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# Hesychasm and Psychedelics: Altered States, Purgation, and the Question of Authentic Mysticism

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Abstract: *The purpose of this essay is to introduce the reader to the tradition of Hesychasm—a form of monastic asceticism rooted in the tradition of the Desert Fathers and given a systematic articulation by the Byzantine author Gregory Palamas (1296–1359)—and to consider how the mystical experiences described in Palamas’s Triads compare to the altered states at the center of contemporary psychedelic research. After reviewing the chief claims of the hesychastic tradition about the nature and purpose of ascetic practice, the essay will consider the methodological challenges psychedelic researchers face when assessing experiences induced by psychedelic substances. The last section will turn to the discipline of Comparative Theology as a helpful framework to bring into dialogue the hesychastic understanding of deification as a trajectory grounded in the reception of the sacraments and the therapeutic impact of psychedelic experiences. The essay will uncover different points of contact between hesychastic and psychedelic experience but will also foreground a number of irreducible differences between the two, reflecting the specific anthropological and soteriological claims of the hesychastic tradition. The conclusion will advocate for greater epistemic modesty—warning from overhasty identification of mystical states and psychedelic experiences—but also invite theologians and psychedelic researchers to greater reciprocal openness to each other’s insights.*

## INTRODUCTION

What is the nature of mystical experience? Can one achieve, or indeed manufacture, mystical experience and thus gain mastery over an alternative dimension of reality? Or is mystical experience bound to be an elusive phenomenon whose arrival we can welcome, but never force, and whose character and import are always bound to transcend our cognitive capacities? Even more controversially, we could ask whether mystical experience discloses a reality that is wholly other and distinct from us, or if it opens the door to some unfathomable depths of the human psyche that are always present but walled up behind barriers raised by rationalist reductionism out of short-sightedness or perhaps fear. The revival of psychedelic research in recent years has elicited much interest in the points of contact between the experiences brought about by psychedelic substances and the altered states encountered in the lives of Christian mystics or practitioners of other religious traditions. At the same time, this interest has often appeared one-sided, as many scholars of religion with more traditional dispositions have been skeptical about the alleged overlaps or echoes between psychedelic experience and mystical practice. This pushes to the side possible inquiries between the two fields. For instance, could one find a developed theology of



mystical practice in the Christian tradition that could illumine some of the findings of Psychedelic Science? And even if we were able to find such an interdisciplinary bridge, what would this encounter teach us about the relationship between psychedelic experiences and Christian spiritual practice?

The tradition of Eastern Christian mysticism has always emphasized the transformative dimension of spiritual practice, where the pursuit of contemplation and the practice of virtues are seen as the entry point for a sustained reconfiguration of one's inner life that eventually affects the totality of our psychophysical being. The notion of deification (*theōsis*), which can be traced back to the first centuries of the Church and which finds its fullest articulation in the writings of the *Philokalia* and the hesychastic tradition systematized by Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), will resonate with contemporary scholars interested in the relationship between religious practice, transhumanism, and spiritual enhancement.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, scholars and practitioners who claim that psychedelic experiences can and do occasion spiritual experiences that have sustained meaning and significance for those who undergo them increasingly confront traditional religious believers keen to defend the unique transformative potential of their spiritual discipline.<sup>2</sup> The question is how to bridge the gap between two conversations that often appear to take place independently of each other.

In recent decades, the rise and increasing dominance and normativity of scientific and medicalized approaches to altered states have led to the privileging of secularized and often decontextualized techniques and hermeneutic approaches to the study of mystical experience. Traditionally, the discipline of Contemplative Studies has sought to remedy this imbalance, and in the words of the prominent contemporary Daoist scholar Louis Komjathy, it has set out to “practice commitment, critical subjectivity and character development” in its study of specific spiritual practice.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, as Komjathy himself acknowledges in his introduction to the discipline, Contemplative Studies has often marginalized religiously committed contemplatives and has effectively “underutilized” Christianity—and other disciplines—as a critical site for inquiry.<sup>4</sup> By turning to the discipline of Comparative Theology to bring into the conversation Hesychasm's understanding of mystical transformation and the therapeutic impact of psychedelic experiences, this essay seeks to offer a theological supplementation to Contemplative Studies' engagement of reductionist readings of mystical experience, at a time when the conversation between proponents of the transformative potential of psychedelic substances and traditional scholars of religion appears to be at an impasse.

After exploring the historical roots and the theological import of hesychastic experience and mapping the contemporary scientific conversation on altered states, the concluding section of this essay will acknowledge the existence of numerous points of contact between hesychastic and psychedelic experience. At the same time, the comparison between these two modes of spiritual practice will also evidence a number of irreducible ontological as well as soteriological differences. In particular, the essay will foreground the hesychastic emphasis on sacramental participation and its claim that authentic mystical experience can only be transformative in the presence of an intentional and sustained reconfiguration of the inner life—a trajectory that the classical tradition of Christian spirituality calls the *via purgativa*. A way psychedelic practitioners may benefit from a closer acquaintance with the hesychastic tradition may not be a recovery of its specifically Christian theological commitments—or its particular modalities to ready oneself for

sacramental participation—but familiarity with Palamas’s vision may encourage a greater appreciation for the kinds of ritual cleansing and preparation that would have attended psychedelic practice in traditional Indigenous contexts.

