

an invitation to **entheological** dialogue

Reverend Mike **Young**

If the **research** MAPS supports is permitted to go forward; and

If the results turn out to be as many of us **hope**; and

If these once taboo drugs come to be **used** with pain patients, the terminally ill and addicts; and

If the families, friends and others who see and hear the results **demand** the experience, **too**;

Then we religious leaders are going to **experience** crises

for which we are almost **wholly** unprepared.

Paradox

The first crisis derives from the fact that institutionalized religion has been all but completely co-opted in the "War on Drugs." We have labeled all drug use outside the strict medical model as naughty. It is curious logic: If you want to use drugs and you're not sick, you are naughty. If you persist, you are sick and we'll give you some other drugs. Many physicians won't prescribe addictive drugs even for terminal patients in acute pain for fear they'll become addicted. The fear here is that the doctor will be perceived as naughty. And prescribing a naughty drug that obviates the need for addictive drugs is naughty for the same reason; namely, our moralistic response to the problems created by a drug-saturated and obsessed culture.

The religious establishment has overwhelmingly bought all of this and painted itself into an especially awkward corner. It used to be that you were naughty if you did something that harmed another. Now it has come to be that you are naughty if you appear not to disapprove sufficiently strongly of naughtiness. That appearance of approval has us tied up in knots. Now we are faced with the possibility of some drugs that do very positive things to otherwise normal – not sick – people. This is not a context that is promising for

useful public policy decision-making. Here are some drugs that reshape and reframe our meaning-making in ways that we religious leaders have always said were good. How could that be naughty?

Whose theology?

The second crisis has to do with the apparent fact that the self-transcending and self-transforming experiences with these drugs do not occur in a particular theological language. Here is an experience that has all of the outcomes we have said we sought, but consistently confirms none of our particularistic theological languages. We know that the experience occurs in symbols, images and language partly determined by set and setting. But similar and similarly self-transcending and self-transforming experiences occur for Catholics and Baptists, Jews and Buddhists, Unitarians and Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Evangelical and Reformed Expiationists. Some will occur in language more or less familiar to the experience, some will not. But it will pretty clearly be the same experience back of the diversity of theological language. Ecumenically-oriented clergy are prepared to be tolerant of one another. But for the total relativizing of our historical universes of discourse, we are not prepared; to say nothing of having prepared our parishioners.

The diversity of theological language is going to challenge the particularities of our religious heritages in unprecedented ways. Religious people, lay and clergy alike, *generally*

Editor's Note:

Reverend Young was one of the ten divinity students who received psilocybin in Walter Pahnke's 1962 Good Friday Experiment. Pahnke's experiment was designed to investigate the potential of psychedelic drugs to facilitate mystical experience.

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tend to regard religious language as competing truth claims. That the experience back of our language is the same human experience is going to produce some serious cognitive dissonance. So far this cognitive dissonance has been confined to small pockets within faith traditions. For example, Benedictine contemplatives have more in common with Buddhist monks than they do with the Pope. I experienced this first-hand at the Buddhist/Christian Dialogues in Berkeley in 1987. Even the most "liberal" of our constituencies have got to suspect apostasy.

New responses needed

And, crisis number three: How will we respond to our own followers telling us that the drug experience is religious experience, that our faith boundaries are fluid, if not passé? We're already worried about church shoppers seeking out the best music, the best preaching, the most feel-good worship, etc., quite irrespective of any brand loyalty. Imagine our panic at a Jerry Falwell promising the Holy Spirit in a pill. Get your rhetoric polished, fellow pastors. It's going to get weird.

Assuming we can get around or through these crises without awakening religious wars, how do we create the appropriate set and setting for the drug experience? This crisis is already happening as the research begins to be shaped. The researchers are not liturgists and religious poets, and the research settings are not religious settings. Yet the experience is inherently religious. It is, after all, about self-transcendence, about meaning-creating and meaning-transforming. And these, not creeds, are what religion is finally about.

How do we learn to most usefully and effectively evoke the set and create the setting for non-particularistic religious experience? Traditional liturgy isn't it, if for no other reason than that it is too talky and casts the participant as spectator. "Generic" religious language is not promising. All I've seen so far has the power to evoke nothing but boredom. If we can't even agree on how to do public prayer in the civic religion together, how can we hope to shape the drug experience set and setting for people of hopelessly diverse interior mythic dialogue?

Preparing for the experience

My current working hypothesis is that we must start the experience with some understandings of the diversity of theological language before the *experiencers embark* on the drug experience. I would prepare them with a conceptual model that affirms the experience as primary and the language they find themselves using to apprehend and integrate it as decidedly secondary. I would illustrate it with the best of the art, poetry and

imagery from all our heritages, from secular humanist to contemplative mystical. Somewhere in all that metaphor they may be given permission to find their own hooks on which to hang their experience.

Back in the 60's I had occasion to trip sit some bad LSD trips. Several of us noted at the time that a common feature of the bad trip was that the tripper had no language for what was happening. On the other hand, virtually identical imagery in the minds of those with some familiarity with mystical traditions was integrated much less threateningly. Those who expected oneness with the universe with no dark night of the soul were terrified and fled ego-loss into the demonic ether. When a westerner says, "I am God," we lock him up in the funny farm. When a Hindu says it, his fellow Hindus say, "Ah, you finally got it!"

But we also found that all too often the experience tended to give cosmic validity to whatever language mediated it. We often had to keep reminding our trippers that the experience was happening inside their own heads, that the images were the furniture of their own minds. Some came back "believing in" spirits and demons with a literalness that might embarrass even the most fundamentalist.

How do we prepare people for the fact that the experience is REAL, and, at the same time, is linguistically mediated; that the language in which the experience is re-presented is metaphorical?

Religiously multi-lingual

The drug experience can evoke a reordering, a reframing, of the experienter's meanings and meaning-making. The ego-loss of LSD, the re-connectedness to empathy of MDMA, the standing naked before the infinite to the point of being out of the body of ketamine: these provide the occasion for the reframing of the existential "Who am I?" and the "What is, therefore, important?" that the experienter realizes they have gotten so wrong. This reframing and re-connecting, this re-membering of ourselves, is what pushes and pulls us to be more than we are. This self-transcendence and self-transformation, *spoken of in differing* ways and sought by differing means, is at the heart of our various spiritual disciplines. But when short-circuited into obsessive ideology, it merely multiplies dogmatism.

How can we teach ourselves and our fledgling mystics to be religiously multi-lingual in preparation for an experience that promises to totally reshape that most basic human tool, the language of meaning? If the "Ifs" with which I started out happen, we may have to learn in a hurry or miss an incredible opportunity. •

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