

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Psychology of religion has always been interested in religious experience, and especially such intense forms as conversion and mysticism. Research has had to depend mostly on autobiographical accounts long after the fact. There have been few truly empirical studies which have analyzed these phenomena during or shortly after they have occurred.

With increasing frequency, books and articles have been appearing which make the claim that certain chemical substances (most notably mescaline, lysergic acid diethylamide, and psilocybin) are capable of inducing under appropriate conditions "mystical" or "religious" experience. Such claims have been met with skepticism from many religious people, and rightly so. The evidence presented has been, in most cases, a series of very subjective personal accounts which, while interesting, does not systematically attack the problem or prove the point.

In the first place, "mystical" or "religious" experience is too broad and general a term; it lacks precise definition as to what exactly is meant. One cannot be

sure that any two persons are talking about the same thing unless the phenomena are first carefully defined. In the second place, personal accounts¹ and subjective claims do not prove anything without controlled studies to rule out the possibility that these experiences were due to factors other than drugs. Also, such experiences usually occur under a variety of conditions and circumstances in which the number of unknown factors is so complex as to defy differentiation and elucidation. In the third place, an enthusiastic claim made by a person who has had the experience is open to the suspicion of misguided personal bias in the interpretation of what actually occurred.

This investigation was undertaken, therefore, to study in an empirical way the similarities and differences between experiences described by mystics and those induced by these drugs. The research was designed to overcome the three shortcomings which were mentioned above.

(1) A phenomenological typology of the mystical state of consciousness was carefully defined after a study of the writings of the mystics themselves and of scholars who have tried to characterize mystical experience.

(2) Some drug experiences were empirically studied

not by collecting such experiences wherever an interesting or striking one might have been found and analyzed after the fact, but by conducting a double-blind, controlled experiment with subjects whose religious background and experience as well as personality were evaluated before their drug experiences. The preparation of the subjects, the setting under which the drug was administered, and the collection of data about the experiences, were made as uniform as possible.

(3) The experimenter himself conducted the experiment, collected the data, and wrote up the results without ever having had an experience with any of these drugs. Furthermore, the typology by which the drug experiences were measured was constructed before the drug experiment was run.

Before proceeding with a presentation of our typology of mysticism and our experimental evidence, we shall briefly review the historical use of naturally occurring psychedelic¹ substances used in connection with religious

¹"Psychedelic" was coined by Dr. Humphrey Osmond from the Greek and, literally translated, means "mind-manifesting" or "mind-opening." ("A review of the clinical effects of psychotomimetic agents," Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, Vol. LXVI, [1957], pp. 418-434.) These substances produce changes in the mental state with the retention of mental clarity and awareness. Mescaline, psilocybin, and lysergic acid

practice as well as the literature on so-called "mystical" or "religious" experiences produced by synthetic psychedelic chemicals.

diethylamide (or, more simply, LSD) are the best known. Other terms which have been used are: "psychotomimetic," "hallucinogenic," "illuminogenic," "mind-distorting," etc. Although such effects may also occur, these words imply a negative evaluation, whereas the phenomena herein studied were generally regarded positively by those who experienced them.