

# Entheogenic Spirituality

*Conversations with Psychonauts*

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Special experience going on? Petroglyph from Tamgaly Valley, Kazakhstan, 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE (Rozwadowski 2001). Used with permission.

# Acknowledgements

This study is a multidisciplinary project with two main parts. Part one was completed in the spring of 2015 as a bachelor thesis in psychology with the title “User perceptions of the mental health consequences of hallucinogen use in self-identified spiritual contexts.” It has since been published in the journal *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* (Johnstad 2015). As the title indicates, this thesis has a focus on mental health.

Part two is what you are about to read. As the title indicates, it has a focus on spirituality. As we shall see, however, the spirituality of the participants in this study is heavily invested in personal growth processes that include also the domain of mental health. Thus there is an overlap in thematic content. In order to avoid repeating myself, I have avoided as much as possible the reuse of interview material published in the first part of the study. Some of the literature review on mental health consequences published in part one does however reappear in rewritten form in section 3.2, and some methodological elaboration from part one reappears here, substantially rewritten, in sections 4.2 and 4.3.

This study also has a predecessor in the form of a bachelor thesis in religious studies titled “Religiøs bruk av rusmidler” (Religious use of psychoactive drugs) from 2012, which is historically oriented. Some of the material from this thesis reappears in translated and rewritten form in sections 1.4 and 1.5.

Along the way I have received much help and support. Most importantly, my supervisor in religious studies, Håkan Rydving, has been with me since the fall of 2014, and has provided invaluable theoretical, methodological, and technical support. Geir Scott Brunborg, my 2015 supervisor in psychology, also provided important feedback and perspectives. Furthermore, the editors and reviewers of *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* did much to raise the quality of my submission to this journal, and their input has informed also my subsequent work. Finally, the participants of the religious studies symposia at the University of Bergen during the fall of 2015 and spring of 2016 have provided valuable feedback on various chapters submitted to their scrutiny.

# Abstract

This study attempts to gain insight into the life worlds of users of entheogenic drugs, and thereby to broaden our understanding of a clandestine and little known spiritual phenomenon. Such insight will also help us to comprehend the rationale behind and consequences of entheogen use. Respondents were recruited at several Internet fora for individual email-mediated interviews (n = 11) or group interviews in public discussion threads (n = 15). They were predominantly males in their 20s, 30s or 40s with stable jobs and living conditions and extensive entheogen experience. The findings obtained indicate that participants tended to follow a pattern of infrequent and often well-planned entheogen sessions. They described a wide variety of cognitive and emotional effects taking place under the influence of entheogenic drugs, ranging from Maslovian peak experiences to one dramatic psychotic episode. Respondents emphasized the capacity of entheogenic drugs for healing and personal growth, and even adverse experiences (“bad trips”) were regarded as valuable for these purposes. Their reported spiritual experiences did not seem significantly influenced by familial or cultural background.

Denne studien forsøker å oppnå innsikt i livsverdenen til brukere av entheogene rusmidler, og dermed øke vår forståelse for et hemmelighetsfullt og lite kjent spirituelt fenomen. Slik innsikt vil også hjelpe oss med å forstå årsakene til og konsekvensene av denne form for rusmiddelbruk. Deltakere ble rekruttert på flere Internettfora for individuelle intervjuer via epost (n = 11) eller gruppeintervjuer i offentlige diskusjonstråder (n = 15). De var i hovedsak voksne menn i 20-, 30- eller 40-årene med stabile jobber og livsforhold, samt ekstensiv erfaring med entheogener. Funnene i studien indikerer at intervjuobjektene fulgte et bruksmønster med relativt sjeldne, men ofte godt planlagte, «turer» på slike rusmidler. De beskrev en bred rekke av kognitive og følelsesmessige effekter under innflytelse av entheogener, som strakte seg fra maslowske «peak experiences» til en dramatisk psykotisk episode. Deltakerne fremhevet hvordan bruk av entheogene rusmidler kunne ha positive konsekvenser i form av personlig vekst og helbredelse, og selv vanskelige rusopplevelser («bad trips») var ansett som positive i denne forstand. De beskrevne spirituelle erfaringer virket ikke å være betydelig påvirket av familie- eller kultur- bakgrunn.

# Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1 – Spirituality and entheogens.....</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1 Spirituality and religion .....	3
1.2 Of its own kind .....	4
1.3 Hallucinogens, psychedelics, entheogens.....	10
1.4 A brief history of religious intoxication .....	14
1.5 Entheogens and religious hierarchies .....	20
1.6 Spirituality and materiality .....	22
<b>Chapter 2 – Inner experience .....</b>	<b>25</b>
2.1 Experience and consciousness.....	25
2.2 Altered states of consciousness .....	27
2.3 “Religious experience” .....	29
2.4 Cultural and linguistic mediation .....	33
<b>Chapter 3 – Entrance and maintenance processes.....</b>	<b>39</b>
3.1 Entrance processes.....	39
3.2 Maintenance processes .....	41
<b>Chapter 4 - Methods .....</b>	<b>50</b>
4.1 Epistemological overture .....	50
4.2 Design and recruitment.....	53
4.3 Data collection and analysis .....	55
4.4 Verification and reporting .....	57
4.5 Anonymity .....	57

<b>Chapter 5 – Interviews</b> .....	<b>60</b>
5.1 Crossing the threshold .....	60
5.2 Religious background .....	62
5.3 Patterns of use.....	64
5.4 Entheogenic experiences .....	67
5.5 Bad trips.....	72
5.6 Psychotic reactions .....	74
5.7 Adverse long-term consequences .....	76
5.8 Positive long-term consequences.....	80
<b>Chapter 6 - Discussion</b> .....	<b>85</b>
6.1 Analytical summary.....	85
6.2 Entheogenic experience .....	90
6.3 Attractions and consequences.....	92
6.4 Entheogenic spirituality.....	94
6.5 Research prospects .....	98
<b>References</b> .....	<b>103</b>
<b>Appendix A: Participation consent form</b> .....	<b>118</b>
<b>Appendix B: Interview topic guide</b> .....	<b>120</b>





# Introduction

Entheogens are a group of psychoactive drugs named after their alleged ability to generate altered states of consciousness conducive to spiritual or mystical “experience”. The word is derived from the Greek *ἐνθεος* (*entheos*) and *γενέσθαι* (*genesthai*), which mean ‘inspired’ or ‘filled with god’ and ‘come into being,’ respectively, and the proper use of an entheogen is thus believed to potentially elicit or at least occasion contact with divine or transcendent forces. While any drug that is experienced or believed to possess these divinity-manifesting properties might therefore be called an entheogen, the term is in general use reserved primarily for drugs such as psilocybin (the active ingredient in “magic mushrooms”), lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT), and perhaps cannabis and 3,4-methylenedioxy-methamphetamine (MDMA, also known as “ecstasy”). The category of entheogens is therefore broadly overlapping with those of psychedelics and hallucinogens, but the term is sometimes preferred to these because of their air of controversy and, in case of the latter, because hallucination is not in fact a dominant or even especially common response to these drugs (Nichols 2004).

The academic interest in entheogens and their users has been undergoing something of a renaissance during the last decade, with numerous new studies being published in a broad range of fields. This newfound interest does however follow a period of several decades where the subject was almost entirely ignored, and there is for this reason much to catch up with (Sessa 2005). The primary motivation behind this study is therefore linked to the perception that the Western world may have a long-standing, fairly numerous, and apparently thriving community of entheogen users that remains largely unknown to outsiders, including academics. In the words of New Age and Western Esotericism scholar Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2013, p. 409):

Whether we like it or not, we are dealing here with a vital and vibrant dimension of popular Western spirituality that has been with us for more than half a century now, and shows no signs of disappearing. It challenges traditional assumptions about what religion is all about, and its radical focus on ecstatic gnosis within a cosmotheistic context makes it particularly interesting from the perspective of the study of Western esotericism.

The academic community has clearly failed to give this clandestine religious phenomenon sufficient attention, and has therefore been caught off guard by the evidence that now emerges

to indicate its substantial societal scope. Thus there is a pressing need to get acquainted with the thoughts, practices, and beliefs of people who use entheogens as a form of spiritual practice.

The purpose of the study is therefore to investigate the life worlds of users of entheogenic drugs in self-identified spiritual contexts through in-depth interviews. It will ask such users – sometimes labeled “psychonauts” – to describe their practices, their experiences of drug-induced altered states of consciousness, and the implications of these practices and experiences for their lives in the long term.<sup>1</sup> Answers will be sought to the following research questions:

1. What does the term “spirituality” mean in a context of entheogen use? What does an entheogen-supported spiritual life look like?
2. What are the characteristics of entheogenic experiences? How are such experiences impacted by factors of cultural and linguistic mediation?
3. Why are people attracted to entheogenic drugs? What are the long-term consequences of entheogen use for life, health, and spirituality?

Chapters one to three offer a literature review and preliminary theoretical discussion of these questions, with one chapter devoted to each. Chapter four continues with a discussion of methodological approaches and dilemmas in the study, and chapter five presents its main findings. At the end, chapter six discusses these findings and attempts to draw conclusions as to the nature of entheogenic spirituality and the entheogen-induced experiences forming its core, as well as what consequences engaging with these drugs might have for a person.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “psychonaut” was coined by Ernst Jünger in 1970 in a logbook of personal drug experimentation (Wells 2005, p. 1812). The word is derived from the Greek ψυχή (*psychē*) and ναύτης (*naútēs*), which mean ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ and ‘sailor’ or ‘navigator’, and is used in a variety of contexts.

# Chapter 1 – Spirituality and entheogens

This chapter presents a foundational discussion of the concepts of spirituality and entheogens. The first two sections attempt to clarify the use of the term “spirituality” and its relation to the use of the term “religion”. Section three introduces the entheogens themselves, and briefly reviews the current state of knowledge about their psychopharmacologic effects. Section four provides a brief overview of the historical use of entheogens in spiritual and religious practice, and sections five and six attempt to explain the aversion to entheogenic experience in the majority of the world’s largest religions.

## 1.1 Spirituality and religion

This study embraces the term *spirituality* in preference over *religion* primarily for strategic purposes. The two terms are sometimes used to differentiate practices characterized by social hierarchies and adherence to dogma (religion) from their non-dogmatic and anti-hierarchical counterparts (spirituality), which is a conceptualization broadly in agreement with the theoretical perspectives of Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1999) and Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005). The distinction is not however clear-cut, and is sometimes subject to criticism (Marler & Hadaway 2002). Nancy Ammerman (2014) did for instance discover that most of the participants in her study used the terms “religion” and “spirituality” interchangeably, although participants who never took part in organized rituals sometimes labelled themselves spiritual but not religious. (A group that she calls “conservative Protestants” also tended to prefer spirituality over religion.) It would seem reasonable that the imposition of a distinction between religion and spirituality is important mainly to people who wish to distance themselves from dogma and social hierarchies – a position attractive especially to the non-religious – and that the two are from most religious perspectives inseparably entwined.

At any rate, this is a distinction that seems uniquely germane to Western users of entheogenic drugs, who largely identify as “spiritual but not religious” or religiously unaffiliated (e.g., MacLean, Johnson, Leoutsakos & Griffiths 2012). Considering the low acceptance for entheogen-related practices in most organized religions, this should probably come as no surprise. This situation may however be subject to change, as fast-growing entheogen-using organizations like the *Santo Daime* are seeking legal protection as religions especially in the

United States. Perhaps in the future we will see numerous entheogen users who claim to be both religious and spiritual and who regard religion and spirituality essentially as two sides of a coin.

As of yet, however, the conceptualization of spirituality as distinct from religion in terms of being without dogma and hierarchy remains commonly accepted among entheogen users. To minimize confusion, this study therefore refers exclusively to “spiritual” practices in its communication with respondents, hoping thereby to avoid getting entangled in miscommunication related to negative connotations about the word “religion”.

## 1.2 Of its own kind

In light of the above observations, the working assumption for the concept of spirituality is that it is in some important sense distinct from religion. Nevertheless the two are undoubtedly related, and to understand spirituality we must therefore come to terms also with religion.

Much ink has been spilled on the attempt to demarcate a precise border between religion and non-religion. The rationale behind this project can perhaps be traced to the delineation of separate sacred and profane spheres in Western cultures, and also represents a continuation of a knowledge-building by categorization scheme inherited from Aristotle and Linnaeus; from a non-Western perspective the imposition of precise definitional perimeters around a closed-off sphere of religion does not necessarily appear equally important and meaningful. It may however be possible to link the perceived need for a border between religion and other spheres of human activity to the fact that many religious traditions regard practices relating to their own sacred figures and transcendent realms as being qualitatively different from other forms of activity. From such an insider perspective, encounters with sacred figures and realms are quite unlike other types of encounters, and must be regarded as a thing apart. In religious studies this is known as the *sui generis* perspective: religious experience is “of its own kind” and cannot be understood in the same way as we would understand other forms of experience. This perspective thus entails, according to Daniel L. Pals (1987, p. 259), “that anyone who seeks to explain – to account for – religious phenomena ought to accord them a certain independence.”

This set-apartness complicates the work of students of religion. If a religious tradition is correct in its identification of transcendent beings or realms that may be approached via certain religious practices, then these practices obviously cannot be understood with the use solely of those methodologies that we would employ in the study of other cultural phenomena. In the words of Gavin Flood (2012, p. 164): “If religions speak from within the real, if they are central to human reality in showing us something about the nature of the universe of which we are a

part, as they claim, then not to understand them in this deeper context is to misunderstand them.” Thus we are in a predicament, for if we take a position on the *sui generis* question, this implies a position also on the existence of culturally posited divinities. If Śiva exists as an ontologically independent entity reachable through religious practices, then these practices and their effects cannot be understood entirely in terms of human culture – they are indeed something apart. A denial of *the possibility* of this fundamental apartness implies rather straightforwardly a denial of Śiva’s possible existence outside of cultural narratives.

*Sui generis* perspectives in religious studies have however often been criticized as embodying covert Western and Christian values (e.g., McCutcheon 1997). In light of the above discussion, the opposite may be equally true: to understand religion as *not* set apart from other aspects of human culture is to claim that religion has no special connection to (imaginary) transcendent realities, and it might be argued that this is a view largely confined to Western-dominated academia. As the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (in Smith 2000, p. 69) quipped: “We are the only people who assume that we have ascended from the apes. Everybody else take it for granted that they are descended from gods.” This reference to “gods” is of course over-generalized and in a strict sense factually untrue, but clearly the belief in divine beings reachable through religious practices is a global majority trend. Approaching religion as only a cultural practice with no special relation to set-apart realities would therefore seem to represent the views and interests of Western secularism over and above this majority view that regards at least one’s own religion as involving a relation to something that exists outside of human cultures.

A problematic aspect of the *sui generis* perspective, on the other hand, is that it seems to posit a sphere of “ordinary” or secular activity that is separate from the sphere of religion, which is not necessarily a view that practitioners for instance of Advaita Vedānta or Yogācāra Buddhism would agree with. It would seem that a person – perhaps someone devoted to mindfulness practice or karma yoga – could regard every aspect of his or her life world as belonging entirely to the sphere of religion, without denying that it also belongs to a variety of other, partially overlapping spheres.

In order to avoid a culturally conditioned approach to and prejudgment of the religious phenomenon one intends to study, it thus seems advisable to avoid taking any strong position on the question of *sui generis* religion. This study will therefore attempt to proceed from a position of non-commitment (or methodological agnosticism) in this regard: its author does not claim to know whether religious practices have the capacity to extend beyond cultural

boundaries and bring humans in touch with divine forces, should any such forces exist. Non-commitment allows for either, as well as for the possibility that some practices may be efficacious and others impotent when it comes to bridging the gap between earthly and transcendent worlds.

This position of non-commitment as regards the set-apartness of religion implies a denial of the unity and coherence of “religion” as a concept. It entails the admission of ignorance as to whether religions do “speak from within the real”, as Flood would have it, and opens for the possibility that some speak from such a place while others do not. Thus what we term religion may be fundamentally separate phenomena, where some express only cultural traditions or evolutionarily conditioned biological realities, while others are set apart from human culture because of their relation to transcendent or superhuman beings or realities.

If the meaning of the concept of “religion” is not a unitary and coherent, it would not seem meaningful to pursue a closed-off definition of the term. I therefore follow Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) and Benson Saler (2000) in seeing family resemblance, rather than adherence to necessary and sufficient definitional requirements, as here being the key to conceptual inclusion. Wittgenstein developed his family resemblance strategy over the concept of “games”, which to him seemed to lack any singular set of defining characteristics: there is not one characteristic that every game possesses, but rather the concept is like a family where each member resembles some others to a degree. Potentially, two games located at different edges of the concept may not resemble each other at all, but they will each have some resemblance to more centrally located games and therefore have a degree of belonging to the family.

Wittgenstein’s conceptualization of family resemblance is congruent with what is known as the *prototype* and *exemplar* approaches to knowledge structures in cognitive psychology, as the work of Saler (2000) demonstrates. According to prototype theory, we organize categories on the basis of one or a few items – prototypes – that are regarded as typical or central to the category (Matlin 2008). Subsequent judgments of whether a particular item belongs to the category are based on comparisons with these prototypes. The exemplar approach extends the list of prototypes, positing that our stored representation of a category consists of a collection of every distinct member of the category. To illustrate with an example, we do according to prototype theory organize the category “dog” around a few dogs that were important to us, such as the family dog we grew up with or the angry dog that once bit us. According to exemplar theory, every dog we have encountered serves to exemplify the category, and may be used as a basis for comparison.

This applies well to the concept “religion”, which I believe in general usage applies to a divergent set of practices, beliefs, and experiences that do not necessarily have any one thing in common. Melanesian cargo cults and the interiorized religiousness of someone like Søren Kierkegaard probably have no shared definitional characteristics and therefore cannot both be captured by any given definition, but they both resemble more mainstream religious endeavors that also do resemble one another. Thus they are linked by a chain of family resemblance and may both be spoken of as religious. I therefore posit that we in practice implicitly judge whether or not a given practice or belief is religious by comparing it first of all with the prototypes or central members of the family, and secondly with the broader collection of exemplars that include more peripheral members.

The prototype religions are, to my mind, simply the world’s largest religions. Saler (2000, p. xiv) restricts his prototypes to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which for him represent “the clearest examples of the category of religion” for “most Western scholars”. I believe this is a mistake, and that the category of religion is best served by the inclusion of Hinduism and Buddhism, which belong among the world’s largest religions and have high recognition levels to global audiences. In practice, therefore, I believe they serve naturally as prototype religions; the image of the meditating Buddhist is probably as prototypically religious to global audiences as that of the praying Christian or Muslim. Taking the largest religions as religious prototypes is a fairly non-arbitrary inclusion criterion based on impact levels, although it leaves a group of medium-sized religions such as Judaism, Sikhism, Shinto, Bahá’í and so forth on the edge of inclusion. These should not to my mind be regarded as prototypical religions, although for historical reasons it might be appropriate to make an exception for Judaism. In the final analysis, it probably does not matter much for the concept of religion whether these medium-sized religions are included as prototypes or not, but their inclusion would stretch the number of prototypes beyond what prototype theorists would normally allow for.

This conceptualization of religion as a family of centrally located prototypes surrounded by a fuzzy cloud of exemplars does not provide a clear line of demarcation between religions and non-religions (Saler 2000). We know, using the above approach, that Buddhism is a religion, for it is in fact a prototypical religion, but all we can say for instance about communism is that it shares some traits with some exemplars of religion but is otherwise located at quite some distance from the center of the family. This might be problematic in the fields of law and policy making, but as scholars of religion I do not believe we need clear-cut answers to the question

of whether communism is a religion: the point is rather that its degree of family resemblance makes it legitimate to study communism *as if* it were a religion, should we be so inclined.<sup>2</sup>

Using this family resemblance approach, we can regard practices involving psychoactive drugs as religious as far as they resemble practices belonging to prototype religions and other exemplars of religious practice. The perhaps most promising candidates here would be Hinduism and certain practices of various premodern indigenous peoples that are sometimes labeled “shamanism” (Eliade 1964; Winkelman 2010). While the terms “indigenous” and “shamanism” have both been subject to criticism for conflating divergent global cultures (e.g., Francfort, Hamayon & Bahn 2001), I will employ them in this study as loose umbrella terms. Sidky (2015, p. 28) characterizes the shaman’s cosmos as a multi-level structure where our human world is positioned between an upper world of gods and an underworld of spirits, and where the shaman is a person who can journey through these various realms to interact with “supernatural agents that can help or harm people.” Thus understood, shamanism would fit into the family of religion as an exemplar, or perhaps a sub-family of exemplars, situated at some distance from the prototype center. On the basis of a presumed familial resemblance between modern Western entheogen practices and practices in Hinduism and shamanism, we might expect that entheogen users pursue altered states of consciousness in order to access transcendent realms, interact with spirits and gods, obtain healing of physical and psychological trauma, and pursue a path to liberation or salvation.

