

Is there any sort of non-clinical use of psilocybin mushrooms that could be safe, beneficial, and legalized?

Quo Vadis Psilocybe?

William Harrison

It's been about four years now since FUNGI's fine coverage of *Psilocybe* (volume 4, no.3). There was much in that issue, in the way of history, lore, science, and praise, but nothing about undoing their prohibition. Many treasured their use, but has there ever been evidence of benefit? Is there any sort of non-clinical use that could be safe, beneficial, and legalized? One that likely could prevent the foolish misuse, and accidents, that still occur? Lots of bad advice, about psilocybin mushrooms ("shrooms"), is still in books and on the web. Is there any way to counter that? If there were an honest yes to all of those, or if curing those problems could be woven in with ending

shrooms' prohibition, wouldn't that maybe be reason enough to do so? And there is good evidence of yes, on some of that – in those same publications of renowned researcher R. Griffith's that David Rose (Rose, 2011) critiqued.

Griffiths et al., at Johns Hopkins University, have published five papers on individual, non-religious use of psilocybin by middle-agers (Griffiths, 2006; 2008; 2011; Johnson, 2014; MacLean, 2011). They found that psilocybin sessions, music-backed in a religiosity-free setting, give mystical-type experiences that inspire long term **empathy, kindness, and openness**. Those are the feelings and behaviors that religions teach, but psilocybin serves those up more lastingly and viscerally than sermoning. Thus, psilocybin, or shrooms, might seem to deserve some place in religion. Griffiths studied only individual use – with each person blindfolded, headphoned (for music) and lying on a sofa. Religious use, though, might best be done, as it long has been, via open-eyed, open-eared, group-use, of shrooms. Many want psilocybin restricted to research, medical use and therapy, so shrooms, for religious use, would likely be less opposed than psilocybin would – and nature has gifted us with more than 100 species.

Empathy, i.e. sensing what another feels, is perhaps the key emotion needed for cooperation, community, and just getting along with others. The primatologist, Frans de Waal, in his book *The Age of Empathy* (de Waal, 2009) examined how empathy comes naturally to a great variety of animals. As he wrote of its origin, "Empathy goes back far in evolutionary time, much further than our species. It probably started with the birth of parental care. During the 200 million years of mammalian evolution, females sensitive to their offspring out reproduced those who were cold or distant. Females who failed to respond never propagated their genes." Later he adds, "I'd be reluctant to radically change the human condition. But if I could change one thing, it would be to expand the range of fellow feeling. The greatest problem today . . . is excessive loyalty to one's own nation, group, or religion. Humans are capable of deep distain for anyone who looks different or thinks another way . . . Nations think they are superior

to their neighbors, and religions think they own the truth. Empathy for 'other people' is the one commodity the world *really needs*. It would be great if we could create at least a modicum of it." Psilocybin or shrooms, used within established religions, would seem to be one possible way.

The only study of religious group-use of psilocybin has been The Marsh Chapel Experiment run back in '62 by Timothy Leary and Walter Pahnke (Pahnke, 1963; Doblin, 1991 – for a critique). Their purpose was to see if theology students, taking a psilocybin pill in a religious setting, would have mystical experiences and positive changes in attitudes and behavior. And most did. That experiment, though, came off as a rather poorly planned muddle through. Pahnke thought he could run a double-blind study, using 20 acquainted divinity students, in a church basement – half getting a psilocybin pill and the other half a placebo (nicotinic acid) – while maintaining a pious decorum. But no trial run was made. Pahnke had never tried either psilocybin or shrooms. Leary had never experienced traditional religious use of either. And Leary was rushed – it was publish-or-perish and mounting-complaints. Their design failed because the effects of their fast-acting placebo were so unlike those of psilocybin. The 10, who got nicotinic acid, felt nothing mystical and spent their hours whispering, talking, joking, and wandering about – distracting some of the psilocybin group into giggle-fits and pissing into urns. All were kept, in that chapel basement, with no ritual or ceremony to see. The service was piped in (audio only), but the topic (death, etc.) prompted two of the psilocybin-10 to escape. And one had to be dragged back and given a Thorazine injection, as tranquilizer. That setting was disinspirational, distractive, and disruptive. And much because of that, all of today's psilocybin researchers seem to have shifted to studying single-subject use, in religiosity-free settings, with each subject blindfolded, headphoned and confined to a sofa – the format that Griffiths introduced.