## DEMONS, DESERTS, AND EARLY CHRISTIAN ASCETICS

To understand the theological claims and the historical significance of Hesychasm, we need to revisit the contours of the Christian monastic tradition in the first centuries of its development. The presence of intentional communities of celibates practicing a common life was attested as early as the second century, but after the cessation of Roman governmental persecutions in the early fourth century, the Egyptian and Palestinian deserts saw the emergence of more structured monastic settlements centered on communal prayer and liturgical practice.<sup>5</sup> Athanasios’s *Life of Anthony*, written in the mid-fourth century, is one of the earliest hagiographic testimonies from this period. This text attested to the flourishing of this mode of spiritual practice and left numerous testimonies as to the extraordinary spiritual but also physical abilities of particular ascetics, who were credited with supernatural powers of insight, bilocation, and healing.<sup>6</sup> Texts such as the *Apophthegmata Patrum* report anecdotes sometimes bordering on the magical and fantastic, recounting the Desert Fathers’ miraculous deeds and their encounters with the demons said to roam the deserts.<sup>7</sup> Schöngauer’s *Tribulations of Saint Anthony* offers an iconic portrayal of this spiritual struggle, depicting the elderly hermit lifted into the air by a crowd of demonic creatures.<sup>8</sup>

In most cases, however, the spiritual battle between good and evil forces was not fought in a public and visible manner but in the depths of the individual soul. Many spiritual writers of the time would expatiate in detail on the nature of this struggle, advising novices on the way to confront temptations with a developed vocabulary of interiority that classified thoughts and inclinations according to their putative angelic or demonic origin. In the pages of the *Philokalia*—an anthology of spiritual writings edited by Nikodemos the Hagiorite (1749–1809) and Makarios of Corinth (1731–1805), published in 1782—one finds the arc of development of an uninterrupted tradition, covering over a millennium from the daring vision of Evagrius Pontikos (ca. 345–395) to the great synthesis of Gregory Palamas and the fall of the Byzantine empire in the 15th century.<sup>9</sup>

Evagrius’s articulation of mystical experience reflects a specific anthropology that arguably deviates from what would come to be regarded as scriptural orthodoxy. In the third century of the Common Era, at a time when the canon of scripture had yet to be set, Origen of Alexandria (ca. 180–256) drew on a plethora of philosophical resources to articulate a Christian soteriology that rested on an *exitus-reditus* dynamic: a circular motion moving from a purely intellectual reality to a world of difference and corporeality that was the consequence of a mysterious cosmic catastrophe that could only be healed by the intervention of the Logos and his irruption into the world.<sup>10</sup> Evagrius’s contribution wove together Origen’s cosmological speculation and the spiritual vision of the Desert Fathers into a spiritual system where the individual ascetic could anticipate in the depths of his soul—indeed, Evagrius’s audience was almost invariably male—the restoration of the primordial unity that existed before the beginning of this world.<sup>11</sup> Many centuries later, Teresa of Ávila’s *Interior Castle* would sketch the movement of the soul into the penetralia of a labyrinthine mansion with many inner chambers, surrounded by a moat teeming with demons.<sup>12</sup> Compared to the baroque lavishness of this scene, Evagrius’s inner landscape is more austere—indeed, Evagrius warns of the danger of mental images, themselves baits thrown at us by the

adversary—and merely mentions a three-tiered trajectory that everyone without exception has to undertake. The entry point to this process and the *sine qua non* of all ascetic work are the initial process of reordering one's inner and outer lives to achieve the kind of intellectual equilibrium and detachment that make further progress possible. This is what the later Latin tradition would call the *via purgativa* or way of purgation: a moment in one's life that Origen sees prefigured in the book of Proverbs, a strikingly matter-of-fact element of the Jewish scriptures that brims with practical advice about one's personal conduct and the running of one's household. While the mainstream Jewish tradition did not call for monastic withdrawal from this world, early Christian ascetics would retrieve this work and turn it into a manual for the monastic life, full of warnings about the dangers posed by disordered attachments to material goods.<sup>13</sup>

Evagrius's technique to classify thoughts according to their origin would be known as *discretio spirituum* or discernment of spirits. The Greek term *diakrisis* actually gestures at a judgment that the individual is called to pass on the source of one's temptations or inner inclinations.<sup>14</sup> The way one comes to look at reality is the result of this process of inner training: gold, which ultimately is just a substance we come across in the natural world, could elicit thoughts marked by selfishness if one were tempted to use it for one's benefit. Or if inspired by altruism, one could choose gold for the purpose of charity. Educating oneself or weaning oneself away from self-centered patterns of thought is thus at the center of this process; Evagrius's advice to move away from recurrent mental images anticipates contemporary psychotherapy's insights about habits of dependence, while his reflections on the link between mental habits and behavior resonate with the work of cognitive-behavioral theorists. Without the reordering of one's inner intellectual and behavioral scaffolding, there is no room for further progress and attempting more advanced forms of prayer without the adequate preparation would cause harm. This is the same as when individuals affected by different forms of dependence or trauma take on more advanced forms of meditation and frequently deepen their inner discomfort.<sup>15</sup>

The goal of the *via purgativa* is *apatheia*, dispassion: a state where passions are not eradicated but ordered so that an inner equilibrium is achieved. In a world of disordered plurality, one creates an ordered multiplicity that is subordinate to the intellect and anticipates the restoration of unity that, for Evagrius, shall come at the end of time. What follows is the *via illuminativa*, portrayed in Ecclesiastes' stern reflections on the fallen and transitory character of everything that exists in this world. This type of detached contemplation is said to be akin to God's vision of the created order, but the actual goal of the spiritual path is the *via unitiva*, a union of the individual with the Godhead. For Evagrius, this embrace erases all difference.<sup>16</sup> Origen saw a prefiguration of the joys of this mystical union in the pages of the Song of Songs, where the bride and the groom are breathless with mutual love and enchantment. This book would come to inspire countless authors to write allegorical commentaries, from Gregory of Nyssa (335–95) to Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153).<sup>17</sup> At the same time, Evagrius's portrayal of the highest stage of mystical union does not linger on the affective aspects of the experience, instead underscoring the purely noetic quality of this encounter with the divine. Indeed, this is an encounter that ceases to be such, as the human and the divine partner fuse into a unity where there is no longer any distinct subjectivity.