This is not however a study of religion, but of spirituality. The working assumption here is that the latter is related to, yet distinct from, the former – that the two overlap in many ways but take divergent paths especially when it comes to hierarchies and dogmas. There may however be more to the story, particularly in the sense that spirituality may cover territory that religion does not. The Venn diagram in figure 1 illustrates this hypothetical relationship between the two terms, which are here partially overlapping but with separate regions for conceptual territory not shared by the other. Note that it would seem possible to extend our understanding of “religion” to encompass every aspect of “spirituality” through the family resemblance

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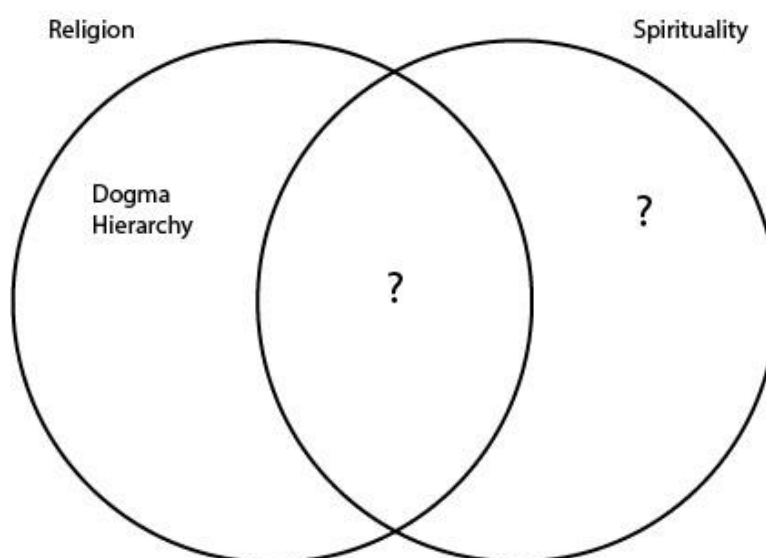
<sup>2</sup> If we nevertheless require clear criteria for conceptual inclusion and exclusion, we can probably achieve this by formulating a set of attributes for each of our prototypes of religion, perhaps with a basis in Ninian Smart’s (1998) dimensions of the sacred, and quantify the degree of similarity for potential family members. This approach, inspired by Gary Goertz’ (2006) work on structuring and theorizing concepts, would allow for a clear, although somewhat arbitrary, line of demarcation. I will not however pursue this idea further here.



approach, while there is less support for a similar extension of “spirituality” so as to encompass hierarchies and dogmas.<sup>3</sup>

I have no suggestion at this point as to what territory “spirituality” might cover that “religion” does not, nor what the two might have in common. Instead I leave the question of what “spirituality” might mean to entheogen users as a research question. The study will thus employ the term in its interactions with participants without defining or otherwise imposing limits on its content, which is a task it delegates instead to the participants themselves. Their usage of the term can thereupon be observed and analyzed. This approach is inspired by the work of Nancy Ammerman (2014) and does allow for respondent-identified aspects of spirituality that may surprise the author.

**Figure 1: Hypothetical religion-spirituality relationship**



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<sup>3</sup> Some self-declared “spiritual-but-not-religious” groups probably adhere to various dogmas and may have formal or informal power hierarchies. On the level of hypothesis, however, I believe it should be unproblematic to move forward with an assumption at least of a considerable difference of emphasis as regards dogma and hierarchy in religion and spirituality.

### 1.3 Hallucinogens, psychedelics, entheogens

Like “spirituality”, the term “entheogen” is employed in this study in preference to its many competitors primarily as a strategic choice. The study’s completion depends on its ability to gain access to a generally withdrawn and secretive group of drug users – fearing as they do the reach of law enforcement officials – and in this situation it is probably helpful to employ the kind of vocabulary that they respect and are comfortable with. A study named “Psychotomimetic Spirituality” would probably not succeed in this respect, as it rather strongly implies that the drug use of its prospective interviewees induces nothing but temporary psychotic confusion and is of no value to anyone. Speaking about entheogens, on the other hand, indicates a respect for drug-induced states that serves the strategic purpose of gaining access to participants.

As explained in the introduction, the term “entheogen” in common parlance designates any psychoactive drug believed to generate or facilitate spiritual experience. There is no *a priori* reason to deny such potential even to the everyday drugs of modern Western cultures – cigarettes, coffee, and wine – and thus the term entheogen might theoretically be employed with reference to essentially any psychoactive drug; my approach, as I will describe in more detail below, is to leave the definition of the term open to the interviewees themselves. The original definition of the term by Carl P. A. Ruck and collaborators (1979) restricts its proper usage to “vision-producing drugs”, by which designation they probably intended those drugs that have otherwise been called psychedelics and hallucinogens; but coffee, wine, and cigarettes might also be vision-producing (in some meaning of that term) with adequate dosage. Hollister (1968) provided a list of definitional criteria for hallucinogens that emphasized changes in thought, perception, and mood along with an absence of significant cognitive impairment, narcosis, stimulation, autonomic nervous system side effects, or addictive craving. While this list leaves a number of indeterminate cases, it might serve as a useful starting point: thus an entheogen might be regarded as any Hollister hallucinogen that is used for spiritual or religious purpose or effect.

The purpose here is not however to provide a clear line of demarcation between entheogens and other psychoactive drugs, which is probably an impossible task. For pragmatic reasons, this study takes an inclusive approach that counts various atypical hallucinogens and quasi-hallucinogens as entheogens; in practice it throws the term “entheogen” at participants without offering any definition, accepting the substances referred to in their responding narratives as entheogens without further ado. This, of course, is the same approach as the one taken with the

term “spirituality”: thus the definitions of both the two central terms of this study are left to the respondents themselves.

The classical hallucinogens are known to work by an agonist or partial agonist action on the serotonin 5-HT<sub>2A</sub> receptors (Iversen, Iversen, Bloom & Roth 2009).<sup>4</sup> Their experiential effects are regarded as uniquely dependent on user expectations and environment, resulting in considerable unpredictability; thus “[a]t the extremes, a user might on one occasion experience ecstasy and mystical union with the cosmos, while on another they might endure a hellish nightmare, extreme paranoia, feelings of insanity, and the like” (Nichols 2004, p. 137). Carhart-Harris et al. (2014, p. 1) regard the hallucinogenic state as “an exemplar of a primitive or primary state of consciousness that preceded the development of modern, adult, human, normal waking consciousness.”

MDMA has a complicated psychopharmacology that combines an affinity for serotonin receptors with the psychostimulant ability to release dopamine and norepinephrine; “[i]t has been described as an ‘empathogen’ because it can promote an extraordinary clarity of introspective self-insight, together with a love of self and a no less emotionally intense empathic love of others” (Iversen et al. 2009, p. 469). Schmid et al. (2014, p. 851) found that MDMA produced “increases in happiness, openness, trust and closeness compared with placebo.” Other drugs that affect serotonin receptors do not produce such empathogenic effects, nor do classical psychostimulants such as amphetamine or cocaine, and these effects therefore remain unexplained. Furthermore there is no cross-tolerance between MDMA and other hallucinogens, nor with the molecularly similar MDA (3,4-methylenedioxy-amphetamine), and MDMA might therefore arguably be regarded as a class of its own (Pendell 2010).<sup>5</sup>

Cannabis for its part affects the central nervous system mainly via the compound  $\Delta^9$ -tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), which is known with reasonable confidence to activate the CB-1

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<sup>4</sup> Neurons are connected to one another in complex signaling networks, and one important form of communication takes place via chemical neurotransmitters such as serotonin. These are transmitted from one neuron to specialized receptors on another via the synaptic cleft. Serotonin or 5-hydroxytryptamine (5-HT) is picked up at a number of such receptors, the subtypes of which are labeled 5-HT<sub>1</sub> to 5-HT<sub>7</sub>. An agonist is a chemical that activates a given receptor, while an antagonist serves to block the receptor; partial agonists have complex effects that may include both agonistic and antagonistic functioning (Iversen et al. 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Tolerance is a term for a decrease in the response to a drug due to previous exposure. Cross-tolerance means that the exposure to one drug results in a subsequent decreased response to a different drug.

receptor located with highest density in the cerebral cortex of the mammalian brain. According to Iversen et al. (2009, p. 495) it heightens and sometimes distorts the senses, alters the subjective sense of time, and induces apparently profound thoughts:

At the most intense period of the intoxication, the user finds difficulty in interacting with others and tends to withdraw into an introspective state. Thoughts tend to dwell on metaphysical or philosophical topics, and the user may experience apparently transcendental insights.

The language used to describe these psychopharmacological effects include words such as *activation*, *release*, and *agonist action*, and indeed it has commonly been assumed that hallucinogens “enhance excitatory neurotransmission and overall brain activity” (Lee & Roth 2012, p. 1821). Recent research by Carhart-Harris, Erritzoe, and collaborators (2012, p. 2138) challenges this assumption, finding that psilocybin “decreased activity and connectivity in the brain’s key connector hubs, enabling a state of unconstrained cognition.” Rather than causing an upsurge of possibly frivolous brain activity, psilocybin actually reduced the activity in several key areas, including the default-mode network, which earlier research has identified as implicated in a baseline mode of brain function (Raichle et al. 2001) and which has been hypothesized as playing a role in high-level constructs such as the self or ego (Gusnard, Akbudak, Shulman & Raichle 2001; Carhart-Harris, Mayberg, Malizia & Nutt 2008; Carhart-Harris & Friston 2010). Thus the very colorful experiential effects that hallucinogens give rise to – the mystical unions and hellish nightmares of Nichols’ description – emerge from a brain with less neural activity than normal. This observation would seem to have potentially wide-ranging consequences, and Carhart-Harris, Erritzoe, et al. (2012) themselves take it as being consistent with Aldous Huxley’s reducing-valve metaphor of the mind-brain relationship, which I will describe in more detail later. A relative deactivation of the default-mode network has also been discovered in experienced meditators both during the practice of meditation and in an ordinary resting state (Brewer et al. 2011).

Psilocybin has furthermore been found to have a defocusing effect on semantic networks that leads to “an increased availability of remote associations and thereby may bring cognitive contents to mind that under normal circumstances remain non-activated” (Spitzer et al. 1996, pp. 1056–1057). Consistent with this finding is Petri et al.’s (2014) discovery of significant augmentations to the brain’s correlational networks in the psilocybin state, which they described as “a less constrained and more intercommunicative mode of brain function” (p. 8). Thus at least with psilocybin we see evidence of an altered state of brain connectivity, which

may serve to explain its sometimes beneficial effect on people with diagnoses of alcoholism or depression: their brains are normally “stuck in a rut” of narrow and repetitive cognitive loops, and the drugs serve to remove such self-limiting restrictions for a period of time, thus enabling new perspectives. In the words of Muthukumaraswamy et al. (2013, p. 15181), “the ability of serotonergic psychedelics to disrupt pathological patterns of brain activity via stimulation of 5-HT<sub>2A</sub> receptors may underlie their therapeutic potential in psychiatric settings.” While activity in the default-mode network is decreased, Carhart-Harris, Leech, and collaborators (2012) found that visual and other sensory regions are in fact activated more strongly under psilocybin, which can explain subjectively experienced increases in the vividness of memories and may serve to facilitate autobiographical recollection in therapeutic sessions.

These effects of plant-derived compounds on human consciousness are interesting in an evolutionary perspective. Why do plants across the world contain chemical compounds that closely resemble the neurotransmitters of the human brain? The presence of toxins in plants are usually thought of as an evolutionary adaptation intended to deter consumption by animals, but this cannot easily explain plant substances that produce pleasurable rewards (Sullivan, Hagen & Hammerstein 2008). “From the perspective of evolutionary ecology,” they maintain, “plants should not have evolved defensive chemicals that easily trigger reward in consumers, and consumers should not have evolved neural circuitry that readily but inadvertently rewards or reinforces consumption of numerous neurotoxins” (p. 1233). Their solution to this mystery is to point to a probable coevolution of plants and mammal nervous systems, where the latter evolved a capacity to make use of the defensive compounds of the former; one possible benefit might involve the anti-parasitic properties of these toxins (p. 1239). According to this argument, then, the human affinity for exogenous neurotransmitter-like substances is adaptive, at least in a context of our ancestral environment: we have evolved a capacity for psychoactive drug use because of the selective benefits of such practices. (The evolutionary benefits for the plants remain unexplained.)

Sullivan et al. (2008) furthermore argue that drug exposure is evolutionarily ancient. This is based especially of new insights indicating that the cytochrome P450 system, which plays an important role in the detoxification of plant chemicals, is far older than previously estimated. Mammals have therefore been genetically equipped to deal with psychoactive drugs throughout their genetic history. This observation seems to indicate that our primeval ancestors were exposed to such drugs, and thus

It seems quite probable that many eons ago, at the dawn of human existence, our early ancestors discovered the mind-altering potential of certain plants during the exploration of their environment for food (Nichols & Chemel 2006, p. 5).

Supporting this notion of proto-human drug use is the fact that animals in the wild are sometimes avid drug users (Siegel 1989/2005; Samorini 2002).

## 1.4 A brief history of religious intoxication

Exposure to plant-based drugs may therefore extend far into our evolutionary past. As this section will seek to demonstrate, human cultures have also long used psychoactive drugs for religious purposes. While there is barely space here to scratch the surface of what is known about the history of religious intoxication, I will in the following review evidence indicating that such practices have been, and to some extent still are, widespread. According to Robert C. Fuller (2000, p. 3), there are at least 150 species of plants across the globe that are known to be used for intoxication, and “[n]early every society in world history has regarded at least one of these intoxicating plants as having religious significance.” The use of psychoactive drugs in spiritual practice – often restricted to specialists – might therefore be regarded as a majority trend among global cultures. The following whirlwind tour will briefly review some archaeological evidence primarily from prehistoric times, some pre-modern textual sources, and some anthropological accounts of indigenous (or “first”) peoples and European folk traditions in modern times. This leads up to a discussion of the “entheogenic revival” in Western cultures from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

We obviously do not know on what basis religious beliefs and practices arose among our distant ancestors, but it is reasonable to think that religious experiences of some kind must have played a central part. It would seem likely that techniques such as dancing, chanting, fasting, and entheogen use would be implicated in some of these primordial religious experiences.

Archeologists have abundant indications of psychoactive drug use among prehistoric and early historic cultures. Interpreting these findings as indications of religious usage is common at least among some schools of archaeology, although it is generally difficult to obtain firm evidence for the specific context of the drug use indicated. Andrew Sherratt (1991) describes two burial sites in late third millennium Eastern Europe containing charred seeds of *Cannabis sativa* in “pipe-cups”. At the same time cannabis was cultivated in China (Fleming & Clarke 1998), and opium (*Papaver somniferum*) had already seen several thousand years as a cultivar

along Mediterranean shores (Rudgley 1995). Abundant cannabis seeds and pollen were found at the Mesolithic site known as Abora in Latvia (Zvelebil 2008), and pollen-analytical studies indicate the cultivation of cannabis around the Oslo fjord and parts of Sweden from the late first millennium BCE (Fleming & Clarke 1998). Petroglyphs from the same area and time period have been interpreted as evidence of mushroom use (Kaplan 1975). A Viking-age burial site with hundreds of henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) seeds, among other exceptional objects, was interpreted as evidence that the woman there interred was “a priestess, a seer, someone in touch with the other world” (Hall 2007, p. 173). In the Americas, seeds of the so-called mescal bean (*Sophora secundiflora*) and San Pedro cacti (*Trichocereus pachanoi*) have been discovered in association with human shelters from the end of the ninth millennium BCE, while peyote buttons (*Lophophora williamsii*) have been discovered at a site dating to the fourth millennium BCE (Guerra-Doce 2015). The earliest of the well-known “mushroom stones” of Central America date back to the first millennium BCE, and the practice continued until the arrival of the Spaniards (Devereux 2008).

Textual sources make the relation between drug use and religion more explicit. The paradigmatic case is the Indian *R̥gveda* with its many hymns to *Sóma*, which is both a drug and a divinity. A direct parallel is found in the Zoroastrian *Avesta*, parts of which are dedicated to *Haoma*. The use of psychoactive drugs in religious contexts has remained part of Indian culture into the present day, with especially cannabis being offered for sale in certain holy cities, such as Puri in Orissa, and being in common use among wandering *sadhus*. According to Jonathan Gnanadason (1996), cannabis is considered to have been part of Indian religious traditions for thousands of years. Zoroastrians in contemporary Iran and India for their part use the stimulant *Ephedra Sinica* in their rituals (Pendell 2010).

In New Kingdom Egypt, the 16<sup>th</sup> century BCE *Ebers* papyrus indicates opium and cannabis for certain illnesses (Aboelsoud 2010). Lynn Meskell (2002, p. 152) identifies a number of references to mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*) in the love poems of this period, and suggests that the mandrake fruit “may have been used at festival times to enhance an experience psychoactively or may have been used more regularly as a magico-medical ingredient.” The 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE *Book of the Heavenly Cow* presents *Hathor*, goddess among other things of love and intoxication, as a bloodthirsty lioness whose wrath can be mollified only by seven thousand jugs of mandrake beer (Rätsch 2005, p. 349).

References to drug use are also found in the *Odyssey* of archaic Greece. In the fourth book, Helen serves a round of wine spiked with the now unrecognizable drug *nepenthe*, which she had obtained in Egypt –

For Ægypt teems with drugs, yielding no few  
Which, mingled with the drink, are good, and many  
Of baneful juice, and enemies to life (verses 228–230).

Infusion of drugs in alcoholic drinks is a known Egyptian practice, and apparently the Greeks imported this tradition and spread it to other Mediterranean and Northern European cultures:

The Greeks did a great deal to develop the use of herbs in Mediterranean cuisine and were fond of spicing wines and meads. [...] Medicinal herbs would have been served in two ways by their infusion into mead: the alcohol would have been a better extractant for their medicinal compounds, and the mead would have masked unpleasant flavors from some medicinal plants (Schramm 2003, p. 8).

It is worth noting that classical authors sometimes seem to refer to such reinforced wine simply as “wine”. “Like the wine of most primitive peoples,” says Carl Ruck (in Wasson, Hofmann & Ruck 2008, p. 99), “Greek wine did not contain alcohol as its sole intoxicant but was ordinarily a mixture of various inebriants.” The black wine that Odysseus carries – which is supposed to be mixed with twenty parts of water, and does prove sufficient to knock out a cyclops – might be an example of such a reinforced wine. As Classical Greece did not know of distillation, the same can probably be said for the *Falernian* or *Mareotic* wine mentioned by Fulgentius (in Trzaskoma, Smith & Brunet 2004, p. 112), “which is so strong that even a drunkard could scarcely drink a pint over the course of a month.” Ruck (p. 101–102) similarly mentions a certain Erasixenus, who is supposed to have died from drinking two glasses of wine, as well as a reinforced wine that is said to have been used in the Dionysian festival *Antheateria*. A magico-religious context for Greek drug use is also found in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius, where



Medea repeatedly influences the narrative with an assortment of *pharmaka*.<sup>6</sup> There are also speculations about the use of entheogens in the Eleusinian Mysteries (Kerényi 1967; Wasson, Hofmann & Ruck 2008) and the role of intoxicating vapors in the divinations of the Delphic Oracle (Bowden 2005).

The use of psychoactive drugs among indigenous peoples in modern times is well documented in anthropological literature. In Siberia, Chukchee, Koryak, Kamchadal, and Yukagir use of Fly Agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) is attested from the early modern period “to facilitate communication with the supernatural, to divine the future, to diagnose the cause of illness, and for general enjoyment on festive occasions such as weddings, when it was offered to guests” (Dobkin de Rios 1990, p. 32). In the Amazon basin, the ayahuasca drink, which traditionally mixes *Banisteriopsis caapi* with a DMT admixture such as *Psychotria viridis*, has been used for ritual and healing purposes since pre-Colombian times (Dobkin de Rios 1972; Naranjo 1979). Central and North American use of *Psilocybe cubensis* (“magic mushrooms”) and peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*) is well attested, as is the South American use of the San Pedro cactus (*Trichocereus pachanoi*) (Dobkin de Rios 1990; Hultkrantz 1996, 1997; Fuller 2000; Devereux 2008). *Tabernanthe iboga* is used for ritual and healing purposes in much of West and Central Africa, and *Cannabis sativa* has a long history of use in South Africa (Deacon & Deacon 1999; Rättsch 2005).

European folk traditions are also suffused with psychoactive drugs. Mircea Eliade (1970) describes the traditional use of mandrake for love magic and healing in his native Romania, and recipes for flying ointments of witch-hunt fame often include psychoactive plants such as wolf's bane (*Aconitum*), hemlock (*Conium*), deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*), henbane, opium, and mandrake (Fuller 2000; Devereux 2008; Sidky 2015). Henbane was also used as an admixture to beer until the Bavarian Purity Law of 1516 specifically forbade such brewing practices (Rättsch 2005, p. 728).