Religious group-use of *Psilocybe* has been going on in Mexico since before Cortez invaded. Mazatec *veladas*, a survival of pre-conquest use, were

first revealed in a 1957 *LIFE* magazine article “*Seeking The Magic Mushroom*” by Gordon Wasson (Wasson, 1957) – an amateur ethnomycologist and vice-president of J. P. Morgan & Co. He described lots more of his doings in his book *The Wondrous Mushroom* (Wasson, 1980). Mazatec *veladas* are done in rooms, at night, with just a few candles to illuminate – and separate mats for each to lie on. In the flickering dark, the curandera uses chanting, humming, and ritual to do requested divinings. Might it be possible, though, to use *veladas* differently? Griffiths showed that mystical experience, caused by psilocybin, inspires those positive behaviors. So might it not be possible to substitute teaching for divining, add some combination of chanting, humming, music and ritual, and get that mystical experience to better promote those positive behaviors? Just talking to the beshroomed, distracts and can cause giggle-fits. So, talks might best be given before shroom-taking or in that 40 minutes, or so, afterwards – before effects start. Talks could be aimed at motivating via beliefs that are, like: kinship with life on earth, creator, creation, purpose, obligations, et cetera. And scientific truth could be respected. Science does have lots to say about creation and cause.

In his most recent book, *The Bonobo and the Atheist* (de Waal, 2013), Frans de Waal discusses the implications of his primate studies in understanding the origin of human morality and modern religion. Many religious folks claim that our morality derives from God’s commandments, Bible teachings, and Sunday sermons. Many philosophers claim, though, that our morality is derived intellectually, by reason, and from the wisdom and teachings of philosophers. A growing number of biologists, like de Waal, though, point to our ancestral lines, and evolution by natural and sexual selection, as the core source of our morality. Religion has added to, elaborated, and reinforced the morality that evolution has provided us but, as de Waal writes, “Thank God, if I may, we share with other primates a background as group animals, which makes us value social connections. Absent this background, religion could be preaching about virtue and vice until it became blue in the face, we’d

never get its point. We are receptive only because of our evolved grasp of the value of relationships, the benefits of cooperation, the need for trust and honesty, and so on. Even our sense of fairness derives from this background.” In support of that, there is considerable similarity in how we humans act as compared to other primates and dogs. All those rely on leadership hierarchies and elites (oft birth-determined but replaceable by force), behavioral rules, group allegiances, group cooperation, and all show capacities for fairness and justice. All empathize, sympathize, and show altruism – occasionally to the extent of sacrificing one’s life for another. Many participate in in-group care of the young, show willingness to care for the injured, ill, and handicapped, and almost all dislike inequity.

With evolution providing such a well-evidenced explanation of how both we, and our core moralities, were created, it’s surprising that so many still attribute both to some invisible, undetectable, unknowable. Can’t we just allow God to be physically real? No wonder some throw up their hands, walk away, and become raving atheists. Shouldn’t at least one of our religions be honoring our human ancestral lines, along with those of all sentient creatures, all the way back to single-celled life, as the creative entities essential to our creation? And shouldn’t we have, at least, some occasional religious ceremony to celebrate life’s creator: The Universe and all nature’s ancestral lines? And what better, as a sacrament, for special celebration and bettering, than a sacrament that pushes empathy, kindness, and openness – but, hopefully, with enough supervision so that good intent doesn’t get derailed, once again, by misguidances like “tune in, turn on, drop out,” “if you feel afraid, just take more,” or “why not for probing even your most hurtful sorrows?”

Shrooms have taught us much, as to how not to use them, and more than enough for us to make lots better, and safer, use of them. Certainly, many have puzzled over and about them, how best to handle them, and their possible uses. In my case, ever since a day, back about 1980 on Kuta beach, in Bali, Indonesia. That was my first strong-dose encounter – one that left me with a life-long interest in them.