For Evagrius, the highest reaches of mystical experience are a recovery or retrieval of an inner condition that is present in the depths of one's being, yet obfuscated by layers of ignorance and self-centered desires. Epistemic and ontological transformation complement each other: on one

hand, there is a process of cognitive purification; on the other hand, this purification is paving the way for a transformation that is present in the here and now but will only be fulfilled eschatologically in the embrace of undifferentiated oneness.

## GREGORY PALAMAS AND *HĒSYCHIA*

If we look at the synthesis wrought by Palamas almost a thousand years later, the fundamental three-tiered structure of the mystical trajectory remains unvaried from its Evagrian origin, though we do also see some significant shifts already in the fifth and sixth centuries. In the wake of the council of Chalcedon (451) and its Christological definition, the general tendency was to move toward a more embodied form of practice. In the spiritual tradition of Makarios, for instance, the centrality of the intellect (*nous*) is balanced with an equal attention to the role of the heart, where *pneuma*, the spirit, becomes the crucial *trait d'union* between the two.<sup>18</sup> Focusing on the breath, ascetics open themselves up to the divine and become receptacles of the Holy Spirit; indeed, the distinction between the practitioners' breath and the Holy Spirit, the breath of God, is sometimes blurred, as ordered attention to the former paves the way to the latter and its cleansing, transformative impact. At the same time, ascetic practice comes to acquire a more pronounced incarnational dimension, reflecting an increased ecclesial emphasis on the soteriological implications of the hypostatic union. A story, most likely apocryphal, tells us of Evagrius asking Makarios, "Father, give me a word to live by." To this, Makarios responds, "Secure the anchor rope to the rock and by the grace of God the ship will ride the devilish waves of this beguiling sea.... The ship is your heart; keep guard over it. The rope is your mind; secure it to our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the rock who has power over all the waves... because it is not difficult, is it, to say with each breath, 'Our Lord Jesus, have mercy on me.'"<sup>19</sup>

While the pursuit of *hēsychia*, inner peace, remains the fundamental anchor of spiritual practice, the monastic literature comes more and more to emphasize the pneumatological, as well as the Christological, aspect. As early as the late second century, Theophilus of Antioch, the author of the "Apology to Autolytus," had emphasized that we all exist because of God's breath;<sup>20</sup> if we look at the testimony of Saint Silouan the Athonite (1866–1938), almost a contemporary of ours, we shall see that he is often portrayed with a scroll whose words ask God to breathe the Holy Spirit over the whole face of the earth.<sup>21</sup> Yet, there is no pneumatology without Christology: in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, John Climacus (sixth–seventh century) writes, "Let the remembrance of Jesus be with you every breath."<sup>22</sup> Another Philokalic author, Hesychios the Priest (ca. seventh century), equally says in *On Watchfulness and Holiness*: "If you really wish to cover over your evil thoughts, to be still and calm, and to watch over your heart, let the Jesus Prayer cleave to your breath, and in a few days you will find that this is possible." Later, he says, "Let us continually breathe Jesus Christ, the power of God the Father and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24).... With your breathing combine watchfulness (*nēpsis*) and the name of Jesus."<sup>23</sup> What we can trace over the centuries between Evagrius and Palamas is the development of a Christocentrically modulated form of psychophysical practice that underscores mental prayer and breath regulation, a harmonization of affectivity and intellect, and the achievement of peace and watchfulness as the result of cognitive or epistemological cleansing. In the Western tradition, Augustine's *Confessions* do intimate the transition between the *regio dissimilitudinis*, the region of unlikeness, and the

condition of clarity and cognitive stillness wrought by grace, but even the doctor of Hyppo does not leave to his readers such a structured program of psychophysical transformation.<sup>24</sup>

Palamas's spiritual synthesis in the *Triads* ought to be read as a response to the situation that he was facing. After the demise of the Latin Empire of the East, the Byzantine state had returned to play an important political and economic role in the Eastern Mediterranean; at the same time, despite the failure of the project of union with the Roman Church encouraged by Emperor Michael VIII Paleologos (1225–1282), Byzantium's religious culture was increasingly marked by Latin influences, thanks in part to the growing role of the Italian and French universities that were transforming the way Theology had traditionally been written and indeed *practiced* as a way of life.<sup>25</sup> Away from the monasteries, which had been Theology's chief milieu, speculation about the mystery of God acquires a more philosophical, systematic, and often self-referential character, drawing on the resources of logic and the rediscovered riches of Aristotelian philosophy. This was sometimes apparently in preference over the writings of the earlier Fathers, the testimony of scripture, or the insights from one's own spiritual experience.<sup>26</sup> At the opposite end of the cultural and intellectual spectrum, so to speak, Byzantine Theology found itself confronted by a movement that critiqued the traditional understanding of monastic practice to seemingly favor a purely individualistic approach to practice. The Messalian movement, whose intellectual contours are unclear but whose cultural impact was significant, appeared to question the centrality of sacramental practice in the context of monastic life and affirmed that one could achieve altered mystical states on one's own by way of psychophysical exercises, without sacramental mediation and largely sidelining the role of ecclesial tradition. Palamas found himself between two opposing but equally problematic approaches: on one hand was what he viewed—possibly unfairly—as a dry, intellectual Theology that failed to articulate a spiritual horizon for the individual and arguably did not even build on a previous practice of inner transformation; on the other he saw a disordered spiritualism that was indifferent to the necessary intellectual cleansing needed for spiritual progress and that also disregarded the central role of sacramental practice.<sup>27</sup> Scholasticism severed the link between Theology and mystical practice, but so did Messalianism; both movements failed to integrate noetic purification with affective transformation and, even more crucially, seemed to detach mystical states from sacramental mediation. The purpose of the *Triads*, therefore, was to present Hesychasm as an antidote to both Scholasticism and Messalianism, presenting the mystical path of the Eastern Church as an ordered and cogent synthesis grounded in the scriptures. Within this synthesis, mystical experiences unfold in a Trinitarian dialectic of transformation, and there is a synergy between individual effort on one hand and the divine initiative on the other. Without the Spirit and without the sacraments—especially the Eucharist, which for Palamas is the chief vehicle of deification—there is no possibility of theōsis. At the same time, hesychastic practitioners must always remember that without initial purgation, a scouring of the intellect and of the heart, neither the Spirit nor the flesh of Christ can open up for them the treasures of the kingdom of God.<sup>28</sup>