Despite this cultural heritage, spiritual practices involving entheogens are practically unheard of in early industrialized Europe. Yet the newfound innocence in the ways of spiritual intoxication was not to last. With their growing empires, Europeans found themselves in control

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<sup>6</sup> The Pocket Oxford Classical Greek Dictionary translates φάρμακον (*pharmakon*) as ‘drug, medicine, remedy; poison, enchanted potion’, while φαρμακεία (*pharmakeia*) is translated as ‘the use of drugs *or* spells; poisoning, witchcraft; medicine’. Drugs and magical practices thus seem inextricably related.

of peoples – especially in India, the Middle East, and South-East Asia – with cultural traditions unbroken by the new forces of industrialization and modernization, as well as of trade routes spanning the globe. Soon enough their traditional intoxicants appeared as commodities for sale in European ports, and Thomas De Quincey (1821/1994) could inaugurate the modern tradition of addiction literature by describing his own use and abuse of opium; his reported ecstasies included visionary encounters with Egyptian and Indian deities. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, John Keats and other luminaries of Romanticism also indulged in opium-induced reveries, and in Paris the mid-century literary and intellectual elite could gather for experiments with hashish in the *Club des Hashischins* (Fuller 2000).

It would probably be correct to describe this use as aesthetically rather than spiritually motivated, and although the 19<sup>th</sup> century also saw the rise of modern Western esotericism with groups such as the *Theosophical Society* and the *Order of the Golden Dawn*, little is known about the drug habits of those involved. The exception is Aleister Crowley, who was infamous for his heroin and cocaine use and published his *Diary of a Drug Fiend* in 1922.

The reemergence of entheogen-induced spirituality into Western mainstream awareness would have to wait until the post-war era. Its watershed moment was probably the publication of Aldous Huxley's (1954/1994) *The Doors of Perception*. Huxley was an initiate both of Western philosophy and Hindu Vedānta, and interpreted his experiences on mescaline – the active ingredient of peyote – accordingly. His 1945 vision of *The Perennial Philosophy*, seeing a shared universal truth behind the world's religions, was greatly empowered by subsequent drug-induced experiences which, he believed, “allowed him to bypass the filtering functions ordinarily imposed upon experience by our limited physical senses” (Fuller 2000, p. 58). Thus with his doors of perception cleansed by mescaline, as he perceived it, he gained access to what he understood as an unconditioned and primeval view of the world. Building on the work of Henri Bergson, Huxley formulated the reducing-valve theory of the human brain: consciousness is limitless, but for reasons of biological survival it is transmitted to our human selves through the filtering mechanism of the brain, leaving us with but a tiny fragment of our true potential (Huxley 1954/1994, p. 11 ff.).

Within a decade of the publication of *The Doors of Perception*, the entheogenic revival was a historical fact. The drug of choice was not however Huxley's mescaline, but Albert Hofmann's recently discovered LSD – along with cannabis and a rapidly growing field of other psychoactive plants and chemicals. It is probably no coincidence that this was also a period of

rebirth for the tradition of Western esotericism – but this time in a large-scale version known loosely as the New Age movement (Hanegraaff 1996).

Characterizing New Age spirituality is complicated by its eclecticism. Like earlier esoteric movements such as the Theosophical Society it is strongly influenced by Eastern, and especially Indian, traditions, and also by strands of Western occultism involving practices such as astrology and magic (Gilhus & Mikaelsson 2005). Although described as Western, the cultural history of these practices stretches back via renaissance figures such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and John Dee into the classical Roman and Greek worlds, and from there into Egypt and Babylonia (Luck 1985; Champion 2008–2009). Unlike earlier Western esoteric movements, New Age spirituality also includes (somewhat romanticized) reinventions of the religious practices of various indigenous peoples – often labeled *shamanism* (e.g., Harner 1980). Thus the new breed of esotericism and psychoactive drugs that arose in the 1960s drew inspiration, directly or indirectly, from a number of cultural traditions that were earlier indicated in this historical overview as particularly intoxicant-infused.

Interpreters of the New Age movement often point to the emphasis on self-development as one of its primary characteristics (Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996). Inspired by Eastern religions as well as the *individuation* of Carl Jung (1969, 1971) and *self-actualization* of Abraham Maslow (1962) – and with an eye to Socrates and the famous inscription at the Temple of Delphi – New Age spirituality values self-knowledge and interiorized developmental processes. These processes are furthermore seen as involving a series of “special” experiences – characterized variously with terms such as *peak experiences* (Maslow 1962), *Kundalini awakenings* (Greenwell 2002), or *initiations* (Matthews & Matthews 2003) – accompanying or manifesting the development of the self. This emphasis on self-knowledge and self-development is sometimes referred to as a psychologization of religion (e.g., Anderstuen 2014). Thus if there is a New Age path to salvation, its main stations might reasonably be described as self-discovery via direct experience leading up to a personal transformation. While not regarded as necessary for this process – and indeed sometimes being frowned upon – there is ample conceptual room in this program for entheogen-induced altered states of consciousness.

Within a few years, however, the entheogenic revival was met with conservative reaction in the form of the so-called war on drugs. This led to the rise of what Fuller (2000) calls the *religious underground*: a movement of mostly disorganized groups and individuals engaging in the use of entheogens in spiritual contexts outside the boundaries of law. Because of the legal status of their practices, such individuals – although with some notable exceptions – have

tended to avoid publicity, but in recent years this situation appears to be changing: the religious underground is arguably becoming more mainstream, and is undergoing increasing academic scrutiny. This research is mostly related to immediate entheogenic experience and its consequences for physical and mental health, and will be reviewed in appropriate sections below.

In summary, this brief historical overview should suffice to demonstrate that the use of psychoactive drugs in religious contexts has been widespread across a broad selection of global cultures. The restrictive attitude to intoxicants that we find in modern Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism is therefore not characteristic of religion in a globally spatial and temporal perspective, and the drug-infused spirituality that remerged in the West especially from the 1960s onwards was therefore not lacking in terms of historical precedents.

## 1.5 Entheogens and religious hierarchies

We have seen in the above evidence of historical use of psychoactive drugs in religious contexts and a continuing use of such drugs in religious practices of indigenous cultures. Psychoactive drug use to the point of intoxication is not however a significant aspect of organized rituals in most contemporary large-scale religions. To understand this divergence, I will suggest two possible approaches. The first, which is discussed in this section, is an analysis of hierarchy, dogma, and power based on theoretical models from Morton Klass (1995) and Jan Assmann (2004). Neither of these is beyond reproach, but they will serve here as plausible starting points for positing entheogenic practice as a potential threat to the power hierarchies of certain types of religions. The second, which I will return to in the following section, is an analysis of the position of materiality in Christian spirituality based predominantly on an essay by Meredith B. McGuire (2003).

Klass (1995, p. 63 ff.) perceives a natural divide between *hierarchical* and *non-hierarchical* religions, labeling the religious specialists for these two types “priests” and “shamans”, respectively.<sup>7</sup> The latter type of religion imposes few if any constraints on religious practices:

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted here that Klass’ terms do not correspond directly with the ordinary usage of these words. A specialist in a hierarchical indigenous religion would therefore be a “priest” in Klass’ typology, even if we could perhaps also refer to this person as a shaman in the more loose and ordinary sense of that word. Similarly, it might be possible to find “shamans” in non-hierarchical Christian groups.

the individual shaman is free to shape practices according to his or her wishes, and laypersons may play an active role in the proceedings. The shaman

is not part of any formal organization and lacks any corpus of written rules. [...] And if a shaman seeks information about attitudes or desires of divinities or ancestors or whatever, he or she is completely free to go directly to the source – which often means by way of some altered state of consciousness (Klass 1995, p. 67).

In hierarchical religions, on the other hand, the hierarchy establishes dogma for proper rituals and acts as a link between the people and divine or transcendent realms. Laypersons are expected to take a more passive role, and the individual is not permitted to seek any form of independent contact with divine realms.

A priest is therefore subject to external authority: that of his present superiors in the hierarchy (where there is one) or that of the dogma written by those who have gone before him. He is not free to reinterpret or to devise new ceremonies or modify old ones. Most particularly, he is not free to seek independent divine guidance – that is, he may not jump the chain of command by communicating with whatever being or power lies above or beyond the formal human organization and literature (Klass 1995, pp. 66–67).

Assmann (2004, p. 28) for his part introduces the term *revolutionary monotheism* to characterize the form of monotheism that “is based on the distinction between true and false, between one true god and the rest of forbidden, false, or nonexistent gods.” Its revolutionary message is that the worship of the old gods must be purged from the land, to be replaced by a new teaching which is always codified in writing. Mandatory adherence to the rules, laws, and norms expressed in this canon of scripture serves to preserve the revolution from reversion and decay.

It would seem obvious that revolutionary monotheisms, insofar as they are to succeed in preserving their dogma, must also be hierarchical in Klass’ sense. Furthermore, in order to preserve orthodoxy and the authority of the hierarchical system, such monotheisms would be expected to discourage practices that give ordinary people the impression of being in personal contact with divine or transcendent realms. “By its very nature,” says Luck (2006, p. 487), “an ‘entheogen’ is surrounded by taboos, because it gives access to the deity, and the tremendous power it transmits must be controlled.” And in the words of Fuller (2000, p. 13):

The claim to mystical experience by lay members is an implicit challenge to the authority of the ordained clergy who are entrusted with guarding orthodoxy. Mystical experiences imply that these individuals – on their own – have learned to initiate “contact” with the divine. This helps to explain why religious institutions often develop negative attitudes toward ecstasy-producing drugs.

Before we attempt to apply the typologies of Klass and Assmann to Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, it should be noted that these religions are in truth families of religions, and that the following observations refer only to dominant tendencies within each family; there is no attempt here at capturing any form of monolithic religious essence. With these reservations, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam can probably be characterized as hierarchical, and the latter two also as revolutionary monotheisms. Buddhism is not monotheistic, but is nevertheless based on a canon, and may reasonably be regarded as a revolution against earlier Indian religious traditions. Hinduism for its part is based on a hierarchical social organization and reverence of the Vedas, but has otherwise no singular body of teachings; it has various specialist hierarchies but no large-scale formal organization holding individual ritual leaders in check; and it also allows for a multitude of gods.

Categorizing indigenous religions within this scheme incurs a risk of conflating a vast range of divergent cultures. Generally speaking, however, it would probably be true to say that the dominant trend among such religions is that they are neither hierarchical nor monotheistic.

On a basis of these considerations, we would expect that Christian and Islamic cultures would develop negative attitudes to entheogenic drugs informed by the interests of their monotheistic hierarchies. Buddhism might be expected to trend in the same direction. Hinduism, which is arguably a less hierarchical and dogmatic religion, would seem to have more room for individual entheogenic experience, and the same might be said for most indigenous religions.

## 1.6 Spirituality and materiality

Whereas the previous section sought to explain the aversion to psychoactive drugs in most large-scale religions on a basis of power relations, this section takes an ideational approach that is specific to Christian cultures. McGuire (2003) perceives a tendency to dichotomize between the material and the spiritual in the Christian tradition, and I will suggest that the relative devaluation of materiality implied by this view might have resulted in a distaste for drug-

induced spiritual experiences. Drugs, after all, are indisputably material – plant leaves, roots, bark, concoctions, pills, powders, blotters – and to a culture invested in the opposition of materiality and spirituality it might seem inappropriate to pursue experiences in the realm of the latter through the means of the former.<sup>8</sup>

According to McGuire (2003, p. 1) Western societies have in recent centuries “tended to view spirituality and materiality as dichotomous, in tidy binary opposition.” Yet pre-modern Christianity was a material religion “grounded in the material reality of the human body” (p. 6). What happened along the way was a recasting of the definitional boundaries of religion, where material concerns and practices came to be regarded as improper or impure. Churches thus “eliminated many ritual practices involving the human body” (p. 6–7), and started treating the material world as a profane realm situated as oppositional to the realm of the spirit.

It might be objected that the Christians of early modern Europe and America were not the first Christian groups to impose a dichotomy between material and spiritual realms. The Valentinian formulation of early Gnostic Christianity did for instance teach that our true spiritual being “is divine by origin and by nature, though at present captive in a body” (Eliade 1982, § 228). Our incarnation in a human body was thus understood as a fall into materiality, and our salvation was seen as a liberation from the bodily prison and a return to our proper spiritual state.

I am not suggesting here that Gnostic ideas have influenced modern Western Christianity towards a polarized and oppositional view of materiality and spirituality. Indeed it would seem more likely that both have been influenced by the dualism of Plato, although that influence might also be but a small part of these movements within the Christian tradition. My point here is merely to indicate that a tendency to dichotomize between the spiritual and the material, the sacred and the profane, has been characteristic of Christian groups in various historical periods. It would seem plausible to believe that such ideational tendencies within the religious tradition have impacted upon the broader culture, and as a consequence we might find an inclination in Western societies to regard spiritual experiences induced through material means as inferior to “pure” spiritual experiences that have no obvious cause in the material world.

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<sup>8</sup> The practice of fasting, by contrast, denies the body material sustenance, which might be understood as a way of conquering bodily needs through an act of will. This would be quite compatible with a negative view of materiality. Something similar might be said for sensory deprivation and, arguably, meditation, which also have an anti-sensual emphasis: they use the body as a tool, but not in a celebration of its materiality.

The ideational basis for entheogen suppression outlined in this section might of course reinforce, and be reinforced by, the basis in power relations outlined in the previous section. Other factors that these analyses fail to grasp might also be of import.



## Chapter 2 – Inner experience

This chapter is named after the *Inner Experience* of Georges Bataille (1943) with the intent to make clear that the term “experience” is here employed broadly and as divested from any connotations of empiricism. It approaches entheogen-induced experiences from several directions. Section one briefly discusses conscious experience in itself, and assesses some of the philosophical conundrums that arise from the proposition that experience, and especially inner experience, is a fundamentally private event. Section two utilizes Charles T. Tart’s (1975) conceptualization of (*discrete*) *altered states of consciousness* as a general framework for interpreting inner experience. While several decades old, this rather underappreciated work provides an analytical overview of human states of consciousness that avoids the judgmental presumptions that unfortunately color some newer approaches. Section three thereupon discusses the notion of *religious experience*, and reviews a selection of the research literature on one of its more ungraspable subtypes, known as *mystical experience*. Finally, section four discusses the extent of cultural and linguistic influence over mystical experiences.

### 2.1 Experience and consciousness

Dictionary definitions of “experience” commonly present it in terms of ‘something personally encountered or undergone’ (Penguin Pocket English Dictionary). This may seem straightforward enough, but the problem with talking about experience is that it soon leads to a discussion of consciousness – of having a first-person perspective on the world. We do not say that a house – or for that matter a live microphone – weathering a storm *experiences* the storm; it does not, to the extent of our awareness and knowledge, have any consciousness of phenomena at all. An animal, on the other hand, and certainly a human being, can be assumed to have a first-person awareness of storms, sunsets, and the color red: we feel there is someone there who can be conscious of these phenomena. Strictly speaking, it seems we cannot claim to *know* that other people have conscious experiences, for we have no way of observing such a thing from the outside. Rather we assume that they have such experiences because we ourselves have them, and it seems likely (and indeed comforting) that other people should be like us in this regard.

There is therefore a sense in which all experience is inner experience. If you are standing next to me and we are both looking at a cat crossing the road, we might speak of our cat-experience in compatible terms but still have no direct access to the other person's consciousness. The ability to mutually verify observations through discourse is of course very useful and a foundation for any scientific endeavor, but it remains the case that I have only your words to rely on when I assume that your experience is the same as mine. Even if we divest from radical philosophical doubt, it remains possible, perhaps even likely, that there are subtle differences in our experience of colors and forms that are smoothed out by our mutual reliance on a shared vocabulary. By its nature, experience itself eludes public scrutiny: only our narratives of experience are subject to verification.

What we call inner experience is further complicated by the fact that it points to something taking place entirely inside our minds, and which therefore does not avail itself to mutual verification. If I report a dream to you, there is no way for you to get your own experience of my dream to see, as it were, if my description agrees with how you would put it. You have nothing to rely on except my words, and some incidental clues such as my body language, the perceived confidence with which I present my case, and so forth.

Conscious experience is in other words a mysterious phenomenon that has so far eluded scientific and philosophical explication. Despite some oversimplified attempts at explaining what consciousness is (e.g., Dennett 1991), it remains a hard problem to philosophers (Chalmers 1996). This state of affairs might give rise to the argument that we should avoid consciousness-related terms of analysis in academic work, since our attempts at defining and explaining consciousness remain a confused tangle. Old-school behaviorists, for instance, wanted to outlaw any kind of psychological pursuit of knowledge about that which is not empirically accessible. Yet if we were to follow this injunction, opponents claimed, we would be denied any kind of approach to human consciousness and therefore lose out on something very central to the human existence. The rebuttal of the behaviorist position is thus perhaps best summed up with the old joke: Two behaviorists have sex. One turns to the other and says, "That was good for you; how was it for me?"

The behaviorist denial of the viability of private mental events such as thoughts and feelings in scientific studies has generally been eclipsed by the so-called cognitive revolution in psychology (Hergenhahn 1997). Nevertheless, such positions are sometimes resuscitated, and seem to play a part for instance in the philosophy of Daniel Dennett. Robert H. Sharf (2000), if I understand him correctly, takes a position along those lines when it comes to analyses of inner

experience in religious studies. He argues against the “valorization” of subjective experience, presenting a reevaluation of its role in Asian traditions and an intellectual genealogy of its role in Western thought to support this argument. Some of his arguments do not however strike me as particularly persuasive: when he claims that there is no premodern equivalent to the term “experience” in Japanese or Chinese (p. 275), this does not imply to me that these cultures were not interested in religious experience; indeed, that is rather like saying that they had no religion because they had no “religion”.

Sharf does not follow the radical behaviorists into an outright denial of subjective experience, which he agrees is absurd. It is not entirely clear to me whether his position is simply that we should be careful when incorporating inner experience into academic analyses, or if he wants to return to the behaviorist proscription of any pursuit of knowledge about that which is not empirically accessible; his conclusion that “all attempts to signify ‘inner experience’ are destined to remain ‘well-meaning squirms that get us nowhere’” (p. 286) sounds like a belated rehearsal of retro-behaviorist talking points indicating the latter. Such a return to the battle lines of yore merits the reply that, yes, a circumscription of academic pursuits only to empirically verifiable phenomena would increase the objectivity of our analyses, but, as demonstrated by the joke about the two behaviorists in bed, at the rather high cost of losing touch with something of fundamental import (and perhaps also of gaining a false sense of objectivity). Personal, subjective, conscious experience is a central facet of what it means to be human; to purge it from academic analysis is to render oneself irrelevant.

This study will therefore follow in the footsteps of William James (1902/1997) and many others in seeing personal conscious experience as a key element of spirituality. It acknowledges the methodological difficulties inherent to this approach, some of which are discussed in section 4.1, and uses the resulting narratives as a signifier only of the speakers’ life worlds. No attempt will be made to assess the ontological veracity of inner experiences reported by the participants; whether the experiences should be regarded as genuine spiritual revelations, confused infatuations, or evidence of schizophreniform disorders is left to the judgment of the reader.

## 2.2 Altered states of consciousness

Having defended the incorporation of conscious experience into academic analysis despite its lack of verifiability, this section proceeds with a brief review of Tart’s (1975) model of states of consciousness. He defines a *discrete state of consciousness* (d-SoC) as “a unique, dynamic pattern or configuration of psychological structures,” and counts the ordinary waking state, non-

dreaming sleep, dreaming sleep, hypnosis, alcohol intoxication, marijuana intoxication, and meditative states as examples (p. 5). A d-SoC is therefore a “particular region of experiential space” constituted by a cluster of experiences that are similar enough to qualify as a specific *type* of experience (p. 55). Within this typology of states, the ordinary waking state normally serves as the *baseline state of consciousness* (b-SoC), and any d-SoC that diverges from the b-SoC is labelled a *discrete altered state of consciousness* (d-ASC). Tart (ch. 8) analyzes the experiential space of d-SoCs in terms of ten major subsystems: i) exteroception; ii) interoception; iii) input processing; iv) memory; v) subconscious; vi) evaluation and decision-making; vii) emotions; viii) space/time sense; ix) sense of identity; and x) motor output. A d-SoC is characterizable by its influence over each of these subsystems.

Revonsuo, Kallio, and Sikka (2009, p. 187) object to Tart’s notion of altered states, which they see not as “an alteration of consciousness (or subjective experience) per se, but an alteration in the informational or representational relationships between consciousness and the world.” This formulation of a relational definition does however end up assuming that there is a “correct” representation of the world that is available to the baseline or “normal” state, and that an altered state of consciousness therefore constitutes only “a general but reversible misrepresentational state of the mind” (p. 201). This is not, I believe, a generally fruitful starting point for a discussion of spiritual experiences, whether naturally occurring or induced by meditative, entheogenic, or other practices, as it would seem to assume that they are all inferior to the “correct” representation of the unaltered mind. We might nevertheless criticize Tart’s model for positing discrete states that are in reality continuous and overlapping. The human consciousness is probably not as neatly categorizable as the model suggests, but we can use the model as a heuristic tool to map some overall tendencies and dynamics.