Three of us (Ronny, Roger, and I) had met up in Bali for a 3-week vacation. At about 4:00 p.m., we each ate one strong-dose omelet of *Copelandia cyanescens* – and started a walk up the beach. Effects began in about 45 minutes and were pretty strong within two hours. At about 7:00 pm there was a gorgeous sunset and, within another hour, the moon and stars were shining brightly – with just an occasional passing cloud blacking out an almost full moon. As time passed, a feeling of awe began growing within me. I slowly realized that I was in a giant cathedral with a Holy Service soon to begin. The moon became a well-defined face, with changing expressions. It looked to be the face of God. As the Service was starting, I waded out into the water – out about 40 feet to where it was just above my knees. The ocean was pretty calm, but one to two foot waves splashed in at regular intervals. All those stars, above, now seemed to be parts of Him too – as was that ocean around, and embracing, me. God was everywhere and everything.

I raised my hands, in prayer and thankfulness, and hummed several long hymns of praise. By adjusting tempo and phrasing, the breaking of waves, and the roll-in of surf, became a lovely part of each – a duet led by Him and His waves. And we repeated the best of those over and over. My friends yelled, many times, for me to get out, but I was OK . . . not just OK, I was utterly enraptured. For about 10 minutes or so, before the Service began to fade out, God gave me a lecture, through my own lips, as to what my responsibilities were, what I’d not been doing, and what I’d better start doing. Soon after that, though, I did have doubts. That speaker, who was using my voice, might have been God, but couldn’t it have been just my conscience, or some imagined (or real) words from my deceased mother or father, or perhaps even from *Copelandia*? We are related to all fungi through some long-ago ancestor. That speaker never did identify himself, so how am I to know? But just the thought that that may have been any one of those does stay with and intrigues me. Of course, I kept all that a secret for many years – as I suspect most others would too. Might that also have been a shroom-assisted revelation that God is The Universe? It seems to me now

that The Universe is very much what God is, but it took me several more years to become convinced of that. This business of *Psilocybe*, psilocybin, and other entheogens conjuring up religious peak-life experiences may not be all that uncommon. Professor Griffiths, of Johns Hopkins, is currently heading up a web-based research study on that (<http://flyer.psychedelicenscounteringthedivine.org/>).

To me, that was the most amazing of my 12, or so, shroom trips. From what I've later learned, though, I wouldn't advise, or repeat, any such water walk. With strong-doses, safety demands we stay out of water and avoid heights (wells, cliffs, balconies, bridges etc.), crowds, and traffic. Not doing so risks accidents or worse. In my case, I was in full (?) physical control . . . except for that voice, that wasn't. Lots safer, especially for first-few timers, would be supervised, closed-door *veladas* that teach safe use and inspire good. But shrooms are currently prohibited all over the USA. So, how to get religious group-use of shrooms even tried? There could be several possible ways,

but just for three:

(1) *By getting drug possession decriminalized for small amounts.* A recent poll shows majority support, in New Hampshire, for a referendum to decriminalize drug possession for small amounts of all drugs. Even if that passes, though, it may be years (if ever) before similar referenda get passed in other states, producing and selling would still be illegal, and all would still be federally illegal – but aren't there at least a few drugs that might best be kept illegal, even for small amounts, both statewide and federally?

(2) *By getting psilocybin FDA-approved for medical use.* Approval of psilocybin, for medical use, may come within the next year or two. Perhaps someday (years? decades?) psilocybin, shrooms, or both, might also be OK'd for doctor-prescribed use at religious events, festivals, or recreational outings – but lots more likely, they won't be. Most Schedule 2 drugs have been approved for medicinal needs. Those that happen also to be popular illegal drugs (cocaine, methamphetamine,

etc.) can not be legally prescribed for anything but medical needs – and getting normalcy declared a disease or injury likely won't work either.

(3) *By challenging the prohibition of shrooms, in federal court, under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA).* The religious use of ayahuasca has been made legal, in that way, for two Brazilian-Christian religious sects – the Uniao Do Vegetal sect in New Mexico and the Santo Daime in Oregon. (Ayahuasca is a vine and leaves extract used as a sacrament by shamans all across the Amazon basin in South America – and also by several Christian sects in Brazil. It is similar in effect to shrooms, but vomit inducing.) Peyote was made legal to all members of the Native American Church (and **only** to them) long before RFRA, but most all ongoing disputes, as to peyote use under federal law, are now litigated under RFRA.