Palamas's predicament could be said to reflect a very contemporary challenge: how are we to envisage a possible mode of spiritual practice that escapes the strictures of reductionist rationalism and simultaneously avoids the pitfalls of a solipsistic search for spiritual experiences detached from conventional religious traditions? Caught between an enlightened rationality that expunges the spiritual dimension from respectable intellectual discourse and a hyper-individualized spirituality, 21st-century seekers find themselves at a loss, unable to discern a way forward toward

integration and transcendence. In the 14th century, Palamas thought that the discernment of spirits and the resulting condition of apatheia were still the best possible ways to access the divine. The divine, for Palamas, was a reality wholly distinct, both metaphysically and epistemologically, from the subjectivity of the practitioners but one that would and could nonetheless transform them and invest them with the divine energies that surround the Godhead. The divine essence is inaccessible, perennially eluding the reach of the human mind, but this essence overflows into the universe by way of its energetic dimension that sustains and transfigures each and every element of creation.<sup>29</sup>

In the *Triads*, as in the works of earlier authors such as Maximos the Confessor, the mystery of the Transfiguration is introduced as the archetypal manifestation of deification in its Christological and soteriological dimensions.<sup>30</sup> The three disciples who completed the *via purgativa* and whose senses were therefore purified and heightened became capable of beholding the transfigured Lord; while the Old Testament tradition had claimed that only those who had died could see God, the event of the Transfiguration does not contradict this claim, as Peter, James, and John died *to the self*. They underwent a kind of kenotic self-emptying, whereby they transcended their carnal desires and could therefore access the reality of the living Trinitarian God. This does not mean, however, that the flesh was cut out from this encounter with the divine. To the contrary, we read that

whenever spiritual joy comes to the body from the *nous*, it is not diminished by this commingling with the body, but rather it transfigures the body, spiritualizing it... at that point the body, rejecting all disordered desires of the flesh, will no longer burden the soul, but actually rise up with it, so that the whole human being becomes spirit, as Scripture says “He who is born of the Spirit, is spirit” (John 3:6).<sup>31</sup>

Already in the seventh century, John Damascene (676–749) had reminded us that in the incarnation Christ’s divinity had turned the passions into a resource for the spiritual life.<sup>32</sup> This perspective complements and builds on the Evagrian vision, as the goal of purgation and apatheia is not the erasure of subjectivity but its full redemption according to the example of Christ. In his monograph, *Human Perfection in Byzantine Theology*, Alexis Torrance presents the Christocentric teaching of theōsis as the summation of Palamite spirituality and, indeed, of the whole tradition of Hesychasm: the individual experiences communion with the Triune God through the divine energies, but these energies are mediated by participation in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.<sup>33</sup> Deification is not the outcome of a natural process of self-transcendence nor does it rest solely on one’s own efforts. It is, instead, the result of an encounter with a personal other. At the same time, one must prepare for this encounter through a process of radical decentering, leaving room for the divine energies that flow from the Triune God.

In that sense, the theology of deification outlined by Palamas seems to be an apposite antidote to the “narcissistic tendencies” Komjathy finds in some forms of decontextualized meditation techniques. These techniques have a preoccupation with the reconfiguration of the self that paradoxically engenders a kind of self-centeredness that is utterly alien to many spiritual teachings, especially those Eastern traditions that question the very existence of a permanent self.<sup>34</sup> Komjathy, a Daoist practitioner, draws on his own tradition to promote a more embodied, intersubjective approach to Contemplative Studies, but the *Triads of the Hesychast Saints* offers

an equally enticing model of *spirituality* that is simultaneously transformative, grounded in the psychophysical totality of the individual, and fundamentally open to a transcendent and personal horizon.

## PSYCHEDELICS AND MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

None of the Philokalic authors, of course, could have ever imagined that many centuries later, in a world they would have found utterly unrecognizable, notions such as “death of the self,” “union with the universe,” and “release from illusion” would become the object of attention not of other spiritual writers but of a medical profession ever keener to explore their potential to treat what they regard as “mental health conditions.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the very notion of mental health would have been an alien construct to practitioners more likely to think in terms of ordered or disordered uses of the intellect and the passions. This is a perspective where the vagaries of the human mind and one’s existential choices are understood in terms of one’s relationship with God rather than through a scientific taxonomy of cognitive and behavioral patterns. Increasingly, the inner experiences brought about by the consumption of substances such as LSD, psilocybin mushrooms, and ayahuasca are understood as modes of mystical experience, as instances of heightened perception transcending ordinary cognitive boundaries and allowing access to new and unexpected dimensions of knowledge.<sup>36</sup> On one hand, as these mystical experiences appear to offer new avenues in the treatment of conditions such as depression, addiction, anxiety, and PTSD, the intentional procuring of these “experiences” is incorporated as a modality of therapeutic intervention in the hope that the ensuing perceptive shift will help bring about a reconfiguration of one’s psyche. On the other hand, as contemporary Medicine and Psychology lack the tools to map and evaluate these experiences, practitioners of psychedelic therapy find themselves in the position of having to reconsider whether traditional accounts of mystical experience may actually offer insights into these inner, altered states that their more skeptical forebears had been quick to dismiss.<sup>37</sup> Many practitioners turn to the wealth of knowledge offered by, broadly defined, Indigenous traditions, where the use of psychedelic substances has often retained a prominent role; others are more open to the insights offered by spiritual authors coming from Judeo-Christian or Islamic backgrounds. At the same time, some authors continue to be suspicious of the insights that can be gained through these comparisons, as the scientific literature attests to the existence of profound and ongoing methodological disagreements.