Tart regards d-SoCs, and particularly the b-SoC, as self-stabilizing: they have the capability to channel available energy into stabilization processes that work to maintain state coherence. In order to induce a d-ASC it is therefore necessary first of all to “disrupt enough stabilization processes to a great enough extent that the baseline pattern of consciousness cannot maintain its integrity” (p. 71). If this is successful, a transitional period characterized by the lack of a coherent d-SoC is entered, one example being the hypnagogic phase between waking and sleep. From here, patterning forces may serve to form the d-ASC as a new, self-stabilized structure. A problem with the use of drugs such as LSD and cannabis to induce a d-ASC is that they are pharmacologically reliable only for the first two steps in the induction process: they will reliably break down the b-SoC and initiate a transition (p. 154). The constitution of the newly-formed

d-ASC depends however on a wide range of non-pharmacological factors including both long-term factors such as cultural background and personality, and immediate factors such as mood, expectation, and social environment (p. 148).

Entheogenically induced states of consciousness are therefore quite unpredictable, both between individuals and within a given individual. Nevertheless, there are certain (moderately) predictable effects on several subsystems. Tart discusses how *input processing* is commonly affected by marijuana intoxication to increase the ability to perceive patterns, to find new qualities in colors and sounds, and sometimes to experience synesthesia (pp. 97–104). He believes that *memory* is to a large extent state-specific, so that an experience in a d-ASC may only be fragmentarily available to a b-SoC perspective and thus believed forgotten, yet may be recalled with great clarity upon subsequent reentry into the d-ASC (pp. 104–109). Entheogens also tend to increase the accessibility of *subconscious* material, which may be a useful therapeutic effect but which Tart also regards as one of the dangers of entering a d-ASC: a person risks being flooded with subconscious material, often charged with strong *emotions*, that he or she is not capable of dealing with (p. 111). Some d-ASCs may also make available new emotions – for instance states of ecstasy – that are never experienced in the b-SoC (p. 125). Such emotions are known to sometimes accompany an altered *sense of identity* where a person is disengaged from the habitual relation to his or her ego or self (pp. 129–136).

This brief tour of Tart’s subsystems indicates that d-ASCs, whether entheogen-induced or not, may have utility for us. On this basis it has been argued that the capacity to alter consciousness – the mastery of various induction techniques – may offer adaptive advantages (Winkelman 2010; Sidky 2015). This hypothesis would seem supported by the findings of anthropologists Erika Bourguignon (1973) and Felicitas Goodman (1988) that almost every global culture uses some kind of induction technique to gain access to altered states of consciousness. Primary cross-cultural applications of d-ASCs are healing and gaining access to revelatory knowledge (Sidky 2015).

## 2.3 “Religious experience”

We have seen in the above how Tart differentiates between ordinary (b-SoC) and less ordinary (d-ASC) states of consciousness. This part will proceed with a discussion of “religious experience” and attempt to map such experience into Tart’s framework. I speak here of “religion” rather than “spirituality” because that is the most common nomenclature in the literature on such experience; as the two are here presumed to differ primarily with regard to

dogma and hierarchy, there is no reason to believe that “religious experience” *qua* inner experience is meaningfully different from “spiritual experience”.

Having previously denied any coherent essence to the concept of “religion”, it naturally follows that the same must apply to the concept of “religious experience”. I believe that people may attach the label “religious” to an experience due to many different reasons and motivations, and that there is no particular reason to believe that these reasons and motivations constitute a coherent set. Thus it is not particularly meaningful to say that an experience *is* religious, which implies the existence of some kind of objective rule with which the veracity of that statement may be judged, but only that an experience *is deemed* religious according to subjective criteria. This perspective is inspired by Ann Taves (2009), but is not meant to imply that “religious experience” is necessarily a *post hoc* construction. My point is rather that we have no means available to determine whether some experiences have a *sui generis* religious component, and no reliable method to distinguish those that do from those that don’t. It may or may not be the case that some experiences deemed religious (or spiritual) are supported by an actual interaction with culture-transcending realms or beings; certainly it seems unlikely that *all* experiences deemed religious are thus supported. Even if we allow for the possibility that *Śiva* exists as an ontologically independent entity, it seems plausible that some reports of encounters with *Śiva* can be reduced entirely to mental and cultural constructions.

Of course, even if we lack objective criteria for categorizing experiences as religious or otherwise, is it possible to obtain empirical data on what criteria people actually use for such purposes and construct categories on this basis. For Taves, the fundamental category in this regard is *specialness*: thus a religious experience is always a special experience (although the converse is not true). While I suspect there might be Advaitins and Buddhists who would claim that ordinary experiences are just as religious as special experiences, I will pass by this point of critique and instead draw the obvious parallel to Tart. A d-ASC is after all for Tart a state out of the ordinary – something special – that might occur by itself or might be intentionally produced through some induction technique. Not all d-ASCs give rise to religious experiences, but we would not be surprised to hear that some do, or that many cultures have practices for inducing d-ASCs in religious contexts (Goodman 1988). Such techniques include prayer, meditation, fasting, sensory deprivation, chanting, dancing, and the use of entheogens.

This framework seems particularly applicable to what is called mystical experience, which is generally characterized by intensity of feeling and an intimate connection with some kind of transcendent reality. In her foundational study of mysticism, Evelyn Underhill (1911/1999, p.

73; emphasis in original) states that “the end which the mystic sets before him is conscious union with a living Absolute [...] which – transcending, as it does, all human powers of expression – he can only describe to us as *dark*.” This perceived inability to describe the object, as it were, of mystic experience, builds on a long Christian tradition of negative or apophatic theology exemplified by such historical figures as Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross. Such traditions may be found also in other religions, for instance in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, where Brahman is described only with the words *neti, neti* (not this, not that).

In an influential analytical work on mysticism, much cited and also much critiqued, Walter Terence Stace (1960) identified nine domains of mystical experience: i) internal unity or merging with ultimate reality; ii) external unity with all beings; iii) transcendence of time and space; iv) a sense of living presence in everything; v) noetic quality or attainment of higher knowledge; vi) sacredness or awe; vii) feelings of joy, peace and love; viii) paradoxicality; and ix) ineffability. We can see that these map particularly to Tart’s sense of identity, space/time sense, evaluation and decision-making, and emotions subsystems.

A prominent application of Stace’s nine dimensions is the Mysticism Scale developed by Ralph W. Hood and collaborators (Hood 1975; Hood, Morris & Watson 1993), which is commonly used as a system of measurement of life-time mystical experience. Factor analysis of responses measured on this scale has revealed that the nine dimensions tend to cluster into three factors: one for introvertive mysticism, another for extrovertive mysticism, and thirdly a separate interpretation factor (Hood et al. 2001). Here the introvertive factor represents “an experience of nothingness” or pure consciousness without any substantive content, while the extrovertive experience “is one in which the self reaches a unity with the multiplicity of objects in the universe”; the third factor for its part constitutes an elaborated interpretation in more cultural-specific terms (pp. 692–693). The attained factor structure was found to apply not only to various samples of Americans, but also to an Iranian Muslim sample, and is therefore taken as support of the view that there is a transcultural “common core” to all mystical experience (p. 704). Later studies in India and China have found somewhat divergent factor structures, however (see review in MacLean et al. 2012).

Another commonly employed instrument for assessing mystical experience is known as the Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ), and was developed by Pahnke (1969) for the evaluation specifically of free-standing drug-induced experiences. Like Hood’s Mysticism Scale it is based on Stace’s nine dimensions, but the two instruments differ substantially in wording and structure, and a factor analysis of the MEQ revealed a divergent underlying

structure with four separate factors (MacLean et al. 2012). These were labeled “mystical”, “positive mood”, “time/space” and “ineffability”, with the mystical factor including internal unity, external unity, noetic quality and sacredness (p. 733). The authors suggest several possible explanations for these structural differences, including the varying characteristics of the instruments of measurement and the specifics of the samples.

These empirical approaches to mystical experience based on factor analyses of survey data attempt to reveal the nature of such experience through a systematic analysis of what a sample of respondents say about it. Our confidence in the results thus obtained is strengthened as repeated applications on different samples reveal compatible results, but this approach remains vulnerable to the critique that it actually perpetuates cultural biases in an essentially closed and self-referential system. Questionnaires do not allow respondents to venture outside of predetermined conceptual boundaries, and may therefore serve to confine responses to given cultural norms.

It has been argued in the above that an experience can be characterized as “religious” only on a basis of subjective criteria, and that a primary criterion in this regard is specialness. Entheogenic experiences involve “special” or altered states of consciousness, and therefore readily lend themselves to religious attribution. Thus “[i]t has long been noted that there is an obvious similarity between various religious/spiritual experiences and drug-induced experiences” (Hood, Hill & Spilka 2009, p. 325). As illustrated by Pahnke’s MEQ, this similarity is expected to extend also to mystical experiences. One challenge with characterizing entheogenic experience is however that, as noted in section 1.3, it is often highly heterogeneous and unpredictable (Nichols 2004). We can therefore expect no definitive exposition of entheogenic effects, but will present two noteworthy contributions: one from Alan Watts (1968), based on self-experiments with LSD, mescaline, psilocybin, DMT, and cannabis, and the other from Benny Shanon (2010), based both on self-experiments and interviews with 178 users of ayahuasca.

Watts (p. 76) ignores the effects on sense perception and concerns himself exclusively “with the fundamental alterations of the normal, socially induced consciousness of one’s own existence and relation to the external world.” He discovers four dominant characteristics of these drugs: i) a slowing down of time and focus on the present moment; ii) an awareness of the interdependence between seemingly opposite things or events, feeling yourself “as the unified field of organism and environment” (p. 77); iii) an awareness of the relativity of personal identity, enabling you to see other I-centers as “yourself – not, indeed, your personal and



superficially conscious ego, but what Hindus call the *paramatman*, the Self of all selves” (p. 78); and iv) an awareness of eternal energy, with the insight that “all existence is a single energy, and that this energy is one’s own being” (p. 79). These four characteristics obviously map well both to Stace’s dimensions and Tart’s subsystems, although they are in a sense more narrowly focused on the dissolution of time and personal delimited identity.

Shanon for his part focuses particularly on visual perceptive effects, based on the observation that “the primary language in which Ayahuasca expresses itself is the visual one” (2010, p. 69). I cannot hope to do justice to his encyclopedic elaboration of various effects here, and it should be noted that his exposition relates specifically to ayahuasca, whose effects should not be conflated with those of other entheogens. Nevertheless, much of what he says at least about the general effects of ayahuasca has been said also about other entheogens, and probably has some degree of general validity. He (p. 59) describes first of all a sensation of *otherworldliness*, where “[t]he feeling is that things are not as they used to be and one has the sense of entering into another, heretofore unknown, reality.” With this otherworldliness comes other phenomenological features such as *beautification* and *sanctity*, as the ayahuasca drinkers “usually feel they are the recipients of utmost grace” (p. 61). There is the experience of *meaningfulness* and *insight*, where drinkers may “feel that they suddenly understand why things are as they are” and “discover the true senses of their own lives” (p. 60). Coupled with this is often a feeling of *enchantment* and *powerful energy*, where drinkers come to see that the world “is governed by invisible forces, energies, or beings,” and that “a tremendous force permeates and animates everything around” (pp. 60–61). While these effects seem distinctly non-ordinary (or special), Shanon (p. 62) maintains that it is also very common for drinkers to

feel that they are rediscovering a facet of their existence that is actually very basic, very much their own. It is as if life had estranged one from oneself and made one forget some very basic things pertaining to one’s very essence. Time and again, drinkers say that the brew brings them “back home” – to the true essence of their personality from which they have distanced themselves.

## 2.4 Cultural and linguistic mediation

Several observations in the previous section relate to the issue of whether or not, or to which extent, cultural and linguistic factors shape the form and content of religious experience. Opinions on the matter differ markedly, ranging from the classical perennialist views of scholars such as Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade, where religious experience is understood

primarily in terms of a pan-humanly shared access to a pre-cultural transcendent essence, to the strong constructivist views emerging in the 1970s and 1980s that regarded religious experience entirely as a social construction. From this latter perspective “the language, doctrines, and beliefs with which mystics describe their experience do not come *after* the mystical experience, they *produce* it” (Fuller 2000, p. 174; emphasis in original). We will recall that Tart (1975) took something of an intermediary position, seeing our entry into a d-ASC as influenced, but not necessarily determined, by cultural factors. This section will discuss a “soft relativist” view from Gavin Flood (2012) that incorporates some constructivist views, as well as a culture-defying perspective from Georges Bataille (1943/1988). Perspectives from the users of entheogenic drugs themselves are also discussed via the research literature on empirical studies of mystical and psychedelic experience.

According to Flood (2012, p. 119), we are “predisposed to acting in the world in particular ways because of the linguistic categories that form the basis of our language.” We perceive the world through glasses colored by linguistic categories, and language thus mediates our experience of reality. This applies both to empirical experience and what we have called inner experience: indeed “[t]he world is not separable from language in the sense that the world is what is presented to us through concepts” (p. 133). With this I take him to mean that we represent our understanding of the world in knowledge structures based fundamentally on language: when we see a small creature crossing the road, we recognize it as a member of the (linguistically based) concept “cat”. This of course begs the question of how dogs recognize the cat crossing the road, and generally seems to imply a fundamental difference in basic perceptive capacities between human and non-human animals. If we accept such a view of perception, says philosopher William Fish (2009, p. 72), “we would thereby be compelled to deny that nonlinguistic creatures such as animals and infants have perceptual experiences as we understand them.” There is today a growing body of research on animal cognition and the capacity to think without language that makes this understanding of categorization as fundamentally bound by linguistic precepts seem unlikely (e.g., Donald 1991; Bermúdez 2003), and it is also not particularly compatible with the earlier discussed prototype/exemplar approach to knowledge structures in cognitive psychology (Matlin 2008). Even if we divest from the notion of full linguistic conditioning, however, it is still possible to claim that language colors our experience of the world to a certain extent. For Flood (p. 83) this coloring effect applies also to our experience of what he calls “invisible” realms: we interpret our experience of

transcendent reality with the aid of pre-existing conceptual knowledge shaped by our language and culture.

A very different perspective is found in the *Inner Experience* of Georges Bataille (1943/1988). Once a devout Catholic who briefly attended a seminary, Bataille later renounced Christianity but maintained his respect for experiences “at the extreme limit of the ‘possible’” (p. 40). “I have of the divine an experience so mad that one will laugh at me if I speak of it” (p. 33), he wrote: to his own mind, at least, the inner experience he extolled was not a product of his culture and background, but was “an experience laid bare, free of ties, even of an origin, of any confession whatever” (p. 3).

For Bataille, the inner or mystical experience is therefore radically removed from the realms of culture and language. No set of words can convey that “which I call the ‘unknown’ and which is not distinct from Nothingness by anything which discourse is capable of articulating” (p. 125); like the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* he can describe the object of his experience only with a *neti, neti*. Furthermore such states of consciousness are not only beyond the capacity for linguistic description, he found, but also fundamentally incompatible with the discursive mind – for “[i]f we live under the law of language without contesting it, these states are within us as if they didn’t exist” (p. 14). The language which Flood claims will shape one’s experience of the “invisible” is therefore for Bataille like a prison from which he must seek liberation in order to attain true experience of the “unknown”.

Ann Taves (2009, pp. 92–93) cites an experience by William Barnard that is similarly claimed to be unconditioned by any spiritual tradition or discipline, and argues on this basis that “we need to abandon the constructivist axiom that beliefs and attitudes are always formative of, rather than consequent to, experience in any very strong sense”. From her perspective the constructivist approach is one-sided in its emphasis on top-down processing of experience – whereby we understand the world in terms of existing knowledge structures – and needs to regain its balance by taking into account also the bottom-up aspects of human perception. Failing to open up for these bottom-up aspects does after all seem to render genuine religious experience impossible, as it leaves no room for new experiential data, and therefore it also rather blatantly implies that such “experience” is entirely imaginary.

Empirical studies of mystic and psychedelic experience largely confirm the gap between experiential and cultural and linguistic factors at least from a respondent perspective, thus challenging the notion that such experience is predominantly a social construction. Back in 1969, Deikman (p. 41) found that in drug-induced mystical experiences

the subject has a revelation of the significance and interrelationships of many dimensions of life; he becomes aware of many levels of meaning simultaneously and “understands” the totality of existence. The question whether such knowledge is actual or an illusion remains unanswered; however, if such a multileveled comprehension were to occur, it would be difficult – perhaps impossible – to express verbally. Ordinary language is structured to follow the logical development of one idea at a time and it might be quite inadequate to express an experience encompassing a large number of concepts simultaneously.

Similarly, Pahnke and Richards (1969, p. 405) observed that

When a subject attempts to communicate mystical consciousness verbally to another person, he usually claims that the available linguistic symbols – if not the structure of language itself – are inadequate to contain or even accurately reflect such experience.

Later research has often supported this finding. One interviewee in a study by Lars Blikstad Galaaen (2015, p. 74; ellipsis in original) says about the psychedelic experience that it “brings you closer to evolution. You take away the operational system [i.e., “culture”]. You get behind all cultural ballast.” Similarly, one of Flore Singer Aaslid’s (2007, p. 109) participants reported that LSD experiences are difficult to describe “because it’s a way of seeing the world that I don’t think we have concepts for in our language. You need poetry or paintings to describe it because it’s a totally different way of perceiving the world.” And an informant in a study on self-transcendent experience found that “[p]art of the experience for me is how words don’t even begin to capture ... how in a way language and words themselves are born of this duality that kind of falls away” (Garcia-Romeu, Himmelstein & Kaminker 2015, p. 643). Galaaen (p. 77) sums up his interviewing experiences:

During my research, I found it frustrating that informants explicitly claimed that it was impossible to describe their experiences with words. Their argument was that human languages were created in a different reality than the subject had experienced, and that these experiences therefore could not be expressed with words.

Ståle Anderstuen (2014, p. 9) similarly reports that most of his informants took it for granted that the use of DMT provides a kind of insight that is not explicable through rational means. Bård K. Rønning (2010) concludes his participatory study of ayahuasca ceremonies in Europe with the admittance that he finds his own profound experiences hard to describe. And in a

famous study by Griffiths, Richards, McCann and Jesse (2006, p. 277) that I will describe in more detail below, ineffability was the highest-scoring item on participant questionnaires, and thus in a sense the most prominent feature of psilocybin-occasioned experiences (no indications of statistical significance for differences in scores between different items were supplied, however).

As we saw in section 2.3, Hood et al. (2001, p. 704) obtained separate factors for what they understood as primary experience – the introvertive and extrovertive dimensions – and for subsequent interpretations of this experience. In their opinion, this result “contrasts with the alternative claim that all experiences are culturally mediated and that mystical experiences, in particular, are the unique and diverse social constructions of different religious traditions” (p. 704). They therefore draw the conclusion that, at least according to their data, mystical experiences were cross-culturally similar to such an extent that “at certain basic levels of mysticism, Muslims had a Christian experience, and Christians had a Muslim experience.” (ibid.). MacLean et al. (2012) for their part found unity and noetic quality loading into the same factor, thus challenging the separation between basic experience and interpretation suggested by Hood and collaborators. They also discovered an ineffability factor separate from the mystical factor, indicating that ineffability, although it figured prominently among a number of respondents, was not a necessary companion of the psilocybin-occasioned experience.

As a tentative conclusion to this section, I would make the observation that an assessment of religious experience strictly as a social construction entails the denial of the ontological reality of religiously posited transcendent realms. Conversely, to see such experience as something other than (simply) a social construction requires of us that we either accept the reality of a transcendent realm or take refuge in some biological and therefore pan-human tendency to attain certain special experiences suggestive of transcendent realms. Consider the following thought experiment, with the premises that (i) *Śiva* exists as an ontologically independent entity of vast power and knowledge, and (ii) somewhere deep in the German woods there lives a twelve-year old girl who knows exactly nothing about Indian culture. Now *Śiva*, for reasons best known to himself, reveals his glory to our young girl and teaches her the proper ways of doing *puja* and obtaining *darśana*. Is this conceivable? If *Śiva* is only a cultural supposition with no independent reality, then it cannot be possible to interact with him outside of cultural boundaries. In the opposite case, it would seem possible that humans could interact with *Śiva* in a manner that is not fundamentally conditioned by culture, as divine omnipotence would presumably be capable of piercing any culturally imposed limitation at its discretion.

The implication is once again that it would probably be a mistake for a researcher of religious phenomena – assuming that one wishes to approach these phenomena without prejudging their ontological status – to take a strong position in this debate. If we assume that religious experiences are, in a reductive sense, social constructions, then we are also saying that any narrative about transcendental realities that might emerge in our research is based essentially on delusion. In the opposite case we will find ourselves working from the assumption that the narratives represent either a window to ontological truth or a shared evolutionary preparation for delusional inner experience. Either approach would seem to impose limits on our research that it might be advisable to avoid: after all it may be the case, given the current state of evidence about the existence of gods, that some religious experiences are complete social constructions, some are based on twists of evolutionary selection, and others represent a point of culturally unmediated contact with transcendent reality.