The easiest path, to religious group-use, would seem to be via that challenging of prohibition in federal court. But how to get started? Shroom



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The advertisement features a collection of mushroom collecting knives with curved blades and wooden handles. The largest knife is prominently displayed at the top, with the brand name 'Maserin' visible on the handle. Below it, several other models are shown in a fan-like arrangement. The background is a textured, light brown color with the website URL at the top.

use is illegal, but there is nothing that prohibits *velada* crafting, or doing – so long as it is done **without** shrooms. And such could be a useful start for working out how, gathering support for, encouraging research on – or for just gathering religious groups that might later care to challenge prohibition under RFRA.

For any who might care to work out some new sans shrooms (“s-s”) *veladas* (setting, teaching, chanting, music, ritual, etc.), the yearly Telluride Mushroom Festival would be a fine place for performing them. Such could be set up at night, with 20 or so invited to join an hour of music-filled s-s communion – but hopefully not on a theater stage. Any such performances that impress, in spite of no shrooms, might well deserve the interest of researchers. Group ceremonies, with night-location and time, could be advertised via fliers or TMF announcements. And it would help if groups could video their doings, beforehand, and get a website set up for showing them. Such a website could be helpful to researchers, future *velada*-demo groups, religious-use groups that might wish to challenge prohibition, and even those federal judges who may someday be deciding whether or not religious group-use of shrooms is to be allowed, under RFRA.

Telluride’s Mushroom Festival would also be a fine venue for talks and panels on religious group-use: safe formats for doing, how best to get those tested and researched, and how best to go about legalization. Those who’d likely be full of ideas and wisdom would include Bob Jesse (a former VP at software giant Oracle), Paul Stamets (author of *Psilocybin Mushrooms of the World*), Roy Haber (that lawyer who got ayahuasca approved, under RFRA, for the Santo Daime), Kat Harrison, Gary Lincoff, Mike Young (a Unitarian Universalists minister who was one of those psilocybin 10 in that Marsh Chapel Experiment) and perhaps others of that Marsh Chapel psilocybin-group. Any emails or petitions in support of particular topics or people might best be sent to the Telluride Mushroom Festival’s Executive Director (and Editor of FUNGI) Britt Bunyard.

It would help if at least one respected

theology school would, with FDA approval, research religious group-use of some *Psilocybe* species as to its possible usefulness to their ministry – and, if useful, train some ministers in conducting such services. That could establish a source of trained ministers, help protect from clowns and pied pipers, and make it easier for sincere groups to get religious-use legalized under RFRA. The theology school most involved with that Marsh Chapel Experiment was Andover Newton Theological Seminary in Newton, Massachusetts. Walter H. Clark, who taught Psychology of Religion there, procured most of the theology student volunteers from there. Thus, there might be more interest in doing such research at Andover Newton, than elsewhere. If interested in inquiring, or possibly supporting such work, Andover Newton’s current President is The Rev. Martin B. Copenhagen.

Or might at least one of the medical schools, currently researching individual use of psilocybin, help guide (by maybe just one or two in-house trials?) some religious school towards religious group-use? Most all the research that Johns Hopkins does or has done, with psilocybin, involves a regime that requires up to three weeks of pre-use talk-sessions for building trust and bonding – along with digging up and probing hurtful memories – for a sort of psychotherapy-lite. Researchers there call that “integration” and seem to consider it important. Bill Richards (Hopkins’ only psilocybin researcher having both theology and psychology degrees), in his recent book *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences* (Richards, 2015), describes it as follows: “What we call integration seems to entail a repetitive, intentional movement within awareness between memories from alternative states of consciousness and the demands and opportunities of everyday existence, including former habits of thought and action that may feel out of sync with the new knowledge or self-concept. For instance, the person who has suffered from alcoholism and who during the action of an entheogen has experienced a sense of unconditional love and acceptance cannot return to the former feelings of low self-worth and wallow in them without feeling a

disconnect and a need for integration. He or she may well feel humility, but it arises not out of a sense of worthlessness but rather out of awe and reverence.” And Richards does value “integration.” On page 139 he writes, “Simply prescribing an entheogen as a purely chemotherapeutic medication appears unlikely to be helpful for very many people.” And he goes on, “. . . it is not the simple administration of the psychedelic substance that promotes healing and facilitates personal and spirited maturation; it is the discrete states of consciousness that are skillfully facilitated and experienced during the period of entheogen action and their subsequent memory and integration that constitutes the effective healing principles.” But on page 149, he undermines that a bit with evidence that religious use (sans-integration) of several entheogens (ayahuasca, peyote, and psilocybin) can cure addictions.