In his popular 2021 article, journalist Natan Ponieman engages in conversation with different medical practitioners concerning the challenges they face when they test subjects who have had a psychedelic experience. A doctor mentions that “the mystical experience questionnaire” has become “the standard in the field,” asking patients to list if they experienced “a sense of being outside of time, beyond past and future,” “certainty of an encounter with an ultimate reality,” “the insight that ‘all is One,’” “awareness of the life or living presence in all things,” “feeling that you experienced something profoundly sacred and holy,” or “the fusion of your personal self into a larger whole.” The medical practitioners interviewed by the author acknowledge that the questionnaire has been criticized for being monotheistically biased and that, if it had been drafted by non-Western researchers, it might have been more inclusive of values coming from traditions such as Buddhism or Hinduism.<sup>38</sup>



The crucial question remains, however, whether the categories that were developed by traditional religions are actually suited to the interpretation of psychedelic experiences or whether they are in fact misleading. Dr. Matthew Johnson, a researcher at Johns Hopkins University, argued in 2020 that the rise of Psychedelic Medicine brings about the very real risk of doctors and practitioners imposing their beliefs onto their practice.<sup>39</sup> As noted above, scholars' and researchers' responses to this perceived challenge diverge significantly. On one hand, in a 2021 article, James W. Sanders and Josjan Zijlmans argued that Psychedelic Medicine should “move past mysticism,” as this would jeopardize the scientific credibility of the whole endeavor; the altered states induced by psychedelics ought to be studied “empirically,” without resorting to scientifically unsubstantiated categories.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, especially in the United States, there has been a move toward incorporating the study of Indigenous and Abrahamic mystical traditions in the curriculum of courses training psychedelic practitioners in the belief that familiarity with these teachings will help them better serve their clients in a spirit of cultural humility.<sup>41</sup> The whole tradition of Transpersonal Psychology, in particular, as well as Jungian and Jungian-adjacent practitioners, has been especially open to this kind of interdisciplinary integration in the hope that practitioners' familiarity with the tradition of their clients will help them in the therapeutic and interpretive process as they accompany clients on their psychedelic journeys.<sup>42</sup> Sanders and Zijlmans object that this would lead to misinterpretation, and argue that “integrating mysticism into clinical research and practice can be both problematic and unrealistic when working with vulnerable populations.”<sup>43</sup> However, as Ponieman points out, the suspicion lingers that scholars such as Sanders and Zijlmans may still be working from a reductionist methodological perspective that ultimately hesitates to acknowledge mystical states as an authentic and legitimate dimension of the human experience.<sup>44</sup>

Scholars trained in the disciplines of Medicine and Psychiatry may not be conversant with the literature on Hesychasm or more theologically traditional scholarship on mystical phenomena. Indeed, they may find a decontextualized and often dehistoricized approach to mystical experience that is more amenable to their sensitivity. Opening up this conversation to the insights coming from the discipline of Christian Theology—albeit without any pretense to normativity—may actually help broaden the hermeneutic armory of psychedelic research and simultaneously ensure that contemplative scholarship attends more carefully to the particularities of specific experiences.

## **ALTERED STATES, SPIRITUAL PERCEPTION, AND THE CHALLENGE OF CHRISTIAN PARTICULARITY**

How does one bring into conversation the Christian theological tradition of reflection on mystical practice and contemporary research into altered states? In 1970, John Marco Allegro (1923–1989) authored a monograph under the title *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, where he famously argued that the roots of Christianity, and many other religions, lay in fertility cults, and where he connected the celebration of the Eucharist with the ritual ingestion of *Amanita muscaria*.<sup>45</sup> This rather imaginative piece of research, however, failed to offer any convincing evidence of its central claim—let alone any accurate historical or phenomenological analysis of the experiential or transformative character of Christian sacraments. The actual relationship between the transformative impact of psychedelic practice and its sacramental analogues in the various strands

of the Christian tradition has vexed scholars and seekers alike. The ongoing psychedelic renaissance appears only to have intensified a controversy that was already brewing in the 1960s when Robert C. Zaehner's book *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* set out to question Aldous Huxley's connection of mystical understanding with psychedelically inspired perception.<sup>46</sup> Huxley claimed that the unmediated perception induced by psychedelic substances grounded a deeper connection with ultimate reality and other human beings, while Zaehner rebutted that this approach forced all altered states into an abstract universalist framework and failed to do justice to their ethical implications.<sup>47</sup> Zaehner's ultimate skepticism toward psychedelic mysticism could not accommodate Huxley's investing of it with a *sui generis* sacramental value. This attitude of guarded suspicion continues to characterize many Christian thinkers of a more traditional vein.<sup>48</sup>

A possible way to overcome this impasse is to resort to the discipline of Comparative Theology and reflect on the way its practitioners have engaged texts from different traditions dealing with mystical experiences while seeking to articulate them in a systematic and conceptually cogent way. Francis X. Clooney, in his *Theology after Vedanta*, invited Christian theologians to engage in the careful reading of texts of other religions and then return to one's own, renewed and transformed by the insights gained through this experience.<sup>49</sup> This approach will evidence points of contact no less than irreducible differences and tensions that demonstrate the unviability of any perennialist or universalist understanding of religious difference. Doing so foregrounds, on the contrary, the particularity of religious traditions. This outcome benefits even scholars and practitioners who do not identify as members of any specific tradition and may otherwise not be keen on a theological interpretation of mystical experience. In fact, Clooney's approach transcends the limitations of a purely textual comparison and can be applied to other fields of religious expression, such as the figurative arts, liturgy, or music.