While this study therefore does not work from any specific assumption with regard to the etiology of spiritual experiences, it will aim to investigate the issue by examining to which extent respondent experience conforms to expectations inherited from cultural backgrounds, and to which extent they are regarded as ineffable and outside the boundaries of language. The hypothesis based on earlier reviewed research is that (i) cultural background generally serves as a frame of understanding for religious experiences in much the same way as it does for other kinds of experiences, but (ii) that respondents will provide a number of narratives about entheogen-induced spiritual experience that differ markedly from cultural norms and which they often will regard as fundamentally inexpressible.

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# Chapter 3 – Entrance and maintenance processes

This chapter reviews extant research on the attractions and consequences of entheogen use. The first section reviews some perspectives on entry processes: the motivations for the initial entrance into the world of psychoactive drugs. Section two reviews processes of maintenance – the motivations for repeated use – with regard to consequences for life, health and spirituality.

## 3.1 Entrance processes

Even the most experienced psychonaut was once innocent in the ways of drugs. At some point in their life they crossed the threshold and embarked on a clandestine path through forbidden lands. What drove them to take that first step?

Illegal drug use in modern Western societies is conventionally interpreted straightforwardly as a sign of being on an “antisocial trajectory”, to use the terminology of Odgers et al. (2008): it is regarded as one fairly reliable indicator of how poorly a person’s life is going, predicted not least by social, familial, and neurodevelopmental risk factors in childhood. Thus the answer to my above question might be that the new drug users did what they did because something went wrong in their lives at an earlier time.

Odgers et al. (2008) also speak of an adolescent-onset antisocial trajectory whose etiology cannot easily be explained by childhood risk factors. Perhaps the prospective drug users are instead rebellious youths who want to break free from the confines of a world ruled by adults? Aaslid (2007, pp. 94–95), who is open about having traversed this path herself, suggests the following reasons for crossing the threshold of the “first gate” of drug use:

It is as if a dark and mysterious force beckons and calls one outward, away from the safe confines of one’s former being in the world, towards something altogether new and different. This is coupled with a strong need for autonomy, of finding a separate identity and ontology, a personal space or room of one’s own that can both protect and connect in terms of serving as a basis for new alliances. There are close parallels between the first gate and adolescence in terms of becoming one’s own person with a strong emphasis on the construction of personal identity and

the need for freedom and excitement. This may also account for why the majority of people who experiment with intoxication start doing so during adolescence and young adulthood.

Entering the lands of dragons and Djinn, in the language of Sandberg and Tutenges (2015), may thus have an attraction of its own: for some people it is perhaps a modern-day rite of passage to venture beyond the safe confines of our civilized worlds, outside the boundaries of sanity, reason and other normative values. This may have a parallel in the late modern interest in extreme sports such as mountain climbing and hang-gliding: the land of forbidden intoxication is a land of adventure and danger, which are not otherwise easily obtainable in our consumption- and welfare-oriented societies. Thus in order to claim the mantle as a countercultural hero, one must first face the dragon.

This perspective suggests that the lands beyond have value only as a testing ground: a place one may go to in order to prove oneself. Yet one of Aaslid's (2007, pp. 93–94) informants described her entry into the world of drugs as being based rather on her “deep spiritual quest”: at age thirteen she was an outsider who did not fit in socially, “reading all kinds of religious texts and poetry,” and searching for people with depth and wisdom. The attraction of intoxicants, then, may lie also in the way they manifest, or at least are symbolic of, a turn from outward-looking materialism to the inward realm of the soul (Aaslid 2008); they are a celebration of subjectivity and inner experience serving as a countercultural defiance of the rigidity and mechanicalness of modern life.

Whatever the reasons given for one's departure, whether it be the need to create a “new image”, experience different states of consciousness or move in a different direction there is a deep underlying fascination with this “zone unknown” and a focus away from “the frequented paths of man”. Drugs at this stage are simply a means to that end, of attempting to move beyond the established normative reality by transcending it and identifying with an altered reality and illicit state of being. Towards this aim they are an essential part of the process but have not become a substitute for the process itself (Aaslid 2007, p. 89).

We note here, in Aaslid's final sentence, the implicit value judgment of long-term drug use. Perhaps the real danger with entheogens is that they start out as a means to an end, but end up as a goal unto themselves. Thus, some might argue, entheogen use may obscure or even serve as a substitute for a genuine spiritual life, or for whatever was the original purpose for taking these drugs. This brings us to the next section, which discusses the processes of maintenance:



what are the motivations for and consequences of continuing entheogen use as a spiritual practice?

## 3.2 Maintenance processes

Repeated drug use is conventionally interpreted in terms of drug craving, habituation, and addiction (Drummond 2001; McSweeney, Murphy & Kowal 2005). Drug taking, argue McSweeney et al. (2005, p. 163), “is an operant behavior that is reinforced by the drug itself.” Most of the drugs that are regarded as entheogenic do not however interact with dopaminergic neurotransmission to a substantial degree, and therefore do not seem to share dependence-forming mechanisms with drugs such as cocaine and amphetamine. Thus at least when it comes to classical hallucinogens, “there is no evidence of a withdrawal syndrome, and users do not appear to develop dependence” (Iversen et al. 2009, p. 488). Nevertheless, even if there is no direct chemical interaction with the brain’s reward systems, entheogens can induce states of consciousness that are regarded as rewarding, and can therefore probably serve as what behaviorist psychology terms *conditioned reinforcers*. Of course, practically everything – sports, meditation, and entheogen use alike – that gives rise to rewarding circumstances has the potential to direct our behavior, but whereas daily sports and meditation practice is probably safe and beneficial, the same is unlikely to hold for daily entheogen use. Cannabis in particular seems to lend itself to habitual use, and is sometimes described as “psychologically addictive” – for instance by one of Aaslid’s (2007, p. 128) informants. Thus it is perfectly possible to abuse cannabis and other entheogens, and short-term overuse may result in the formation of long-term habitual usage patterns.

Aaslid emphasizes however the importance of distinguishing between different patterns of drug use, and maintains that *problematic* usage patterns are distinct from what she terms *experimental* and *recreational* patterns. This emphasis on distinct usage patterns corresponds with the findings of Mette Kronbæk and Vibeke A. Frank (2013), who interviewed adult cannabis users in Denmark and obtained evidence both of problematic and unproblematic use, with the latter taking a recreational form that did not interfere with social and economic life. Interestingly, one participant in Aaslid’s (2007, p. 178) study hints at what might be considered a fourth usage pattern that is neither recreational, experimental, nor problematic:

[M]aybe it is possible to be totally clean for weeks at a time and rather use drugs as a ritual thing once in a rare while. That's what I've done with magic mushrooms for many years, tripped out once a year as a spiritual thing, to be inspired and to shake up my psyche, use it therapeutically almost.

Perhaps we may call this a *spiritual* usage pattern. Research on the spiritual aspects of entheogen use goes back at least to Aldous Huxley's (1954/1994, p. 51) self-experimentation with mescaline, which he described in terms of the Catholic "gratuitous grace". More systematic experiments followed in the early 1960s, when Walter Pahnke (1966) conducted a double-blind controlled study that ministered psilocybin and nicotinic acid as an active control to ten pairs of Harvard theology majors in preparation of a Good Friday service, and found that nine out of ten people in the experimental group and only one person in the control group subsequently reported religious or mystical experiences during the service. The validity of this finding was confirmed by a six-month follow-up questionnaire, and also by follow-up interviews conducted by Rick Doblin (1991, p. 13) a quarter century later, which found that "[t]he experimental subjects unanimously described their Good Friday psilocybin experience as having had elements of a genuinely mystical nature and characterized it as one of the highpoints of their spiritual life."

Due to legal restrictions these lines of research were curtailed from the 1970s onwards, but recent policy changes in regulatory agencies have brought experimental studies back on the table and given new impetus to entheogenic research agendas. Rick Strassman's (2001, pp. 89–90) study from the early 1990s set the stage for what was to come with a carefully designed research protocol for the "reexamination of the human psychobiology of the tryptamine hallucinogen of abuse, N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT)." He categorized the experiences of his volunteers as *personal*, *invisible*, or *transpersonal*, with *invisible* indicating "an encounter with seemingly solid and freestanding realities coexisting with this one" and *transpersonal* involving "near death and spiritual-mystical experiences" (p. 155). As an example of the latter he offers the testimony of a volunteer named Cleo, who during a DMT session was encouraged by inner voices to stop looking for God outside herself and then turned her attention inwards, resulting in an epiphany where she experienced "[t]hat God is in everything and that we are all connected" (p. 238). Cleo later wrote Strassman to say that "I am changed. I will never be the same. To simply say this almost seems to lessen the experience. I don't think that anyone hearing or reading this can truly grasp what I felt" (ibid.). Strassman was however disappointed by the fact that a number of such peak experiences did not seem to have any obvious long-term

implications: none of his volunteers “began psychotherapy or a spiritual discipline to work further on the insights they felt on DMT” (p. 276).

This question about the long-term value of entheogenically induced epiphanies is a widespread concern, and was voiced as early as 1964 in Huston Smith’s (reprinted with modifications in 2000) article about the religious import of drugs. According to Smith, “[d]rugs appear to be able to induce religious experiences; it is less evident that they can produce religious lives” (p. 30). There is however conflicting evidence: an editorial in the Western Buddhist magazine *Tricycle* did for instance claim that “[f]or the new Buddhists of the 1960s and 1970s it was a rare bird indeed who came through the dharma gates totally independent of ‘mind-expanding drugs’” (Tworkov 1996), indicating that drug-induced spiritual experiences can lead to long-term spiritual practice at least for some individuals. Hood et al. (2009, p. 240) similarly reports that

The high rate of former drug use among members converted to new religious movements is well documented. In some new religious movements, the rate of former drug use is reported to be almost 100%.

Roger Walsh (2003, p. 4) may have a point in this regard when he claims that “the transformation of experiences and insights into enduring change is one of the challenges of transformative disciplines in general,” and that it is therefore not a limitation specific to the use of entheogenic drugs.

A burst of research on entheogens during the last decade sheds some light on this controversy. In a now famous double-blind study of “the acute and longer-term psychological effects of a high dose of psilocybin” (Griffiths et al. 2006, p. 268), thirty volunteers without previous entheogenic experience received psilocybin or methylphenidate hydrochloride (Ritalin) as an active control in individual eight-hour sessions. Assessments of drug effects and mystical experience were conducted immediately after sessions and as a two-month follow-up, with the latter including ratings of changes in attitudes and behavior by community observers. Results were overwhelmingly positive, with participants returning high scores on a mysticism scale developed to assess primary mystical experiences, and with two-thirds furthermore scoring the psilocybin session as being among the top five most personally meaningful experiences of their lifetime. These findings on the attribution of personal meaning and spiritual significance to the use of psilocybin endured in a 14-month follow-up (Griffiths, Richards, Johnson, McCann & Jesse 2008), and measurements of personality change also found

significant increases in the personality domain of openness more than one year after the session (MacLean, Johnson & Griffiths 2011). A similar increase in openness was observed in a two-week follow-up questionnaire among participants in a study of the biological effects of LSD (Lebedev et al. 2016).

Survey data on users of entheogenic drugs largely support these findings. Michael Lerner and Michael Lyvers (2006, p. 146) obtained cross-cultural samples from Israel (110 respondents) and Australia (73 respondents) and found that users of psychedelic drugs “scored significantly higher than users of other illegal drugs and nonusers on mystical beliefs, such as oneness with God and the universe, the illusory nature of physical existence, and the presence of a transcendental reality.” They were also found to be less materialistically oriented than the two other groups. In a study of 337 respondents, Michael Lyvers and Molly Meester (2012, p. 410) found that the “use of LSD and psilocybin was significantly positively related to scores on two well-known indices of mystical experiences in a dose-related manner, whereas use of MDMA, cannabis, cocaine, opiates and alcohol was not.” Similarly, Carhart-Harris and Nutt (2010, p. 288) obtained over 600 responses from hallucinogen users, of which 18% answered “probably yes” and 63% “definitely yes” to the question of “whether they had ever had a ‘spiritual experience’ while under the effects of a hallucinogenic drug.” This survey also asked about perceived health effects, and about two thirds of LSD users reported a positive or very positive long-term effect on wellbeing, while about 60% of psilocybin users, 50% of MDMA users and 40% of cannabis users reported the same. Benefits included alleviating depression, anxiety and insomnia, as well as “improved insight, perspective, self-understanding and acceptance, resolution of existential anxieties, help with mourning and a reduced fear of death, improved optimism, self-esteem and an increased sense of spirituality” (p. 291). Minorities of 14% (LSD), 12% (psilocybin), 21% (MDMA), and 38% (cannabis) of respondents commented on adverse effects and health risks, which included paranoia, panic attacks, psychotic symptoms, anxiety and depression. A roughly simultaneous study with 667 respondents sought to investigate the differences between users of psychedelic drugs, users of other drugs, and nonusers, and found that “the use of psychedelic drugs with a purpose to enhance self-knowledge is less associated with problems, and correlates positively with coping and spirituality” (Móro, Simon, Bárd & Rácz 2011, p. 188).

Interestingly, entheogens sometimes induce personality-transforming spiritual experiences even in committed atheists. One of Anderstuen’s (2014, pp. 58–59) participants described himself as an atheist, but nevertheless reported an intensely emotional encounter with “god” on

DMT. Another man (in Saunders, Saunders & Pauli 2000, pp. 34–35) described the impact of an LSD trip on his atheist beliefs as follows:

The only faith I had when I had my first spiritual experience was faith that there was no God, only science. [...] I was so against religion that I was preaching atheism to all my friends. But this experience was so powerful that I was changed in a moment.

We have seen that users report both positive and aversive health consequences from their entheogen use, with cannabis appearing to be the most problematic drug. Medical research has indeed obtained preliminary evidence of effects from habitual cannabis use on brain structure (Battistella et al. 2014; Rigucci et al. 2015). It might be noted, however, that the “regular” users in the first study smoked a median of 20 cannabis joints per week, which is clearly a very intensive pattern of use. By comparison, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2015, p. 21) defines chronic cannabis use as four or more use occasions the last 30 days.

There is also some evidence of serotonin neurotoxicity from MDMA (Erritzoe et al. 2011; Benningfield & Cowan 2013), although the effects in humans may not be chronic (Green, King, Shortall & Fone 2012). Furthermore it appears that the use of cannabis may prevent MDMA neurotoxicity, at least in mice (Touriño, Zimmer & Valverde 2010). When it comes to the classical hallucinogens, a review of 1960s and 1970s research on long-term adverse consequences discovered no clear adverse effects, although there were several reports of possible impairments that other studies failed to replicate; the review concluded that “the literature tentatively suggests that there are few, if any, long-term neurophysiological deficits attributable to hallucinogen use” (Halpern & Pope 1999, p. 247). More recently, Nichols (2004, p. 134) has maintained that “[t]here is no evidence that any of the hallucinogens, even the very powerful semisynthetic LSD, causes damage to any human body organ.” It might however be noted that hallucinogenic compounds that include monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOI) – particularly ayahuasca – may interact dangerously with some other drugs and foods (dos Santos, 2013). Furthermore it is frequently a problem that drugs obtained on the black market are fake or impure and sometimes contain toxic substances (e.g., Vogels et al. 2009).

The picture is even more complicated for adverse psychological effects. Cannabis use among youth has been linked to an increased risk of schizophrenia (e.g., Casadio, Fernandes, Murray & Di Forti 2011), although the reason for this may be that “individuals with an increased genetic predisposition to schizophrenia are both more likely to use cannabis and to use it in greater

quantities” (Power et al. 2014, p. 1203). One recent study found that the underlying basis for schizophrenia in cannabis users was familial risk for schizophrenia rather than cannabis use itself (Proala, Fleming, Galvez-Buccollini & DeLisi 2014). The argument for linking schizophrenia to cannabis use is also complicated by the fact that while cannabis use has increased – UNODC’s 2015 report indicates about 5% increase over the previous five-year period – schizophrenia and psychosis rates have remained stable or even declined (Frisher, Crome, Martino & Croft 2009).

Psychedelics have in some cases been found to induce both acute panic reactions and toxic psychoses (Abraham, Aldridge & Gogia 1996; Iversen et al. 2009). Even with the very positive reports by participants in the study by Griffiths et al. (2006, p. 282), about one third of the participants nonetheless experienced periods of “significant fear.” Conversely, preliminary evidence has been obtained for the therapeutic effect of psilocybin (Grob et al. 2011) and LSD (Gasser et al. 2013) for treating anxiety in patients with life-threatening diseases. While panic reactions might seem aversive and perhaps anti-therapeutic, such “painful psychodynamic reactions have also been considered integral and fruitful” in many cases (Majić, Schmidt, & Gallinat 2015, p. 246). Of the 10,000 individuals or so who participated in LSD research in the 1950s and 1960s, Passie et al. (2008, p. 307) found that “[t]he incidence of psychotic reactions, suicide attempts, and suicides during treatment with LSD [...] appears comparable to the rate of complications during conventional psychotherapy.” Psilocybin mushrooms were found to result in “only few and relatively mild adverse effects” in the Netherlands (van Amsterdam, Opperhuizen & van den Brink 2011, p. 423), although the authors caution against the possibility of panic attacks and flashbacks. Participants in ayahuasca ceremonies organized by the Santo Daime Church in Oregon (Halpern, Sherwood, Passie, Blackwell & Rutenber 2008) and in Brazil (Bouso et al. 2012) scored significantly lower on psychopathology measures than control groups or the general population. Among the broader population, a study by Krebs and Johansen (2013) investigated a sample of 130,152 adults from a United States National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), of which 16.9% reported any lifetime prevalence of psychedelic drug use. They found

no relation between lifetime use of psychedelics and any undesirable past year mental health outcomes, including serious psychological distress, mental health treatment [...], or symptoms of panic disorder, major depressive episode, mania, social phobia, generalized anxiety disorder, agoraphobia, posttraumatic stress disorder, or non-affective psychosis (p. 5).

Instead the effects tended toward the opposite, as psychedelic drug use correlated weakly with a reduced rate of mental health problems. The authors caution that these are effects at the population level, and may possibly mask adverse consequences for some individuals counterbalanced by benign effects on others. Finally, in a study of over 190,000 adults from the same NSDUH database, Hendricks, Thorne, Clark, Coombs, and Johnson (2015) discovered that the use of classic psychedelics is associated with reduced psychological distress and suicidality.

The dangers of habit formations and problematic usage patterns were discussed earlier, but recent research has also obtained preliminary evidence for the use of hallucinogens in the treatment of dependence on other substances. This includes the use of psilocybin in treating nicotine dependence (Johnson, Garcia-Romeu, Cosimano & Griffiths 2014) and alcohol dependence (Bogenschutz et al. 2015), the use of ibogaine in the treatment of alcohol, cannabis, cocaine and crack dependence (Schenberg, de Castro Comis, Chaves & da Silveira 2014), and also the use of ayahuasca in treating alcohol, tobacco and cocaine dependence (Thomas, Lucas, Capler, Tupper & Martin 2013). These preliminary results await confirmation from larger trials, but are congruent with early findings on the therapeutic use of hallucinogens in the treatment of substance use disorders (e.g., Abramson 1967). A recent meta-analysis of single-dose LSD treatment of alcoholism in the 1960s revealed significant therapeutic effect up to six months post-treatment (Krebs & Johansen 2012).

We can conclude from the above review that entheogen use is not without health risk, even if benign consequences might outweigh adverse consequences for some cases and usage patterns. Certainly it would seem advisable to avoid the chronic overuse characterizing “regular” cannabis users in the study by Battistella et al. (2014). Findings on neurotoxicity must however be understood in context: while we have some indications that cannabis and MDMA may have neurotoxic effects especially with a problematic pattern of use, we already know that alcohol causes “regional brain damage and cognitive dysfunction” to heavy social drinkers (Harper 2009, p. 136), and that “[m]odels of alcohol abuse have identified significant frontal cortical degeneration and loss of hippocampal neurogenesis” (Crews et al. 2015, p. 331). While I am not aware of any comparative studies of the neurotoxicity of alcohol and illegal drugs, comparisons of acute lethal toxicity certainly favor entheogens such as cannabis and LSD over alcohol (Gable 2004). Unlike alcohol, these entheogens are also not physically addictive, and legislative drug classifications based on addictive potency or toxicity therefore seem to lack a scientific basis (van Amsterdam, Opperhuizen, Koeter & van den Brink 2010).

The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA 2015, p. 15) has estimated that 23.3% (78.9 million) of European Union citizens have used cannabis at some point in their lives, and 5.7% (19.3 million) used it last year. Despite such widespread cannabis use, a comparative study by Nutt, King, and Phillips (2010) concludes that cannabis causes far less societal harm than alcohol; the harm contribution from MDMA and classical hallucinogens is almost negligible in comparison. Nutt (2009) has also compared the harm caused by MDMA use and horse riding to the favor of the former, and asks for a more balanced approach to the relative risk incurred by drug use.