Actually, no research has as yet been reported that shows that those weeks of integration even contribute usefully. Thus, researchers may be rather undervaluing psilocybin. And that interviewing and probing of memories could be seen as being a bit invasive. As Richards writes on page 188, “Typically during this period, spread out over at least one or often two or three weeks, one’s life history is shared in confidence, including important relationships, career developments, religious or non-religious history and present orientation, travel experiences, and any unique traumas or accomplishments that have occurred thus far in life.” And such probing is not done just with the troubled, but with all. Asking intimate questions could have downsides. What if a person lies, imagines, or dreams some previous touching, or rape, and the guide phones the police? We did have a McMartin preschool trial, here in Los Angeles, back in 1983. Five of the McMartins and three of their teachers were charged with 321 counts of child abuse involving 48 children. After a seven-year trial, and years of jail time for some, all were ultimately acquitted or not convicted. If clinical psilocybin is ever to go big-time, either in clinics or retreat centers, it might be good if those would shift to some combination of just interview, questionnaire, and medical tests for

picking out those who really do need the intimate probing – and, for those who don't, maybe at least offer a one or two session, self-integrative, option? Would that Johns Hopkins could at least help guide religious group-use of shrooms towards a religious humanism of bolstered kindness, empathy, openness, and achievement. But is Johns Hopkins's commitment to do (or pressure from above to do?) "integration for all" just too strong to allow that? A positive evaluation, based just on interview, questionnaire and medical tests (Addendum 2) could be all that's required – if healthy and untroubled – for religious group-use participation. And, at least the healthy and untroubled, might best be allowed to experience their group-use wonderment pretty much on their own – assisted only, when needed, by trained guides. Down in Huautla de Jemenez, it is still possible to arrive in the morning, have your supervised *velada* that night, and come away having had a most memorable, self-integrative, peak-life experience – with just the OK of the curandera or the shaman.

Yet another route to *veladas*, and getting them researched, could be to just contact local ministers as to their possible willingness in having a *velada* interest group join their congregation. Unitarian Universalists do pride themselves on being humanistic, non-creedal, and accepting of a wide range of beliefs. And they do encourage member groups to meet together in Small Group Ministries (SGMs) for discussions and projects. Possibly an *s-s velada* could be an SGM project – or getting it researched by Johns Hopkins or Andover Newton? Even if only 15 or 20 were interested in *velada* participation, there might well be many willing to volunteer, as helpers or controls, should any university or theological school care to research the possible benefits of special occasion group-use. Other possible uses, of sans-shrooms *veladas*, could be to push (via tripsitting, *s-s velada*, counseling, and pamphlets) religious-flavored Harm Reduction, of the sort that Rick Doblin's Zendo Project does at EDM venues and mystic festivals like Burning Man (USA), Boom (Portugal), Cosmo (UK), and Eclipse (Canada). Perhaps get church members trained, at such

places, in handling bad trips and visitors better instructed in how to avoid bad trips – or worse (e.g. by just never using MDMA for dancing – or any other pills that one is not sure of as to their content, purity, safety, and legality). And with minister leadership, perhaps yet one other SGM project could be to hire a good lawyer and challenge the federal prohibition of shrooms, for religious use at that particular church, under RFRA. With the right sort of minister, congregation, and support, all that could be done.

WANT TO FIND OUT MORE? You can find additional information at the FUNGI website, fungimag.com, see: Part II. Psilocybin mushrooms and religious experience: Let's start the adventure. You can also take part in this discussion at the annual Telluride Mushroom Festival. See calendar and ad in this issue for details.

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