was not the by-product of a later period. This appears to suggest, as Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) observed, that “the use of intoxicants ... is a recent innovation and points to a

⁸ See Carl A.P. Ruck, Mark Alwin Hoffman, and José Alfredo González Celadrán, *Mushrooms, Myth and Mithras: The Drug Cult that Civilized Europe* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2011).

⁹ See Andrija Puharich, *The Sacred Mushroom: Key to the Door of Eternity* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959).

¹⁰ See John Marco Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross: A Study of the Nature and Origins of Christianity Within the Fertility Cults of the Ancient Near East* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1971).

¹¹ See Jerry B. Brown and Julie M. Brown, *The Psychedelic Gospels: The Secret History of Hallucinogens in Christianity* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2016).

¹² Peter T. Furst, “Ancient Altered States,” in *Higher Wisdom: Eminent Elders Explore the Continuing Impact of Psychedelics*, eds. Roger Walsh and Charles S. Grob (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 153. Some psychedelic researchers regard the rock art found in the mountain range of Tassili n’Ajjjer southeast Algeria to be the most ancient verification of entheogenic use.

decadence in shamanic technique.”¹³ This is not to say that entheogens cannot be medically beneficial, or helpful in healing many of the psycho-somatic maladies of our time – especially when employed in the sacred context of a given spiritual tradition – but to suggest that they are the origins of all religion simply does not hold up.

This book explores how many of the ‘mystery’ religions – such as those of ancient Egypt and Greece, especially the Eleusinian, Dionysian, and Orphic mysteries – participated in the process of initiatory death and rebirth in order to be transfigured into a divine mode of being through the use of entheogens. Participants were considered privileged to have been initiated into the ceremonies of these mystery traditions.

The Immortality Key cites various texts in support of its thesis. The ancient Greek playwright Sophocles (c. 496–406) declares: “Thrice fortunate are those among mortals who have seen these rites before going to Hades; for they alone have life there, while others have every kind of misery.”¹⁴ Further testimonies likewise indicate that, as a result of having experienced the mysteries, the soul of the initiate will be content and at peace after death. For example, Cicero (106–43) asserted that the Eleusinian mysteries disclosed how “to live happily, but also to die with a better hope.”¹⁵ These initiations, then, did not confer just posthumous spiritual benefits, but also led to a dis-identification with the ego, along with a new identity that both transcended and suffused the psycho-physical dimension.

¹³ Mircea Eliade, “Shamanic Ideologies and Techniques among the Indo-Europeans,” in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 401.

¹⁴ Sophocles, Fragment 837, *Fragments*, trans. and ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 368–369.

¹⁵ Cicero, De legibus II.xiv.36, *On the Republic, On the Laws*, trans. Clinton W. Keys (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 415.

In the Western Church, there is the experience known as the “beatific vision” (Latin: *visio beatifica*) and the Eastern Church teaches the doctrine of “deification” (Greek: *theosis*). The Christian tradition states that God “dwell[s] in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see” (1 Timothy 6:16), yet it is through the cleansing of the Intellect (*Intellectus*) – or the “eye of the heart” – that we may see the Divine “face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12). In connection with this experience, we find written in the Gospels: “ye shall see heaven open” (John 1:51). It was the Hungarian scholar Carl Kerényi (1897–1973) who employed the term ‘beatific vision’ (Latin: *visio beatifica*) for what was experienced at Eleusis.¹⁶ Interestingly, the term was not indicated in Greek. Muraresku notes that “It was this same beautiful vision that brought the very concept of psychedelics into the modern world” (p. 342), and states that “To get the beatific vision, you have to die for it” (p. 343).

Muraresku mentions that a prominent feature in the world’s religions is the injunction that finds expression, for instance, in the well-known words of the Prophet of Islam: “Die before ye die” (*mūtū qabla an tamūtū*). In the Hindu tradition, there is the concept of being ‘twice-born’ (*dvija*): our initial entry into terrestrial existence is one type of birth, whereas the second is an initiation into a spiritual path. Within the Jewish tradition, especially in its mystical dimensions, there is a similar notion of *dying before dying* known as ‘cessation or annihilation of existence’ (*bittul ha-yesh*). At St. Paul’s Monastery on Mount Athos are inscribed the words: “If you die before you die, you will not die when you die.” In Western Christianity, Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) expressed the

¹⁶ See Carl Kerényi, “The Eleusinian Version of the *Visio Beatifica*,” in *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 95-102.

same concept in this way: “If you could naught yourself for an instant, indeed I say less than an instant, you would possess all.”¹⁷

This alchemical and transformative psycho-spiritual process of ‘dying before dying’ appears in a myriad of forms throughout the spiritual traditions and their sacred psychologies, yet points of convergence can readily be discerned. At the heart of every integral psychology or “science of the soul” is the recognition of a psycho-spiritual transformation or *metanoia*, which is inseparable from a metaphysical vision grounded in the sacred. This can be seen as a sacred psychology – rooted in metaphysics – that speaks of a ‘horizontal’ dimension comprising the empirical ego, and a vertical dimension that pertains to the transpersonal Self.