Thus it is certainly the case that moderate entheogen use is less dangerous in terms of brain damage and death than motorcycling, mountain climbing, and hang-gliding. On the other hand, there is probably a larger risk for immoderation with entheogen use than with these other pursuits, as entheogens seem to have much to offer their users beyond the adrenaline- and endorphin-induced feeling of exhilaration. Furthermore, whereas our societies have structures and institutions – driving schools, climbing clubs, hang-gliding regulations – in place to minimize risks for other dangerous activities, the entheogen user is left largely to his or her own devices, without recourse to institutional support and harm reduction measures. This is unfortunate, as the difference between problematic and non-problematic usage patterns is obviously critical to the relative success of the psychonaut lifestyle. Non-pharmacological variables such as mood and environment (set and setting) have been found to play an important role in the effects at least of psilocybin (Studerus, Gamma, Kometer & Vollenweider 2012), and many unpleasant and damaging entheogen experiences could probably have been avoided if this knowledge was thoroughly disseminated among neophyte users. In the absence of governmental harm reduction policies, user communities on the Internet have created informational resources such as *erowid.org*, *psychonautwiki.org*, *rollsafe.org* (for MDMA), *tripsafe.org* (for psychedelics) and a number of discussion fora.

What, in the end, are the consequences of engaging with entheogenic drugs? Clearly it is wise to engage them with care and respect. Entheogenic drugs are obviously not without risks, yet if we are to believe the research referred to above, there is also the promise of reward. Indeed, the capacity of these drugs in providing spiritual experiences and benign health effects seems to play a significant role in maintaining user interest. In order to sustain these benefits over time, the need for moderation in usage frequency is often emphasized in guide books to entheogen use, as continued advantage seems to depend on experiences being integrated and somehow put to use before new usage is considered (Fadiman 2011; Goldsmith 2011).



Who, then, are the psychonauts? Based on the literature reviewed above, this study expects to hear reports of spiritual and mystical experience, of transformation and healing, and of positive personality changes. It expects narratives also of difficulties, of trips that went bad, and perhaps of narrow escape from hellish entrapment.

These psychonauts do not in any way regard themselves as “drug addicts”; they usually prefer psychedelics for philosophical or spiritual reasons, and otherwise have a highly pragmatic attitude towards their use. They are often exceptionally learned and in many ways regard their explorations of consciousness as simply a convenient means for supplementing their education where other formal learning institutions fail to do so (Aaslid 2007, p. 108).

# Chapter 4 - Methods

This chapter discusses the study's main methodological approaches and dilemmas. The first section provides an overview of general epistemological concerns. Sections two, three, and four describe approaches to recruitment, data collection, analysis, verification, and reporting, and section five discusses challenges with securing participant anonymity.

## 4.1 Epistemological overture

The purpose of this study, we will recall, is to gain access to the subjective experiences and realities of users of entheogenic drugs in spiritual contexts. This is an ambitious research program that brushes up against a number of epistemological challenges, the most important of which I will attempt to sketch out in this introductory section.

A first level of uncertainty relates to the controversy as to whether entheogens bring about genuine spiritual or mystical experiences or perhaps serve only to induce worthless hallucinations or damaging psychosis-like episodes. This is connected also to the broader and more fundamental question of how to obtain knowledge about other people's conscious experience, to which I believe most philosophers of mind would reply that we simply cannot, except that we can of course ask them and take their words as representative of their experience. We then have no assurances that our respondents will tell us the actual truth, and certainly we know they cannot tell us all the truth: perhaps we would find their judgments of what to emphasize and what to ignore dissatisfactory, had we any way of knowing about that which never got told.

An immediate postmodernist or constructivist objection to this talk of actual versus narrative truth would be to deny that there is any such thing as an actual truth outside of the narratives we use to express our truths. We still have no assurances that the respondents don't tell us a different narrative than what they tell themselves.

These complications are further exacerbated by the fact, discussed in section 2.2, that "mystical experience" is so termed precisely "because it is considered beyond the scope of language to convey" (Deikman 1969, p. 23). Parts of this study may therefore be characterized as an attempt to ask people about a type of mental events – that may or may not deserve to be called "experiences" – whose defining characteristic is that they cannot be described in words. Perhaps it is not entirely unfair to question whether the outcome of such an endeavor has any

meaningful relation to what we normally call “knowledge.” I will return to this problem of speaking about the unspeakable in interviews and later discussion.

Adding to these epistemological ambiguities is the fact that entheogenic drugs have been generally forbidden across the Western world for several decades. Views about entheogens are therefore invariably politicized, tending to distribute according to well-defined battle lines. From the establishment or conventional perspective, they are unambiguously evil and their suppression is necessary for the sake of our children; for anti-establishment rebels they are often the very symbol of liberation from evil regimes. Needless to say, such a war of good against evil leaves little room for shades of grey: grand narratives tend to drown out subtle voices of nuance.

This, more or less, is the climate in which politicians, government officials, and publically funded drug researchers have been working for the past four or five decades. Clinical research on entheogens has been forbidden for much of this period, leaving recovery centers for drug addicts a primary source of research data. That this research has been quite unanimous in portraying illegal drugs negatively should come as little surprise: one would suspect the same from a study on the effects of alcohol in a sample of recovering alcoholics. The unrepresentativeness of these findings on illegal drugs has however remained obfuscated by the fact that the true extent of the drug-using population was quite unknown: researchers knew little to nothing about the segments of this population that managed to stay out of sight. Aaslid (2007, p. 97) describes them as the “hidden user population”, and indicates that these population segments may indeed constitute a silent majority. That the lives of these latter groups of people are rather more successful than the lives of people in rehab is obvious enough; that the invisible and well-functioning drug users outnumber the all-too-visible junkies on the streets or in custody or treatment is also getting clear. One recent estimation by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2015, p. ix) is that the number of problem users is about 11% of the total number of illicit drug users, and the ratio is probably far higher for opiates than for entheogens. As the existence of a well-functioning group of illegal drug users does however not serve the war-on-drugs narrative, “user perspectives which do not support the prevailing position are consistently overlooked and under-represented” (Aaslid 2007, p. 20).

While change is imposing itself on the field of drug research, it remains hampered by the fact that illegal drug use often takes place in arenas that are inaccessible to outsiders – be they researchers or undercover police agents. As we lose the illusion that we know who these drug users are, we are forced to realize also that there is no reliable way to obtain a representative

sample of the population, as several user segments may remain systematically under-sampled. Highly resourceful and security-conscious users may lie about their practices to preserve their privacy, and at the low end users may be unreachable because they simply have no capacity or interest in participating in surveys. One way out of this predicament may be to focus on qualitative studies that aim not for overall representativeness but at giving a voice to the segments of drug users that have previously been muted out. As these studies pile up, they will serve to broaden our picture of what illegal drug use is and what it entails for those who engage in it.

The present study contributes to this task by narrowing its focus down to the use of a certain group of drugs labeled entheogens in self-identified spiritual contexts. This is not a majority segment of the general population of users of illegal drugs, and the findings of this study therefore cannot be applied to that general population. However, by studying a group of drug users that is otherwise rarely subject to academic scrutiny, these findings will contribute to Aaslid's project of giving a voice to previously under-represented perspectives.

It may nevertheless be argued that the study is unethical and should be avoided. As Bente Alver and Ørjar Øyen (1997, p. 57) have pointed out, the very act of placing a phenomenon under a scientific or academic lens serves to legitimize and perhaps create an interest for it. An interview study of drug use in spiritual contexts will entail that the researcher exhibits an interest for a behavior that many regard as being entirely destructive, and this may be perceived as an implicit normative judgment that may reinforce such behavior both among interviewees and the general public.

On the other hand, say Alver and Øyen, there may exist a different narrative behind the conventionally accepted one that deserves more attention. If, indeed, the literature reviewed earlier gives a valid view on entheogenic drugs, and if Aaslid is correct in positing the existence of consistently overlooked perspectives on these drugs, then we may have to open up to the possibility that they are not exclusively destructive after all. Perhaps the conventional pre-judgment is in fact oversimplified and blind to the nuances and complexities surrounding entheogen use. That prospect, at any rate, would seem to legitimize the search for more knowledge about these drugs and their uses even in the face of the abovementioned risks.

## 4.2 Design and recruitment

Current or past users of entheogenic drugs in self-identified spiritual contexts were interviewed either individually or in groups about their practices. Interviews were asynchronous and Internet-mediated, with participants being encouraged to interact with the interviewer via anonymized email addresses. While full Internet anonymity is somewhat elusive, participants did have the option of remaining unidentifiable at least to the author of the study, which served to minimize privacy concerns. Ethical approval was obtained from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (reference 40281/3/KH). Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) seven stages of interviewing – thematization, planning, interviewing, transcription, analysis, verification and reporting – were used as a structural basis for the study.

Participants were recruited through a variety of Internet fora, including a website at the domain [entheogenstudy.org](http://entheogenstudy.org), a Facebook page for the study, and a number of public discussion fora devoted to the sharing and discussion of drug experiences and New Age spirituality (forum names are withheld for anonymization purposes). This set of recruitment arenas allowed for a broad selection of entheogen users. The only criteria for inclusion were adulthood and current or past entheogen use in spiritual contexts. As mentioned earlier, I have with inspiration from Ammerman's (2014) study made no attempt at defining the terms "spiritual" or "entheogen" on the participants' behalf, leaving this instead to their own judgment. Participation was based on voluntary response to recruitment letters, and took the form of individual ( $n = 11$ ) or group ( $n = 15$ ) interviews according to participant preferences.

Personal interviews commenced with the presentation of an informed consent letter that participants were asked to read and sign (letter of consent attached as Appendix A). As a personal signature would compromise privacy, participants were asked to "sign" the letter using only their email address. This approach has been presented by Lokman I. Meho (2006) as a useful way of acquiring informed consent for email interviews, and was approved by the Data Protection Official for Research / NSD. It does obviously result in a signature with no juridical validity, but still serves to express the participant's declaration that they have read and accepted the letter of consent. Group interviews for their part took place in publicly available Internet forum threads. In such public debate arenas, obtaining consent may not be a general requirement (Elgesem 2015). Because of the sensitive nature of the subject, consent was nonetheless obtained from participants. Furthermore, several anonymization procedures were also implemented to protect the identities of interviewees. These are detailed below, and include not reporting participant pseudonyms or nicknames, rephrasing quotes to confound Internet search

procedures, and delinking demographic information from narratives. Participants were also asked to read through and verify the use of their quotes, and inconsequential details in potentially recognizable narratives were changed to preserve anonymity.

Basic demographic data were collected from participants in individual interviews and, where possible, from participants in group interviews. Participants in individual interviews were in their 20s ( $n = 3$ ), 30s ( $n = 5$ ) or 40s ( $n = 3$ ), and predominantly male ( $n = 10$ ). Three were married (two with children), three others were in stable relationships (one with children), four were single, and one was in the middle of a break-up of a long-term relationship. Eight held steady jobs in retailing, education, music teaching, journalism, industrial services, and as an IT consultant and hospital worker; one recently went back to school after having been employed for five years, one was unemployed, and one used to work as a kindergarten assistant but was disabled because of an inherited condition. All reported stable living conditions in Western European or North American countries, with backgrounds in Christian or secular families. All except one are current users of entheogens. Participants in group interviews did not for the most part wish to volunteer any information of this kind; about half indicated their age and gender, and these were all male and between the age of early 20s to middle 50s.

It should be noted that the recruitment process did not aim at obtaining a representative set of participants reflecting the general population of entheogen users. Participants were, as mentioned, required to volunteer for participation in response to recruitment letters posted on the Internet, and users with some enthusiasm for entheogenic drugs were probably more likely to self-select for the study; it is certainly the case that users living on the streets or confined to hospital wards or prisons did not have the opportunity to participate. In addition, almost every participant who indicated gender was male. The study should therefore be taken to reflect the “best practices” of a generally resourceful and predominantly male group of entheogen users.

A gender imbalance is commonly observed in drug studies. “Peruse the bibliography of any scholarly work on drugs,” says David Lenson (1995, p. xv), “and you’ll find that citations of male authors outnumber those of women by better than ten to one.” Aaslid (2007, p. 7) similarly speaks about “a remarkable predominance of male perspectives” in this field. Interview and survey studies with self-selecting participants commonly report substantial gender imbalances, with participation rates from women at 15% (Carhart-Harris & Nutt 2010), 22% (Anderstuen 2014), and 31.5% (Lyvers & Meester 2012). Even if prevalence rates are also higher for men than for women – lifetime cannabis prevalence for Western and Central Europe has been estimated at about 25% for men and 15% for women (UNODC 2015, p. 14) – these differences

are not sufficient to explain the gender discrepancy among study participants. Thus it seems to be the case that female perspectives and experiences are systematically underrepresented in drug studies, including this one. A comparative study of gender differences in entheogen usage is therefore called for.

### 4.3 Data collection and analysis

Interviews were conducted on a semi-structured basis, with the aim of obtaining a naturally flowing conversation relating to a number of specific research questions. Participants in group interviews responded to a more restricted line of questions pertaining mainly to one specific topic. There were two main phases of interviewing – one in the spring and one in the fall of 2015 – and some of the material from the former has already been published (in Johnstad 2015). A full interview typically took about ten to fifteen exchanges and extended to about ten pages of material; some were however cut short as the interviewee stopped responding to questions. The average number of pages of material was 8.0 for individual interviews and 2.9 for group interviews, for a total of 132 pages.

Typical questions used to guide the interview.

- Why do you use entheogenic drugs?
- Can you describe some drug-induced experiences that were important to you?
- How do you feel your entheogen use has influenced your life for better or worse?
- Have you ever felt that you were overdoing or abusing drugs?
- Have you ever experienced healing of physical or psychological issues as a result of using entheogenic drugs?

The pros and cons of asynchronous interviewing via email have been thoroughly discussed in Meho (2006), who concluded that this methodological approach was cost-effective and allowed access to individuals that might otherwise have been hard to reach. This would certainly seem to be the case for participants asked to describe their use of illegal drugs. By allowing for a high degree of participant anonymity, email interviews (with anonymization protocols as discussed below) probably served to facilitate participation from interviewees who would otherwise have balked at describing illegal activities to an unfamiliar researcher. Meho also discovered a broad range of medium effects from using email to convey interviews, including the disadvantage of

losing visual and nonverbal cues from facial expressions and body language. Advantageous medium effects included a possible increase in honesty and self-disclosure, as well as the elimination of transcription errors. In conclusion, he found no overall negative impact on data quality, quoting some earlier studies that in fact suggested the opposite.

Some observations from my own interviewing practice may be added to this. It is easier for a participant to abandon an anonymous email exchange than a face-to-face conversation, and for this reason it is somewhat hazardous to pose critical or difficult questions in an email interview. Researchers using asynchronous interviewing via email are therefore well advised to delay such questions until the end of the interview. Interviewing via email also allows for conducting several interviews during the same time period, which is in many ways helpful but which also risks confusing the interviewer. I often had to check the interview log before posing a new question to make sure I had not asked a similar question before, which would probably have seemed careless and perhaps disrespectful to the interviewee. I believe there were times when a high work load and significant amounts of stress on my own part made my questioning less responsive to the participant than it ought to have been, damaging the natural flow of the conversation. While I have not received any complaints, it is possible that some participants discontinued the interview for such reasons.

As interviews took the form of written communication, no transcription from oral records into writing was necessary. The obtained data were analyzed using thematic analysis and Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) procedure for meaning condensation. Themes were constructed on a basis of open-ended, exploratory, and data-driven comparative analyses of interview responses pertaining to all major research questions. The difference between themes and topics is that the former represent an observed tendency among participants to relate to a specific topic in a specific way. Topics, in other words, are *a priori* areas of interest such as "entheogen usage patterns", whereas themes are *a posteriori* trends that emerge from the interview narratives during analysis – such as the observed tendency, reported in more detail in section 5.2, to use most entheogens except cannabis no more than about once per month. A theme denotes a trend that is recognized as significant by the researcher – commonly, but not exclusively, because it represents a quantitatively substantial tendency. One example of a theme that is regarded as significant without representing a quantitatively important trend is that of psychotic reaction to entheogen use, which is reported in section 5.6.



## 4.4 Verification and reporting

Due to the sensitive nature of the information, conversations on public fora are paraphrased in this report rather than quoted directly; this is intended to make testimonies less transparent to Internet search procedures. About half of the interviews were conducted in Norwegian and are reported in translation. Statements have been edited for brevity and relevance to specific topics.

Because of the potential distortions introduced by the author's translation and editing of interview narratives, the research report has been distributed among participants for approval. As far as possible, each interviewee was contacted individually and asked to read through their narratives in the report in order to evaluate whether the edited and in some cases translated version still represented their views and intents.

The chapter on findings presents fragments of informant narratives organized according to topics and themes. This approach has both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand it allows for a comparative perspective where themes are fleshed out by several voices at the same time. Thus we see how they sometimes differ in their emphasis on certain nuances even within a framework of broad agreement, or sometimes disagree substantially. On the other hand, this approach does not allow the reader to become thoroughly familiar with any informant, in the sense of being able to see how his or her views and experiences relate to each other. Doing so, at any rate, requires a close reading of the material with the aim to recollect the various ID numbers given to participants. The use of ID numbers rather than pseudonyms strengthens this tendency towards fragmentation and anonymization. Thus the overall effect from this method of presentation is to protect participant anonymity, as a casual reading of the material will fail to divulge any obvious links between narrative fragments that are not recognizable on their own but might be so when juxtaposed (should any such combination threats to anonymity have survived scrutiny).

## 4.5 Anonymity

This brings us to a discussion of one prominent challenge for the study: to maintain the anonymity of the participants. They were asked to describe behaviors that are generally illegal, and both ethical and recruitment concerns therefore required that no participant should be identifiable to others at any stage of the study. Measures implemented to obstruct the identification of participants are here referred to as anonymization protocols. According to the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD 2015), data may be regarded as anonymous

when they are free from informational content that might either directly or indirectly identify sources. In this usage, direct identification takes place through supplying names, addresses, ID numbers, email addresses and so forth, while indirect identification might occur especially via a combination of information relating to background, geographical location, and narratives about recognizable events.

In order to preserve the anonymity of the participants, this study implemented several anonymization protocols. Most fundamentally, participants were encouraged to construct new email addresses, under pseudonyms, that were used solely for communication relating to the study. Furthermore, they were encouraged not to reveal any specific information about their location, background or circumstances that might indirectly reveal their identities. In accordance with current guidelines for Internet research from The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH 2014), I have not employed any participant pseudonym in published reports, as these are often traceable across a variety of Internet sites. To minimize the chance that participants accidentally revealed de-anonymizing information, the encouragement to speak in general terms was repeated with every question relating to background and life circumstances; in cases where sensitive information was nevertheless transmitted I rewrote their statements in a re-anonymized form for my records and immediately deleted their email (and again deleted it from the trash folder).

In combination, these anonymization protocols probably sufficed to provide an acceptable degree of participant privacy at least in the sense of allowing for communication between interviewer and interviewee without the former knowing the identity of the latter. They did not however ensure any protection from eavesdroppers: email service providers probably know and store the participants' Internet Protocol (IP) addresses, which can be used to trace their identities, and also have the capability to read emails passing through their servers. To protect one's identity in this regard requires at least the use of The Onion Router (Tor) Internet browser for IP scrambling as well as encryption of email content. I encouraged the use of Tor and published a public encryption key at the website for the study, but communication at this level of privacy demands a good amount of technical competence and was for this reason not insisted upon.

The emphasis on anonymity furthermore entailed a number of negative consequences. One practical complication was that the need for special email accounts used only for the purpose of taking part in the study raised the cost of participation. Constructing and maintaining a separate account requires a fair bit of time and effort, and some potential participants clearly

could not be bothered to go through with these anonymization protocols. Others went through with the account construction part and then promptly disappeared after a single email exchange, perhaps forgetting to later check this “throwaway account,” as one participant called it before disappearing. Further consequences included the inability to obtain properly signed informed consent letters, which has already been mentioned, as well as a potentially reduced capability to safeguard the rights of minors. Katrine U. Segadal (2015, p. 44) warns that “when obtaining consent online, it might be a challenge to be certain of the actual age of the person granting consent,” and this challenge was exacerbated in this study as participant anonymity at least vis-à-vis the researcher made it impossible to check the identities of interviewees. This opened for the prospect of minors passing off as adults and thus gaining access to a study discussing the use of illegal drugs. In practice, of course, minors attempting to take part in the study would need to converse on adult subjects such as mental health and spiritual practice in a manner sufficient to convince the researcher of their maturity; my judgment is that such subterfuge would not have been possible for any significant amount of time and that no attempts were in fact made. In principle it remains however an unfortunate and unavoidable possibility for any study encouraging participant anonymity.

## Chapter 5 – Interviews

This chapter presents participant narratives over a range of topics. Narratives are presented as themes, which usually represent shared trends and tendencies among a group of respondents. I have limited my own commentaries in this chapter to some introductory and conclusive remarks for each section, as well as brief transition remarks between themes and sub-themes. An analytical summary and broader discussion of the material is found in chapter 6.

Some of the interview material obtained in this study has already been published in Johnstad (2015). In order to avoid repetitions, I have focused here on the material left unpublished, as well as that obtained from the second round of my interviewing. The findings from the two interview phases are highly convergent, and the narratives here presented do serve to reinforce and expand upon that which has already been published.