In this particular case, one may ask what insights emerge from juxtaposing the theological reflection on mystical experience found in an author such as Gregory Palamas and the writings of contemporary researchers parsing the import and consequences of controlled psychedelic experiences. What we initially encounter in both traditions is an epistemic shift: a radical transformation of cognitive categories, involving self-perception as well as perception of one's relationship with and place in the cosmic order. Natan Ponieman quotes Charles Raison of Emory University, who serves as director for clinical and translational research for the Usona Institute—a Wisconsin center leading psilocybin clinical trials—as one researcher who tries to closely monitor the self-reported assessment of individual patients who claim they have had this kind of experience.<sup>50</sup> For Raison, patients appear to undergo a process whereby they transcend the limitations of their own individual consciousness, and they enter into contact with some broader reality, bringing about a sense of “a meaningful and purposeful interconnection with the larger world.” This transformational encounter appears to have a significant impact on individuals from a variety of populations, “including people with depression, cancer patients, and people with different types of substance use disorders like alcohol dependence and tobacco addiction.” This kind of experience, Raison tells Ponieman, appears to give many people “a long-term anti-depressant response,” something that “is giving some psychiatrists immense new hope.” The Finnish researcher Jussi Jylkkä, who strongly resists all kinds of physiologically reductionist reading of psychedelic-induced experiences, confirms that patients often develop “radically new philosophical insights” about cosmic interconnectedness leading to “significant shifts in the

subject's worldview," which he claims cannot possibly be the outcome of neuropsychological processes.<sup>51</sup>

In their edited volume *The Spiritual Senses*, Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley introduce their readers to the centrality of spiritual perception in the writings of classical spiritual authors, thereby setting out to challenge the modern and contemporary reductionist tendencies in the context of theological epistemology.<sup>52</sup> In the Christian West, under the influence of the Kantian reflection on human cognition, knowledge of the divine seems to have withdrawn from the panoply of sensory perception, turning at best into the rarefied object of practical reason. On one hand, the discovery of psychedelics in the 20th century and the recently revived interest in their medical potential may be seen as a strategy to sidestep these cognitive strictures, opening up "the doors of perception" that the *Critique of Pure Reason* had slummed shut.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, one could argue that the rediscovery of the broader Christian spiritual tradition—particularly the Eastern hesychastic strand, with its attendant belief in the ontological transformation of the individual—reflects an analogous desire for a less constricted understanding of spiritual practice and experience that affirms one's ability to experience the divine through one's senses. The disciples of Jesus can see the transfigured Lord in the Taboric Light. Because they have achieved apatheia, their eyes are now capable of beholding the divine energies. Their senses have become a springboard for a closer communion with the divine. This noetic sight into a dimension that is ordinarily foreclosed was already intimated in the reports of the early Harvard experiments from the 1960s, when under the supervision of Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (who later took the name Ram Dass), the researcher Walter Pahnke gave psilocybin to several seminary students hoping to see whether the substance would bring about an actual religious experience.<sup>54</sup>

While the phenomenological points of contact and the epistemic attestation in both cases to an irruption of a distinct dimension of reality seem to bring together psychedelic and hesychastic experiences, Christian observers steeped in their theological traditions will hesitate to jump to quick conclusions as to the nature of psychedelic experiences and will, in fact, offer a number of significant qualifiers. If we could venture to imagine Palamas's response to the legacy of the Enlightenment's rationalism that cast doubt on the legitimacy of mystical experience, it might have echoed his suspicion toward Western Scholasticism's tendency to reduce theological reflection to abstract metaphysical speculation, pushing the lived experience of the divine to the margins of acceptable discourse. At the same time, Palamas might have been highly skeptical of the claims of psychedelic researchers; while he may not have questioned the reality of psychedelic experiences—he did not accuse the Messalians of insincerity per se—he may have viewed the attendant altered states as purely *natural* phenomena that open up a dimension of reality ontologically distinct from the divine energies. In the *Triads*, the divine energies can only be accessed *after* one's achievement of apatheia and—ordinarily though admittedly not exclusively—through participation in the sacraments. As a result, Palamas would have been unlikely to equate experiences induced by psychedelic substances with the deifying experience of the Triune God that takes place in the Eucharist. Perhaps he might have viewed them as somewhat analogous to the kind of experiences adumbrated by Evagrius, for whom mystical states uncover a semi-panteistic, divine dimension that is inherent in human nature.

