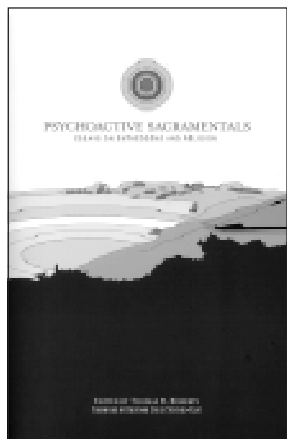


Book Review: Psychoactive Sacramentals



Psychoactive Sacramentals: Essays on Entheogens and Religion is a compendium gleaned from a 1995 retreat sponsored by the Chicago Theological Seminary and the Council on Spiritual Practices. Edited by Thomas B. Roberts, and with a foreword by Brother David Steindl-Rast, the book features talk transcriptions and essays from: Rev. Mike Young, Huston Smith, Roger N. Walsh, Stanislav Grof, Charles T. Tart, Rick Doblin,

Annelise Schinzinger, Alexander T. Shulgin, David Presti and Jerome Beck, Rev. Aline M. Lucas, Myron Stolaroff, Rev. George F. Cairns, Frances Vaughan, Ann Shulgin, Rev. Karla Hansen, Richard Glen Boire, Robert Jesse, and others.

I have been reading *Psychoactive Sacramentals* on and off for a couple of months. It has not been a book that I plunged into and read at one sitting, but rather one that I circle about, reveling in its various ideas, some new, some old, some challenging, and others less so. It often appears at night, when I drag myself off to bed; there it is working its way to the top of the book pile. I pick it up and become immersed, finding myself flitting in and out of it one or two essays at a go, or revisiting some particular essay for further understanding. The following are mini-reviews of just a few of the many essays contained therein.

Albert Hofmann's essay on "LSD as a Spiritual Aid" concisely covers some important territory, putting into 3–4 pages what some people might stretch into a moderate-sized book. He elegantly discusses the nature of reality, and how LSD helped him look at the essence of it—both the objective material world and the inner spiritual world.

It was an unexpected pleasure to find Will Penna's poem "*las noches de los ayahuasqueros*" in a book otherwise filled with essays. Alternating back and forth from Spanish to English, the poem artfully presents Penna's ayahuasca journey with Don Pablo. It is divided into an intro section, descriptions of visions accessed through the ayahuasca, and icaros (ayahuasca healing/voyaging songs). Penna does a beautiful job of conveying the essence of his Amazonian journey. I have revisited this poem a few times; having read dry "trip reports" time and again, the structure of the poem seems to fit more with the idea of the healing journey. Penna does Don Pablo justice with this piece.

Although I am more comfortable with subjects other than biblical research, I found Dan Merkur's "Manna, the Showbread, and the Eucharist: Psychoactive Sacraments in the Bible" very engaging. Merkur covered ground that is

being discussed with increasing frequency—for example Clark Heinrich's work related to *Amanita muscaria* and early Christianity. Merkur notes references, from Exodus and beyond, that point to the possibility of a lysergic-based sacrament, first consumed in general pan-tribal situations and then becoming an item used exclusively in the realm of the priest as time went on. He posits that one reason for early Christian persecution can be traced to Jesus and the Disciples openly promulgating a psychoactive revolution of spiritual experience. I found Merkur's speculations to be quite intriguing.

Roger N. Walsh's essay "Consciousness and Asian Traditions: An Evolutionary Perspective" works through the various spiritual systems—descending from Paleolithic times and the technology of shamanism, through the development of early Vedic thought (and putting a few holes in Marija Gimbutas' Kurgan/Patriarchal invasion scenarios), the practice of yoga, and the Buddhist take on the whole cosmic ball of wax. It concludes with the dangerous place we find the world in today, where the global implications of the modern state of mind imperils life as we know it.

Kathleen O'Shaughnessy's "The Strengthening Aspects of Zen and Contemporary Meditation Practices," was one of my favorite essays. It is a succinct work that presents her background and a practical plan for engaging the future with a simple but well-conceived plan to bring change to the world through the blending of meditation practice with the gentle act of gardening. Her thoughts on the introduction of DMT-containing plants into our diet, borrowed somewhat from Terence McKenna, offer up an approach that borders on the revolutionary. Delightful!

While I found great value in many of the essays, a few of them fell short of the mark. Paula Jo Hruby's "Unitive Consciousness and Pahnke's Good Friday Experiment" was over-analytical. Although she makes good on explaining various states of consciousness, she complicates things by fragmenting them into unnecessary categories. Thomas J. Riedlinger's "A Pilgrim's Visit to Marsh Chapel" didn't engage me. It could have been the subject matter or the style of the writing, but it was difficult for me to crack into this essay, and I was not moved emotionally or intellectually. With those slight criticisms out of the way, the book definitely has treasures to offer up.

Alas, my brief review doesn't do *Psychoactive Sacramentals* justice. Its contents span many aspects of the emerging combination of traditional belief systems with the rediscovery of entheogens and their applied use in our present time. I suggest you find a copy, and excavate to your heart's delight. •

– Gwyllm Llwydd/Rowan Tree Arts