### 5.1 Crossing the threshold

At some point in their lives, the participants in this study used an entheogen for the first time. I asked them what their motivation was for taking that first step, and the answers clustered into three themes. Most commonly, people were curious, and they wanted to see what drugs were really about through self-experimentation. Sometimes there was a spiritual motivation underlying this experimentation, and sometimes a more hedonistic or pleasure-seeking motivation. In any case, entheogens were sought out consciously and often on a basis of long-standing interest. Crossing the threshold was sometimes a drawn-out process, in some cases taking several years. Anti-drug information campaigns in school were sometimes cited as a motivation for self-experimentation.

For some reason I started reading trip reports at the *Shroomery* when I was in high school. I was fascinated by the reports and by the fact that such experiences were at all possible. I was also surprised by how wrong everything we had been taught about this was. (ID32)

I have always been interested in intoxication, psychiatry, and psychology. Tripping always seemed both enticing and frightening to me. (ID28)

I experimented with cannabis because I was curious about it. The first five times or so – this was over a period of maybe six or seven years – it didn't do anything for me. Then suddenly my world

exploded with spiritual revelation. In retrospect it seems I always had a kind of instinctual trust in the basic goodness of drugs – like I always knew that what we were taught in school was bullshit, even if I hadn't heard anything contrary from anyone. My early experimentation was basically solitary, I was not part of a drug-using group or anything like that. (ID9)

The reason that I first tried mushrooms was to get back in touch with my inner world after many years with much hard work and heavy responsibility. I needed to break down mental and emotional barriers. The decision was made without influence from friends or literature. (ID27)

For some people, the motivation for experimenting with entheogens also had a specifically spiritual component.

What made me interested in taking mushrooms in the first place, was that a lot of people described their experience with mushrooms as a religious or mystical experience. After I lost my faith in Christianity and broke up with my partner, I wanted to see if I could experience something similar with mushrooms. (ID33)

I have searched for a religious/mystical experience since I was a boy. I came across information about LSD, the Gospel of Thomas, and the Tibetan Book of the Dead on the Internet when the rest of my class in high school was on a trip abroad. (ID30)

It probably started with some teenage enthusiasm for exploring reality, defining my own spirituality, and a search for truth and an understanding of my own consciousness – when an acquaintance mentioned that mushrooms grow everywhere. I was not in a drug-using partying crowd, and because no one else shared my interest, psychedelia was a solitary thing for me. Before I tried it I had read trip reports and scientific studies for a few years. I experienced it as deeply meaningful and good from the start, and could not understand that it was illegal. It seemed very unfair to me that I should have to hide it and risk getting punished and having my future destroyed – for something that taught me so many important lessons. (ID26)

The third group of people started out experimenting with entheogens in the context of partying. Some of the drugs that are counted as entheogens by the participants of this study – particularly cannabis and MDMA – also serve well as party drugs, and of course there is no *a priori* reason to assume that partying cannot be spiritual (e.g., Saunders et al. 2000; Gauthier 2004). At some point the experimenters perhaps got more than they had bargained for, especially if the experimentation started including classical hallucinogens. Others seem simply to have matured,

desisting with partying excesses but continuing with a more measured use of select psychoactive drugs.

In my youth I was a committed hedonist and was nicknamed “INXS” because of my habit of doing everything to excess. I was unaware of, or perhaps deliberately ignored, the very real consequences of my actions. I first took LSD when I was 18 or 19. This was always in a social setting, but during these home-based “parties” I would sometimes be in such a profound altered state that I would go to my own room and enjoy what the trip had to offer. (ID5)

I have plenty of drug experience from my youth, especially with MDMA and amphetamines. Stopped playing with drugs when I was 23. Since then it has been cannabis and occasional use of mushrooms and MDMA. (ID12)

None reported any kind of peer group pressure impelling their early drug use, but of course such influence might simply be unacknowledged. We note however that several experimented with entheogens in solitude. There were also no mention of experimenting with drugs as an escape from problems from childhood or elsewhere – indeed several participants emphasized that they had a safe and loving upbringing. (There is one exception that we will look more closely at in section 5.6.)

## 5.2 Religious background

The participants in this study were all brought up in Western cultures. Some came from Christian and some from secular families, but none reported that their background in this regard had much impact on their experiences with entheogens. On the contrary, there were two themes emerging from their narratives: one group that regarded their background as mostly irrelevant, and a smaller group that had explicitly broken with their religious past. Some acknowledged inspiration from their background on a general level, but there were no reports of Christian imagery or symbolism in entheogen-induced spiritual experiences (the psychotic experience described in section 5.6 is a partial exception).

I was not raised with religion. My family is not religious at all. I come from a white working class family, so there is a bit of a Christian/Catholic background. But my family never went to church or did anything with it. No Bible, no praying, nothing. (ID8)

My mother became a Christian after a spiritual experience about 15 years ago, after I had moved out. She never tried to push Christianity on me, but we have had many interesting discussions. (ID12)

According to what relatives have told me, there haven't been any particularly religious people in my family since the year 1800. (ID17)

I was programmed from birth with what I consider to be a highly distorted and bastardized version of monotheism in the form of Roman Catholicism. Fortunately I abandoned religion in my mid-teens and I managed to totally abandon the concepts and chains of religious guilt soon after. (ID5)

Two respondents provided particularly interesting narratives in this regard, as their engagement with entheogens started during or right after their break with Christianity.

What had the most impact on my separation from religion, was hashish. It was highly psychedelic for me, as I had no tolerance or experience before. In the hashish state of mind I thought things over more thoroughly, without jumping to the same conclusion that I had had earlier. This gave me the room to be skeptical about my own faith without being knocked out of balance. The separation took more than a year, and I needed a lot of time to accept and acknowledge that I no longer believed in any god. (ID33)

I was raised in a family with somewhat fundamentalist Christian views, but my faith was challenged before I started tripping on mushrooms. Family history and childhood have been themes for some of my trips, however, and I have tried to understand the reason why my family has a faith. As I see it, it is a mixture of basic spirituality and some fear – of death, and of what may happen in life. Not everything is negative, but some of what I see in my family is based on fear. I had a good and safe upbringing, but I think I have inherited some anxiety, depression, and a feeling of not being in control of my life – which are related in my opinion to being a member of relatively fundamentalist Christian congregations. (ID26)

Some influence from Christian themes and concepts endured beyond this apostasy, however:

One of my experiences on MDMA had a significant element of Christianity in it, mixed with an Eastern Advaita-understanding (which I did not have words for back then). I felt at one with everything around me, and then thought about the most positive interpretations of Christianity –

how the message may have been misunderstood by me and many in my family, but that there nevertheless was something deeply meaningful and true in the Christian concept of love. (ID26)

## 5.3 Patterns of use

Participants described a generally moderate usage of most entheogens. The consensus seemed to be that about one trip per month is acceptable, although some people emphasized that they pass through different stages, and that what is right for one stage might be wrong for another. There were also reports of seasonal variations.

I have had periods when I used mushrooms once a month. Last year I used them maybe six times. I do not know other people who eat mushrooms regularly (more than once or twice in a year). (ID8)

Now I mostly use LSD 2-6 times a year but in large doses. In my experience that is the best way to use psychedelics. And I know months before the next trip when it is going to be. (ID10)

I feel a kind of satiety after a trip, and have no desire to repeat it very soon. Even if it can lead to good times and much joy, I use it mostly to understand – to experience new things, learn something, get new perspectives. (ID28)

I have had periods with frequent use (more or less every weekend) and periods with infrequent use (once or twice a year). It has definitely been more “constructive” when used infrequently, but I have been working more intensely on myself spiritually and psychologically when I have used more. It depends on where you are in life, but it is important to go with what feels right. (ID29)

I tried mushrooms for the first time during the summer of 2013, and have probably used them about 15 or 20 times since then. I use them more frequently in the summer, when I have time off from work. I focus more on work and daily life in fall and winter, and try to work with and live out insights that the trips has provided. (ID33)

The exception to this norm is cannabis, which some people used far more frequently.



The last year, after I acquired a vaporizer and steady access to locally grown cannabis, I have used it almost every day (about 5-7g per month). Before I used to smoke about 2-15 times per month. (ID12)

I use cannabis very frequently (at least every week). (ID17)

Those participants who regarded cannabis as an entheogen tended to use it more like other entheogens, however.

Because it is very intense for me, I only do cannabis a few times every year. Also it's my experience that if I do it too often it gets less intense, and therefore less meaningful for me. I want it to be a special, transformative, revelatory experience, and in order to give it the space it needs I must portion it out. (ID9)

I smoke cannabis now and then, but in tiny doses. One gram per month during spring and summer time, is enough both for me and my boyfriend. I use about 0.05g-0.1g for a joint. I prefer to use it alone, and still experience cannabis as a psychedelic. Because I am alone, I get to experience the high it gives me without disturbance. It's a like small and light trip, similar to mushrooms or LSD. (ID33)

Several respondents reported previous experience with the psychostimulants amphetamine and cocaine, but have since generally lost interest in such drugs. Some reported experience with a broad range of entheogenic drugs.

I am not particularly enamored with stimulants. I took some speed one evening, woke up with the worst hangover ever and decided it's not worth sacrificing brain cells for. (ID33)

I have used many psychoactive drugs: LSD, 2C-B, 2C-I, 2C-E, mescaline, ketamine, mushrooms, cannabis, MDMA, mephedrone, cocaine, amphetamine, different benzodiazepines, and poppers (alkyl nitrites). Of these I still use cannabis, LSD, mescaline, the 2C drugs, MDMA, and mushrooms. (ID17)

Setting was regarded as very important by a majority of participants, as a bad social setting might lead to unpleasant experiences. Most preferred to be alone or in the company of close friends, but some would also use entheogens at parties.

Being with people we trust, trying to be sure that everyone is well informed on what they consume, what dose and which effects they expect. Also it's very important to be aware of what or who will be around you when you trip. I prefer to be in a psychedelic party or in nature, but not in a crowded city for instance. Sometimes I trip alone – I did that a lot in the beginning. (ID7)

If you want to do a psychedelic session take your time to think about set and setting. It's important to pick a safe and comfortable place to trip. Remember that when you take a psychedelic it's like everything comes through the senses unfiltered. Outside stimuli can become intrusive or annoying. Normal sounds like cars passing by can become intrusive. Also it's easier to focus on your trip when you are not bothered by outside stimuli. (ID8)

My shamanic practice is always solitary and out in nature away from all people and man-made objects. (ID15)

I like a setting with a minimum of light. Light distracts, reminds you of the material world, while darkness allows you to disappear. (ID12)

I use psychedelia alone, and usually in a dark room where I won't be disturbed. I have many friends who share my interests, but we trip on our own. (ID27)

A psychedelic experience has the potential to bring up subconscious trauma. This can be scary and unpleasant, so it is important to make sure that the setting is as safe as possible. (ID34)

The first years I had no one to share it with. After a while I shared a few trips with a friend, but mostly I did it on my own. Doing it with others is a different thing from doing it alone. It is easier to let go when I don't have to relate to others. On the other hand I always learn something about my social skills, or something which is relevant for my relations to others, when I trip with them. So I like doing that too. (ID26)

While setting was important to people, most regarded it as easily controllable and not really a factor requiring much preparation. Experienced users seemed to take a proper setting more or less for granted, and would not consider using entheogens otherwise. (They were however very concerned with communicating the importance of setting to new users.) Many respondents reported spending much time on cultivating a proper set (or mind-set) for the session, however. Physical preparations in terms of exercise and fasting were also common.

If you want to use psychedelics as tools then it benefits you more if you have time to think about your motives and intentions for the trip. I like to think very deeply about what is the reason for my next trip. What is it that I want to work on? Right now I know my next trip is going to be in May after I get my school work done. And I know that what I want to deal with during that trip are my boundaries. And I know I'm going to be alone and I'll be taking about 1000-2000 µg LSD. (ID10)

Wherever you do it, being well rested before the trip is needed. If you experienced very bad things recently (broke up with someone, lost a friend or a family member), you should trip later. (ID7)

I don't prepare a lot, but before sessions with MDMA and other serotonin-related drugs I try to do some things that increase serotonin production a few days or weeks ahead – like eating plenty of carbohydrates, and getting some sunlight and physical activity. It is also important to be in a good mood and not carry any “baggage” into the trip. Never when you are in a bad mood or angry etc. (ID17)

The best mood for hallucinogenic exploration is to be relaxed and to have a clear mind. Make sure you do not have all kinds of worries on your mind. (ID8).

I used to prepare myself before each trip more extensively before. I think it is fun to take spontaneous trips in the forest, with about 1-2 g of mushrooms. If I want to take larger doses and have a more introverted trip, then I like taking it easy during the day, go for a walk, do some yoga and meditation, wash the apartment and take a shower, to kind of clear up my body and soul. (ID33)

I make sure that I am well rested. I fast for about six hours, and about two or three hours for drinks (so I don't have to go to the bathroom when the trip peaks). (ID12)

In summary, we see evidence in this section of what has earlier been called a spiritual usage pattern. This is less true of cannabis usage, however. Entheogen sessions were often carefully prepared, and the importance of a suitable set and setting was almost universally emphasized.

## 5.4 Entheogenic experiences

Respondents reported a wide range of spiritual experiences on entheogens. Commonly, the first point they emphasized was that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to describe the experience.

The problem with psychedelia is that it is so difficult to put what happens into words. It is about what happens before the words. (ID32).

As you probably know, it is impossible to describe a mushroom trip properly. These are very private experiences that cannot be described with words. (ID12)

The journeys were so incredible words break down. (ID15)

The fact that it is so hopeless to describe the experience is itself attractive to me. It is like experiencing a new world, with emotions and experiences you cannot imagine. (ID28)

When I try to put it in words it somehow doesn't sound genuine. It is like trying to explain color to someone who has never seen it. For some of us it is the first adult experience of being liberated from the prison of our programming with all kinds of habits, interpretations, ways of thinking and so on. (ID26)

As we see in this last narrative, the entheogen experience was sometimes described as a release or unfoldment. There were also reports of being more closely attuned to the present moment, and of a sense of homecoming.

With hashish and alcohol I feel folded in, while with mushrooms I am rather folded out. Everything opens up in a way. (ID28)

Marijuana gives me an extraordinary experience of the here and now. (ID12)

When I take mushrooms I feel like I am home. (ID33)

Some other important themes for entheogenic experiences were insight and the feeling of peace and joy.

I think that mushrooms can bring out material from the subconscious that one has pushed away in the sober condition. The state of mind that I experience on mushrooms, opens me up for other perspectives than those I have in daily life, and also makes me more open and vulnerable to my own subconscious. Several times I have experienced a kind of sadness over not taking good enough care of myself when sober – that I haven't listened to my own needs, or to the signals

from my body and psyche. I experience the mushroom as a kind grandmother who reminds you to listen to your heart. It also makes me much more playful and curious, and I like to play around with thoughts, instead of jumping to conclusions. (ID33)

The feeling of unity and insight into the inner and outer universe give a safety and joy that I bring with me into daily life. Psilocybin provides new perspectives, opening up a whole new world of insight and possibility. You also become more conscious of your dark sides. (ID27)

It occurred to me on my last trip that fun and insight are equally good reasons to take mushrooms. It is healthy to have fun, and the healthiest fun I can imagine is to bring some music and a thermos with tea into nature and trip. (ID28)

I found that moderate cannabis use is very useful in maintaining a relaxed and meditative state of mind. (ID5)

Relations to others were often described as strengthened by feelings of empathy and love.

Mushrooms make me feel more empathic and understanding for the feelings and motivations of others. (ID8)

I feel more empathy and understanding for people and ideologies that I strongly disagree with in the sober state. It is impossible for me to be angry or annoyed when I am on mushrooms, and when I think back on an occasion where I was irritated over something, those feelings seem unnecessary and remote. (ID33)

Another important aspect of entheogenic experience was seemingly profound, yet sometimes disconcerting, inner visions.

A voice tells me that I am a bad person and must be destroyed, and starts eating me from the inside. The process is slow, but I allow it to go on and I give myself to the plant and tell it to do what has to be done and that I have faith in it. Later wolves come and eat me from outside, taking my body parts and dismembering me. But this felt good, and they are my allies. Eagles join in and take leftovers. They are polar creatures, and soon I am in the polar tribe of Arctics, with wolves, owls, and native people. I am curious where this imagery is coming from since I never had contact with those lands or cultures, which seem foreign to me. It looks very realistic, not fantastic. They are my allies and protectors. (ID18)

I was on stage at an outside concert and then saw two golden-colored, roughly humanoid light beings descend from the sky. Each grabbed one of my hands and then pulled my soul out of my body and we flew off into space. The emotional intensity of this vision and the precise nature of the experience once I had been pulled out of my body are virtually impossible to explain and convey accurately! (ID5)

Such visions may lead on to peak experiences, which sometimes involves a dissolution of the self. One participant, referring to himself in the third person (“Joe”), described a personal experience of frightening visions leading eventually to ego death:

At a point a very strange world emerges. It is hard to describe, but there are brilliant colors in incredible high definition, with geometric shapes and patterns changing around in a way so perfect and coordinated, he is totally baffled. Like a mathematical engine room of the universe. Together with this, a kind of ambient, very alien and quite scary music plays in the background. At one point strange and alien looking creatures start to appear. Some are humanoid, and some insect-like. Their attitude is quite unwelcoming, like they are the guardians of this realm, and would rather prefer he was not there. Joe finds it all extremely weird and disturbing, and when one of the insectoids moves towards him in a threatening manner, he tries to open his eyes and get up, to try to change the scenery. He stumbles to the bathroom and splashes water in his face, then goes back to bed. But the mushrooms are still coming up, and his attempts to take control are useless. And in a moment of fear, he surrenders. Suddenly he is gone. Every fragment of himself is gone. No visuals. Just an eternal sensation. A sensation of the soul, his true self. The self he has always been, and always will be. He is in total control and without control, he is nothing and everything, simultaneously. He is outside time and space. He just exists, like an eternal light, drifting in eternity. Merging in to other personalities. Rushes of revelations. How long this moment lasted in real-time is impossible to know. When he gets back to himself, he just lies there, upside down in bed, tears running down his face, with an extreme feeling of bliss. (ID12)

Another found himself merging with his friends and the whole of humanity, and imagined what the world will be like when this unity is recognized by more people:

I sat there watching my friends, then as the trip peaked I didn't see them as my friends anymore, but they were me and I was them. Even as I acknowledged that we looked different, were separate and had different roles and so on, we were “one”. The fact that we were separated only made “the being” more intelligent and was an advantage. What would an ant accomplish on his own? I now

regard humanity as a confused being that sabotages itself, and the day when balance and understanding are in place the world will be completely different. (ID31)

Such experiences of ego death were sometimes accompanied by experiences of contact with a transcendent power – although it seems the interviewees found it difficult to discern between inside and outside, self and other, in these states of rapture.

I am sometimes in contact with something vaster than myself. Whether to call it God, or soul, or higher self I don't know. Such experiences changed my life and made me a spiritually active person with an ongoing meditation practice and very different aims in life than what I had before. This is the highest level I have reached to. Below this level there are intermediate levels that somehow are the foundations for our world down here on earth. I don't claim to understand it, but I find it very inspiring to glimpse the nature and workings of these levels of reality. (ID9)

What I often feel when I am on mushrooms is that there is a story where everything is related to everything. There is chaos but then the pieces fall in place one by one, different feelings press through me, something outside me communicates with me, or a bigger self communicates with itself. I am not satisfied with how I describe this. But it is an attempt. (ID26)

Several of the above experiences clearly deserve the designation “mystical”. Even experiences with entheogens that were not of this mystical kind were still sometimes marked by their extreme intensity, however.

I smoked a larger dose of *changa* [a smoking blend containing DMT] than before, and it hit me right in the face. It was unbelievably intense. The only thing I remember is that it was like the ordinary DMT universe, only a lot more intense, and with many entities. I remember a feeling of having gone too far, that I was somewhere I had not been cleared for. There was an entity trying to communicate with me in an incomprehensible alien language, and it expressed a kind of worried compassion. Somewhere in there I “popped” into another personality – I don't remember who, but it was someone I know. I remember knowing that it was all too much for me, and that I was finished with DMT. (ID12)

I remember a super-intense *ayahuasca* trip where I simply had to stop assessing the visions I was seeing, and just let them be as intense as they were. It wasn't dangerous, but it challenged me profoundly on the level of my fear. Before the trip I had the intention to work with fear, and that sure came to fruition. (ID26)

Clearly the participants of this study were often lost for words to describe their entheogenic experiences. Some of their narratives involve profound and life-changing experiences, but we also see evidence of more ordinary experiences of insight, empathy, peace, and love.

## 5.5 Bad trips

The prospect of super-intense entheogen-induced visions brings us to the topic of bad trips. Several respondents reported having passed through difficult trips, but often regarded these as valuable learning experiences. The current section will discuss this majority tendency among interviewees, while the following section will discuss one exceptional case of a bad trip resulting in what was probably a full-blown psychotic episode.