Another important qualifier that Philokalic authors would have raised is the role of the *via purgativa*. Psychedelic-induced states, even if achieved in highly controlled circumstances, are not

necessarily preceded by intentional periods of penitential practice. Indeed, for many contemporary spiritual seekers, the very notion of penance carries with it unfortunate connotations of normativity and heteronomy. Penance may be summarily dismissed as a relic of an oppressive and outdated morality. In many experimental settings, of course, the required cognitive and behavioral stabilization that Palamas and earlier authors like Maximos the Confessor viewed as a prerequisite for the purification of one's sensory capacity to experience the divine will be replaced by a secularized and medicalized preparation process. The Christian authors discussed in this article would claim that this trajectory is inherently flawed, lacking both a recognition of one's sinfulness and the subsequent pursuit of contemplation (*theōria*) and virtuous activity (*praxis*).<sup>55</sup> As a result, hesychastic practitioners would question any conflation between apatheia, on one hand, and the psychological stability required of participants in psychedelic experiments on the other; the latter would appear as an attempt to achieve altered inner states and their attendant cognitive capacities while bypassing the necessary preparation for them. As mentioned at the outset, this conversation could encourage practitioners to recover—to the extent that such modalities of cultural appropriation are possible or advisable—the kind of cleansing and purification rituals that in traditional cultures preceded and protected experiences of altered states.

The conclusion of this conversation is both an invitation to epistemic modesty and an appeal to greater cognitive openness. On one hand, psychedelic researchers should be careful lest they come to overhasty conclusions and summarily identify psychedelic-induced states with the mystical experiences foregrounded in the writings of traditional religious mystics. On the other hand, theologians and scholars grounded in particular religions, while exercising an understandable caution about psychedelic-induced states, should also be open to the insights that researchers and scholars derive from psychedelic experiments and assess them in light of their own understanding of mystical experience. The encounter between psychedelic and theological scholarship is still in its infancy, and in light of Francis X. Clooney's reflection on Comparative Theology, it may invigorate both medical experimentation and theological reflection, encouraging both sides to appreciate their uniqueness and their specific characteristics.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ron Turner Cole, “Spiritual Enhancement,” in *Religion and Transhumanism: The Unknown Future of Human Enhancement*, ed. Calvin Mercer and Tracy J. Trothen (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2014), 369–84.
- <sup>2</sup> Roland R. Griffiths, William A. Richards, Una D. McCann, and Robert Jesse, “Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance,” *Psychopharmacology* 187, no. 3 (August 2006): 268–83; discussion 284–92.
- <sup>3</sup> Louis Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 14–15.
- <sup>4</sup> Margaret Benefiel and Jessie Smith, “Review of *Introducing Contemplative Studies* by Louis Komjathy and *Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on Meditation and Contemplative Prayer*, ed. by Louis Komjathy,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 120–23.
- <sup>5</sup> William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), chap. 3, 57–84.
- <sup>6</sup> Athanasios, *Life of Anthony*, trans. Robert C. Gregg, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979).
- <sup>7</sup> For a translation of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, see Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984).
- <sup>8</sup> Jean Michel Massing, “Schöngauer’s ‘Tribulations of St Anthony’: Its Iconography and Influence on German Art,” *Print Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (December 1984): 226.
- <sup>9</sup> See G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, eds., *Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth*, 5 vols. (London: Faber and Faber, 1979–2023).
- <sup>10</sup> Jean Daniélou, *Origen*, trans. Walter Mitchell (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 209–20.
- <sup>11</sup> See Julia Konstantinovskiy, *Evagrius: The Making of a Gnostic* (London: Routledge, 2016), 47–77.
- <sup>12</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Mirabai Starr (New York: Riverhead Press, 2004).
- <sup>13</sup> For Evagrius’s crucial role in shaping Christian reflection on asceticism, see A. M. Casiday, introduction to *Evagrius Ponticus* (London: Routledge, 2016), 1–36.
- <sup>14</sup> On discernment of spirits, see Evagrius Pontikos, *Antirrhētikos, or Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons*, trans. David Brakke (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).
- <sup>15</sup> For a discussion of this theme in contemporary psychotherapy, see Jennifer Wolkin, “The Science of Trauma, Mindfulness, and PTSD,” *Mindful*, June 15, 2016, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.mindful.org/the-science-of-trauma-mindfulness-ptsd/>.
- <sup>16</sup> See Konstantinovskiy, chap. 6 in *Evagrius: The Making of a Gnostic*, “The Last Things,” 153–79; see also Ilaria Ramelli, *Kephalaia Gnostika: A New Translation of the Unreformed Text from the Syriac* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015).
- <sup>17</sup> See Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987); Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976).
- <sup>18</sup> See Marcus Plested, *The Macarian Legacy: The Place of Macarius-Symeon in the Eastern-Christian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 190–95, 198–202.
- <sup>19</sup> Tim Vivian, trans., *St. Macarius the Spirit-Bearer: Coptic Texts Relating to Saint Macarius the Great* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 117–18.
- <sup>20</sup> “God has given to the earth the breath which feeds it. It is his breath that gives life to all things. And if he were to withhold his breath, everything would be annihilated. His breath vibrates in yours, in your voice. It is the breath of God that you breathe—and you are unaware of it.” See “Apology to Autolycus,” chap. 7 in *New Advent*, accessed June 21, 2023, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02041.htm>.
- <sup>21</sup> For an overview of St. Silouan’s life, see St. Sophrony, *St. Silouan the Athonite* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2021).
- <sup>22</sup> Cited in Kallistos Ware, *The Power of the Name: The Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: SLG Press, 2000), 11.