This book postulates a psychedelic “Reformation to end all Reformations” (p. 14) that is emerging to fill the spiritual void felt collectively by those – not only in the present-day West – but throughout the world who are “religiously unaffiliated” (p. 8) and “spiritual-but-not-religious” (p. 9).

This warrants some clarifications. The authentically spiritual dimension found in the world’s religions is what keeps a faith healthy, as it were. Yet many are unsure how to access this, so it is often assumed to be altogether absent when this is assuredly not the case. We must take the time to rediscover these neglected elements at the heart of all religions.

There are those who are averse to the idea of religion, and are only interested in its mystical or esoteric aspects, as we find among those who claim to be “spiritual but not religious.” This often fails to recognize that formal religion is the protective framework that allows us to access its inner dimension. As has been pointed out by many, true spirituality can never be a commodity for mass

¹⁷ *Meister Eckhart, Sermon 17, The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart, trans. and ed. Maurice O’C. Walshe (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), p. 131.*

consumption: “[T]ruths of a certain order by their very nature resist all ‘popularization’: however clearly they are set out.”¹⁸ We recall that while the word “religion” is off-putting to many (who prefer the notion of “spirituality”), we need to remember that the etymological root of the English word “religion” is the Latin *religare*, meaning to “re-link,” or “bind back” to the Spirit that is transcendent to, and immanent in, all things.

This book aims to substantiate a continuity between the ancient mystery religions and the contemporary therapeutic uses of entheogens. As Muraresku writes: “The religion with no name is the oldest continuously functioning spiritual tradition the world has ever known” (p. 385). The author adds “The religion with no name is back” (p. 387), yet what does this mean? With a closer analysis, two claims become evident: (1) all religion derives from psychedelics; and (2) the contemporary form of “the religion with no name” is the emergence of the “psychedelic renaissance” and its employment of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy. This approach is again shortsighted, if not erroneous altogether, for it does not understand the true nature of religion and spirituality. It is the Absolute that discloses itself through revelation to the diverse communities and cultures of the world in the form of sacred tradition, but it is not within the agency of psychedelics to create divine Revelation or bring about new religious forms.

To reduce the origin of religion to psychedelics is to completely misconceive the nature of revelation. Sacred medicines can certainly be a medium through which spiritual influences may be channeled, but to suggest that they are the source of all religious manifestations is quite risible. Spiritual phenomena are not the concoction of human beings but, rather, should be seen as firmly grounded in a ‘vertical’ dimension of reality that is transcendent, yet immanent in all things at the same time.

¹⁸ René Guénon, “The Hatred of Secrecy,” in *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 85.

A puzzling aspect of the book is that Muraresku does not appear to be concerned by the absence of any support for his thesis, not to mention that the inner or mystical dimension found within religions can be accessed without the use of psychedelics. After all, religion consists of both exoteric and esoteric dimensions, and it is through the outer forms that we can access the spiritual kernel. There is a certain position of ‘entheogenic exclusivism’ in this misconceived outlook which asserts that all spiritual realization requires psychedelics.

Although the author mentions his many travels, research, and conversations with various scholars, there remains a paucity of evidence regarding the existence of a “secret” tradition based on entheogens. Indeed, a hidden aim emerges in Muraresku’s attempt to undermine the validity of divine revelation and supplanting it with mind-altering substances as a substitute for the spiritual traditions. The work under review is unable to make a compelling case for its grand theory of the “pagan continuity hypothesis with a psychedelic twist” (p. 14), due to its overreach and misunderstanding of what true religion and spirituality are. This work is largely a product of the “psychedelic renaissance” and, while its promises are indicated in the wealth of clinical findings for therapeutic value, its present-day uses are poles apart from the traditional uses of entheogens. This highlights the spiritual vacuum and confusion that afflict the psychedelic movement, and indicates our need to turn to the spiritual traditions for their profound discernment and guidance on these matters, which are of the highest importance for our ultimate well-being.