- <sup>23</sup> Hesychios the Priest, “On Watchfulness and Holiness,” in *Philokalia* 1:182, 1:187, 1:189. Hesychios’s writings can be found in Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware, eds., *Philokalia* 1:161–98.
- <sup>24</sup> See Henri Perrin, “Augustin et la ‘région de dissemblance’ (*Confessions* 7:10, 7:16). Quelques réflexions à propos d’une thèse,” in *Saint Augustine et la Bible*, ed. Gérard Nauroy and Marie-Anne Vannier, *Actes du colloque de l’Université Paul Verlain, Metz. 7–8 Avril 2005* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009), 285–95.
- <sup>25</sup> This is discussed at length in Donald MacGillivray Nicol, *The Byzantine Reaction to the Second Council of Lyons, 1274* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).
- <sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Marcus Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 41–62, with special attention to the impact of Greek translations of the works of Thomas Aquinas.
- <sup>27</sup> John Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 42–62.
- <sup>28</sup> Meyendorff underscores the continuity between Palamas’s vision and the earlier monastic vision of the Desert Fathers, emphasizing at the same time the novelty of his vision of the divine energies and the centrality of the Eucharist. See *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 157–72.
- <sup>29</sup> Whether Palamas intended an epistemological or an ontological distinction and whether his teaching is compatible with Western Trinitarian Theology continue to be vexed questions. See Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 50–55, 71–73.
- <sup>30</sup> Maximos the Confessor had discussed the Transfiguration in a famous passage in *Amb. 10* (PG 91, 1130D–1133A) which provided the Christological background for Palamas’s later speculations. See Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge 1996), 108–13.
- <sup>31</sup> Gregory Palamas, *Triads* 2:2, 2:9.
- <sup>32</sup> In *De Fide Orthodoxa*, we read that “as the divinity was joined to the flesh that was subject to the passions, even as it remained impassible” it perfected the passions, “rendering them salvific” (PG 94, 1057–8).
- <sup>33</sup> Alan Torrance, *Human Perfection in Byzantine Theology: Attaining the Fullness of Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 152–97.
- <sup>34</sup> Louis Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies*, 40–42.
- <sup>35</sup> Natan Ponieman, “How Science Is Making Sense of the Mystical Experience in Psychedelic Medicine,” *Forbes*, October 1, 2021, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/natanponieman/2021/10/01/how-is-science-making-sense-of-the-mystical-experience-in-psychedelic-medicine/>.
- <sup>36</sup> See Katherine A. MacLean, Matthew W. Johnson, and Roland R. Griffiths, “Mystical Experiences Occasioned by the Hallucinogenic Psilocybin Lead to Increases in the Personality Domain of Openness,” *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 24, no. 11 (November 2011): 1453–61.
- <sup>37</sup> See Joshua Falco, “Psychedelics and Mysticism: The Debate Continues,” *Psychedelic Science Review*, November 23, 2021, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://psychedelicreview.com/psychedelic-and-mysticism-the-debate-continues/>.
- <sup>38</sup> Ponieman, “How Science Is Making Sense of the Mystical Experience in Psychedelic Medicine.”
- <sup>39</sup> Matthew W. Johnson, “Consciousness, Religion, and Gurus: Pitfalls of Psychedelic Medicine,” *ACS Pharmacol. Transl. Sci.* 4, no. 2 (December 2021): 578–81.
- <sup>40</sup> James W. Sanders and Josjan Zijlmans, “Moving Past Mysticism in Psychedelic Science,” *ACS Pharmacol. Transl. Sci.* 4, no. 3 (May 2021): 1253–5.
- <sup>41</sup> See, for instance, the UC Berkeley Psychedelic Facilitation Program at <https://a8cteam5147557443.wpcomstaging.com/training/>, accessed June 20, 2023, or the certificate offered by the Center for Psychedelic Therapy and Research at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, <https://www.ciis.edu/research-centers-and-initiatives/center-for-psychedelic-therapies-and-research/about-the-certificat3>, accessed June 20, 2023.
- <sup>42</sup> See Nicole Ruzek, “Transpersonal Psychology in Context: Perspectives from Its Founders and Historians of American Psychology,” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 39, no. 2 (July 2007): 153–74.
- <sup>43</sup> Sanders and Zijlmans, “Moving Past Mysticism in Psychedelic Science,” 1253–5.

- <sup>44</sup> See, for instance, Joost J. Brecksema and Michiel Van Elk, “Working with Weirdness: A Response to ‘Moving Past Mysticism in Psychedelic Science,’” *ACS Pharmacol. Transl. Sci.* 16, no. 4. (July 2021): 1471–4.
- <sup>45</sup> 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* (Gnostic Media Research and Publishing, 2009), 38–42, 84–8.
- <sup>46</sup> Robert C. Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).
- <sup>47</sup> For an account of this debate, see Douglas E. Osto, *Altered States: Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 186–9.
- <sup>48</sup> See Rod Dreher, “A Christian Approach to Psychedelics,” *American Conservative*, May 21, 2018, accessed March 1, 2024, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/christian-approach-to-psychedelics/>.
- <sup>49</sup> Francis X. Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993).
- <sup>50</sup> See Poniaman, “How Science Is Making Sense of the Mystical Experience in Psychedelic Medicine.”
- <sup>51</sup> Jussi Jylkkä, “Reconciling Mystical Experience with Naturalistic Psychedelic Science: Reply to Sanders and Zijlmans,” *ACS Pharmacol. Transl. Sci.* 4, no. 4 (August 2021): 1468–70.
- <sup>52</sup> Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- <sup>53</sup> A classic treatment of this issue is S. Morris Engel, “Kant’s ‘Refutation’ of the Ontological Argument,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 24, no. 1 (September 1963): 20–35.
- <sup>54</sup> The trial, known as the Marsh Chapel Experiment, is discussed in R. Doblin, “Pahnke’s ‘Good Friday Experiment’: A Long-Term Follow-Up and Methodological Critique,” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 23, no. 1 (January 1991): 1–25.
- <sup>55</sup> In his *Centuries on Charity*, Maximus the Confessor outlines that the spiritual path comprises pure prayer and contemplation of the cosmos and the divine realities (theōria), as well as the pursuit of the virtues (praxis); his point was that the latter were not a mere preliminary practice but continued to accompany our spiritual growth. See, for instance, the *First Century* in Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware, eds., *Philokalia* 2:53–65.