I have had two difficult trips that stand out from the rest. One episode was last summer, when I ate a bit less than 2g of mushrooms. I thought it would be pretty weak, since it was a year old and not very well preserved. It wasn't weak. My mind narrowed down to thinking about the world, the political system, all the wars, everything that is going to hell and how little I as an individual can do about it on my own. It was difficult to see any hope, and I felt that the global society is corrupted. It was a feeling of powerlessness and absence of meaning with life. It wasn't a fun experience. (ID33)

On my previous mushroom trip I got reckless. It was a good reminder never to disrespect the mushroom. The company I worked for had just filed for bankruptcy, so my professional future was less than crystal clear. In addition I was tired and worn down after work, and the place wasn't heated properly. At the point where the trip peaked, it felt more intense than ever – in a negative sense. It was like I had been poisoned. Everything was just an out-of-control carousel of confusing chaos, thoughts, and physical discomfort. I tried to breathe and channel it away, but it seemed hopeless. After some time I went to the bathroom and tried to pull myself together. The light made it an overwhelming experience, and taking a piss when I was stoned out of my mind on mushrooms just made me laugh at my state of utter intoxication. The whole thing started unwinding as I returned to the living room and cuddled up to one of my mates. From then on the evening was devoted to giggling and open eyed visuals – no more inward delving. (ID12)

While difficult, respondents often emphasized the growth potential inherent to such experiences.



With alcohol you can have a very nice experience while you are under the influence, then you get a hangover later. With mushrooms it might be quite the opposite. I have never had it as well as after a bad trip. In a way I feel cleansed. So the trip can be awful, but can still prove to be very useful and instructive. I have learnt the most from “bad” trips. (ID28)

For me bad trips help me to see the error in my ways and strengthen my conscience so I can make better choices in the future. It has shown me truths about myself that were hard to take in, but have definitely helped make me a better person. (ID19)

At times I experience extreme self-reflection on cannabis, which can be unpleasant while it lasts, but is useful. (ID12)

Some also pointed out the usefulness of spiritual practices like meditation, breathing exercises, and chanting in dealing with difficult entheogen experiences.

I have had difficult experiences (not bad but challenging). I had an experience a couple of years ago where I was getting lost in the chaos of the experience and the chaos in my own mind. At some point fear and unrest entered my mind. I had a hard time meditating and being calm, so I started to chant, and with this I started having visions and everything became more harmonious. (ID8)

My yoga practice includes breathing techniques, and I experience that being conscious of one’s breath makes it easier to notice if there is tension in the body – and dissolve this. If I get anxious, it is helpful both when tripping and when sober to focus on the breath and calm it down. (ID33)

Breathing practices can be a good tool if you get afraid or stressed out, as much in everyday life as when tripping. It’s all connected. (ID34)

Despite all of the above, it is nevertheless important to note that some interviewees reported bad trips that caused psychological trauma for several years – even if these experiences were also ultimately regarded as valuable.

In my vision I am flying slowly and timelessly into a whirlpool that is made entirely of emaciated-looking bodies like you would see in a Nazi concentration camp, but with eyes open and staring. I am being sucked into this horror in a timeless way, and I totally freaked out. As I was going in, I was sensing cold flesh, and parts of my body were aching and I freaked out! I should also say

that the period when this happened was terrible. My life was very fucked up and I was working this terrible job in a factory sweat shop. So I had a lot of sadness in me. I regretted for years not going with the vision into the whirlpool of death. The experience freaked me out so much that it kind of made me fear tripping with eyes shut, and I think I also put blocks up to inner visions. But I wrote about it for a dissertation in art school, and it really inspired me in lots of ways regarding what books I got, my ideas for art etc. I am now over that fear, but there must always be awe. Ecstasy is very alive, awesome, and wild, and cannot be tamed. (ID6)

I have had some difficult experiences and one really terrible bad trip. This happened at a difficult time in my life when I was irresponsibly experimenting with various drugs including LSD, MDMA, and cocaine. On an LSD trip where I also smoked a joint to make it stronger, I reached a state where I felt that I somehow had lost my capacity to feel and to love. It occurred to me that this loss might be permanent – that I had somehow fried my brain. In retrospect, I believe this fear was probably caused by earlier exposure to anti-drug propaganda. I went deeply into a state of self-contempt and full panic, fearing I was going insane. After this I was miserable for months, had anxiety to deal with for years, and did not touch any drugs for a long time. Very chastening. I think it was five years before I once again felt ready to confront a psychedelic experience. In retrospect the full experience (the bad trip and the years after) was an important learning and healing journey for me as a person. (ID9)

We can see that both of these rather damaging bad trips happened to people who were not at a very good point in their lives, and who should probably, according to some of the advice on preparation and mind-set discussed in section 5.2, have postponed their experiments with entheogens, or at least taken extra good care with preparing the session. The narratives of this section otherwise indicate that even painful and difficult experiences are sometimes considered fruitful. Overusing entheogenic drugs seems to be a fairly reliable way of obtaining bad trips, and can, as we shall see in the following section, be a factor also in inducing psychotic reactions.

## 5.6 Psychotic reactions

I have previously (Johnstad 2015) discussed two interviewees who reported difficulties with staying grounded that may have been caused by their entheogen use. Neither of these two described any psychotic reactions arising directly from an entheogen trip, however. This section will present such a psychotic episode resulting from a series of bad trips on LSD and mushrooms, as well as the background for that episode and its long aftermath.

I grew up with two alcoholic parents, and my father was also physically aggressive. In many ways I was an intimidated and bottled-up individual with much psychological trauma. I have been through a couple of treatments with SSRI medication, which serve to quiet down the mental “storms”, but on the whole the psychiatrists have not really helped me deal with my underlying problems, only with symptom relief.

I started my psychedelic quest about a year before the psychotic episode. During that year I tripped way too much – around 50 trips on mushrooms, TMA, and sometimes MDMA and LSD. It always went well, and I received no signals to slow down. The last two trips on LSD went bad, however. First I overdosed by accident and had a really shitty experience, and then some time later I denied my own fear and set out again. It was a very destructive trip, I felt I had lost myself and was stuck in a vacuum. For a week I was filled with fear and anxiety, then I slowly started feeling better.

After a few weeks I was back in my nutshell, believing myself ready for a mushroom trip. In the company of a friend I ate about 2.5g *Psilocybe semilanceata*, and then we shared a joint. Soon bad vibes started forming, and I recalled my horrible LSD trips. For a while I communicated telepathically with the cat, then for a long time I walked stressfully around the apartment in an eternal search for nothing. Finally I gave up and walked out on the balcony to gaze at the sky. Star signs were forming before my eyes. I believed it was the end of the world, the great dimensional shift – judgment day was upon us and I would soon have to stand trial for my sins. For some reason I believed that my girlfriend was in the neighbors’ apartment and needed rescuing, so I climbed over to their balcony and started banging on the window. The neighbors were horrified. My friend tried to stop me, but it seemed to me that he was sent from the devil to stop me from fulfilling my sacred mission. So I punched him straight in the face. He fell down and there was blood everywhere.

The next thing I remember is that I tried to break their window. If I could only rescue my girlfriend then both of us would be picked up by a UFO and we would be safe. The neighbors screamed as I used whatever I found to break into their home. Before I got anywhere, the apartment filled up with a flock of vampires, who descended upon me with cruel smiles and black eyes.

If there is an emotion that kicks in when you give up life and accept eternal damnation, that is what I felt. The vampires put me in a UFO that flew through time and space at the speed of light, and a few hours later I woke up in the emergency ward. It was the low point of my life. The first six months after the incident I was seriously traumatized and basically a nervous wreck. (ID34)

We can see in this narrative not only a problematic starting point for self-directed, entheogen-fueled psychological exploration, but also several breaches with what is regarded as good

tripping practices as per section 5.2. Weekly entheogen use over as long period as a year is certainly not in line with the advised usage frequency. Furthermore, although the subject said that everything went well, this was no longer true at the point where he had a “terrible” LSD trip. Having a new LSD trip right on the heels of such a bad trip, and then tripping on mushrooms just a few weeks after two successive bad trips, is not in conformity with the emphasis on cultivating an appropriate mental set free from “baggage” in preparation of entheogen use. A third point which has not previously been discussed is the use of cannabis to augment the effects of other entheogens. Cannabis is widely recognized, for instance by the people behind *tripsafe.org*, as a drug which serves to intensify experiences of other psychoactive drugs, and should therefore be used only at the tail end of the trip, after the peak period has passed. Smoking cannabis at the beginning of a trip incurs the risk of an uncontrollably intense experience, which here obviously seemed to be the case, and which was especially ill advised following a recent bad trip that was also caused in part by accidental overdosing.

This narrative was published at one of the Internet fora I frequented when foraging for participants, and was much discussed by the other members of that forum. Some pointed out that if the guidelines for safe entheogen practices were more widely dispersed, the occurrence of such damaging experiences as this would be much reduced.

In the long run, despite the significant legal and social repercussions, this psychotic episode helped me deal with my long-standing problems. It served as a release of my psychological trauma and a catalyst for further self-development. The mushrooms pulled my trauma up into my consciousness and forced me to deal with it – which resulted in a horrible episode there and then, but also cleansed my past and allowed me, in a sense, to be “born again”. Over the next few years I continued working full time, stayed together with my girlfriend, and eventually bought my own apartment. I have not had any further psychotic episodes, spent time in a psychiatric ward, nor received any diagnosis of psychosis. But if I had not passed through this temporary psychosis I believe I would be much worse off today. (ID34)

## 5.7 Adverse long-term consequences

The above observations bring us to the topic of long-term consequences. This section will look specifically into adverse consequences, leaving more positive consequences for the next. As discussed in Johnstad (2015), two respondents have reported enduring difficulties with staying grounded that may result from their entheogen use. These subjects are themselves uncertain as

to whether their problems are of a psychiatric nature or if there is something deeper and more spiritual that explains the matter. Both were recruited to this study via a forum devoted to certain esoteric teachings known as the Law of One, and one described his situation in the light both of those teachings and of psychiatric norms:

I now accept that I am NOT a “normal” human being, whether that’s because I have two 6th density Souls in a “dual-activated” body or because I have a psychotic illness. Either because of my Spiritual Extraterrestrial “status” or because of my supposed illness, I have difficulty remaining grounded. I live in a society with other “normal” people and if I want to conform to people’s bullshit rat-race lives, I find it easier to do this whilst taking anti-psychotic medication. (ID5)

Some other participants commented on the spiritual repercussions of overdoing entheogenic drugs, and one questioned whether drug-induced spiritual experiences were truly genuine.

Possible consequences of overdoing hallucinogens are to feel the ego spiritualized, omnipotent, or enlightened, or to go crazy, or live in fear. Such overuse doesn’t destroy egoism but rather increases it. (ID1)

I stopped using “drugs” to find the path to spiritual experience without being under the influence of psychedelics. It seems to me that experiencing the mystical only under the influence of psychedelia is a bit like cheating. Is the experience as real if you have only gone through it under the influence of psychedelia? (ID30)

Some warned that drugs may become substitutes for personal developmental processes.

Cannabis gave me access to some very special experiences, and this became so important to me that I could not spend much time away from it. There is the craving for special experience, for being – yet again – freed from the ordinary and allowed to enter the realm of the Real. This is a danger, a trap on the path, because overdoing gets in the way of integrating the experience in your life, making it count in a permanent way. (ID9)

Thus even if entheogens are not addictive in the traditional sense, one can develop a sense of craving for the experiences that they make accessible.

I think that psychedelics can give people new and meaningful insight, but I see that some use this as an excuse to trip way too much. They take frequent doses in order to discover their “core selves” or the meaning of life. In my experience, I’ve seen friends and acquaintances that get even more confused or closed off than they were in the first place. (ID33)

I have sometimes taken MDMA too frequently. It has been amazing for me to open up to the feeling of love for myself and for others, and I have wanted to repeat my access to that condition because it removes social anxiety and other unpleasant states (ID26).

Cannabis and MDMA seemed to lend themselves to such overuse to a higher extent than the classical hallucinogens, perhaps because they give rise to less intense experiences.

Perhaps if you were to view cannabis use as a lifestyle-choice rather than an addiction you may understand the prevalence of its use. Yes, it is a psychoactive substance, but so is coffee! I personally feel that on a scale between coffee and alcohol, in terms of health ramifications, cannabis is much closer to coffee than it is to alcohol. You can be intoxicated on cannabis all day long and still live a constructive life. At the age of 17 I left school and started working full-time and my use became more frequent, leading to the point when I was 17 or 18 when my cannabis use developed into a nightly habit. Basically, I would get stoned every night, if I had company or not. (ID5)

I cannot abuse mushrooms in the same way as cannabis. In a way I get filled up by a mushroom trip. Cannabis is not as intense an experience. (ID31)

I think it is possible to use at least marijuana, and maybe also proper psychedelics, as a form for escape, but in my experience it is rather the opposite: when I use marijuana I am compelled to confront existential issues and somehow work my way through them. It is anti-escape. (ID9)

Yet entheogens were found to lose effect with overuse due to tolerance, which imposed a clear limit on its habit-forming effect. Habitual cannabis users probably experience cannabis as relatively mild because of such tolerance effects.

If you overdo it, you will have less and less interesting experiences. (ID7)

There is a term for people who start tripping a lot: “eraserheads”. It happened to me. Basically I was tripping 4-5 times a week for about 3-4 months. What happened to me was that I lost the

trips. I didn't get the psychedelic mind state anymore, only the physical effects. When I stopped this I was at the point where I didn't get anything out of acid other than just muscle cramps. But it was a path I had to walk and I'm not regretting it. This is how I learnt what is and what is not the right way for me to use psychedelics... through my own experience. (ID10)

Respondents otherwise reported of few significant social complications of entheogen use. Some had gotten in minor trouble with the police, and there were sometimes arguments with family members. None described any repercussions for their work or careers.

No economic or social consequences, and no impact on family or children. I have stopped completely drinking alcohol, preferring cannabis when I am around friends who drink. (ID12)

It has a low impact on my daily life, as I get to work when I should and have a normal social life visiting cafes and so forth. The only thing is that if I smoke a joint late in the evening when I have to get up early I get very tired and may risk oversleeping. But I was never a morning person. (ID17)

I have never been in contact with the police myself, but I know several people who have been taken for possession. (ID26)

When one is intoxicated on cannabis, it commonly has a negative effect on short-term memory, but I find that the same is true whilst intoxicated on alcohol. A long time ago, when I was stoned all day every day, I always held down very demanding jobs. (ID5)

While not addictive in the physical sense, it seems that entheogens do have a habit-forming potential that users need to be conscious of. Less experientially intense drugs such as cannabis and MDMA particularly appear to lend themselves to overuse. While there is some disagreement about this issue, it also appears to be the case that habitual use trivializes these drugs and serves to deprive them of their entheogenic potential. Thus even the recreational usage pattern identified by the above authors may have problematic aspects from the perspective of a spiritually motivated user.

Beyond this potential habit-forming effect, respondents identified few significant adverse effects from their entheogen use. Most were in full time work, and several had their own families to take care of. If we are to believe their testimony, years of entheogen use have not

impacted negatively on their cognitive abilities, and they do not appear to have incurred any noteworthy neurological damage diminishing their capability to live a full human life.

## 5.8 Positive long-term consequences

On the other hand, respondents reported a wide range of positive consequences arising from their entheogen use. Almost everybody pointed to some kind of personal growth.

I mostly use psychedelics to help me to make new imprints on my consciousness. You change yourself, you change the reality you live in. When you experience ego death, the crucial moment is when you come back out of it. That's the moment when it is sometimes possible to make new imprints and change the way the new self is going to be. But I don't say it is easy and that that alone would be enough. After that you have to live like the changes are real and they will become real. (ID10)

I became more interested in beautiful things, beautiful music, being kind to others and so forth. Kind of hippie-like. This was not something I had expected. (ID28)

I have become more social, to my clear advantage. I have also worked with my tendencies toward compulsive thoughts and actions, judging myself and others. I have had some insights about my lifestyle and healthy thinking habits that I could take with me into daily life, but it required some work after the trip. (ID26)

One insight that has come up during the influence of mushrooms, and which I have worked with the past few years, is the importance of letting go rather than clinging on to anger or grief. Another thing is that 'I am my own responsibility' and therefore have to take ownership of my own emotions, plans for the future, economy, relations, etc. Other long-term effects is that I appreciate nature more than before, I enjoy more the simple things in life and don't feel a great need to gain the approval of others. I have also become more sensitive to taste, smell, and other sense impressions. Sex will never be the same. (ID33)

Psilocybin use has made me fearless. One leaps headfirst into the unknown. (ID27)

This growth often included the healing of psychological problems.



I have got some amazing help from psychedelics. I was diagnosed with PTSD, but it is now completely gone and LSD was one big key to get rid of it (but also therapy and going to the court about the crime that happened to me). The psychedelics didn't really help me with this problem (I had the PTSD for 10 years) before I learnt the right way to work with them. (ID10)

Psilocybin and DMT have been key components in a long term personal healing transformation. They have helped me more than anything else to manage my depression and to gain new intense perspectives on myself and my place in the world. I have suffered depression most of my life, and when I began to embark on excursions with DMT in combination with Ayahuasca leaf or tea, my depression completely lifted and was replaced with a fantastic outlook on the world. I felt like anything was possible and creativity flowed through me. Things eventually did return to normal, but my goal was to learn to remember the feelings and access that in my daily life. My outlook on life has slowly but surely changed, and at present I have a perspective on the world that I know I would not have had without these incredible compounds. (ID15)

Before I was on high doses of anti-depressives in order to cope with compulsive thoughts (they are notoriously hard to treat). After two trips on mushrooms I could hand everything back to the apothecary, fully cured. (ID28)

I have suffered from depression and anxiety and was outside the workforce for many years because of this. But I feel that MDMA and entheogens have helped me with this, and I see myself as completely healthy today. LSD helped me quit smoking. (ID17)

As we see in this last testimony, the growth and healing process commonly involved dealing with habitual use of non-entheogenic drugs and other addictions.

I totally stopped drinking and smoking. I still do not drink and smoke. (ID8)

With semi-regular DMT/Psilocybin use, my opiate abuse rapidly declined and then vanished, along with my habitual alcohol abuse which disappeared almost instantly. This all coincided with my sudden realization that eating meat was also extremely un-natural and bad for me. (ID14)

I was addicted to gambling, but I have cured my addiction with the use of psilocybin. (ID27)

These personal growth processes were often seen as a spiritualization of life.

In my first ceremony with Ayahuasca, I unlocked my fears. I am trying to annihilate my selfishness. All spirituality is a kind of healing. (ID1)

Cannabis brought me in touch with the spiritual dimension of life, and this helped to reduce my old existential anxiety and made me a more fundamentally harmonious person. It is hard to explain how this took place, but it was a deep transformation of my personality that took me from a state of being basically alone in a hostile world to a sense of belonging – to being part of something huge and vastly meaningful. Of course, that existential alienation or what you want to call it is so common today that we don't really recognize it as a mental health problem – it's just the modern way of life, basically. And since we don't recognize it as a real problem, I guess we have a hard time acknowledging the value of a practice that might help us get beyond it. So for me, cannabis has been a tremendous contribution to my mental health situation. Psychologically, it is mostly about how a spiritual awakening transforms the whole life. Pre-spiritual life was like one big psychological issue to me, and these drugs got me on the healing path. Spirituality, in a sense, is about life-healing, or existence-healing. (ID9)

For me, the use of entheogens has always been about a genuine spiritual quest for something good, mystical, real, and true. I have experienced much gratitude for being alive and for having the opportunity to enjoy a broader specter of sense experience the days after a trip. Often with new, creative inspiration and perspective on life's many challenges and possibilities (ID26).

One reason why I use these drugs is that I feel like a new and better person for weeks and sometimes months after a good trip. Being non-religious, entheogens are a way for me to have spiritual experiences where I appreciate nature and its beauty. They have also removed my fear of death. When it comes to MDMA, which is my favorite, it is the feeling of no worries and total love for my friends which attracts. (ID17)

Psychedelics open up the natural ability to go inside. They are a key to the self and the spiritual. They are not a magic pill, you have to do the work yourself. Psychedelics do not do the work for you. They are a key to open up the possibility. They show you how the mountain top looks like but you have to climb to the top yourself. Having a nonpsychedelic practice such as meditation or yoga will help you get more out of the psychedelic experience. (ID8)

As advised by the last interviewee, taking up various forms of spiritual practice often accompanied the processes of growth and healing. The spiritual traditions most commonly quoted as inspirations were Buddhism, Advaita Vedānta, and various forms of shamanism, but

none of the participants were engaged in organized religious activities. Several did however participate in workshops and take courses relating to the abovementioned traditions.

Chanting can help to calm the mind a bit. I do meditation every day. Meditation to me is not only sitting meditation. I also meditate while walking or doing everyday stuff. You can meditate everywhere at any time. I also do chant sometimes. When you are afraid or feel fear, use your voice to chant or sing. (ID8)

I took up mindfulness and loving kindness meditation as well as yoga practice, and I have observed a very evident effect on my stress levels at work. The integration of breathing practices and meditation during yoga practice made me feel very calm for the rest of the day and evening. It is not unlike the feeling I get after eating mushrooms. The world moves around you, but you feel calmer on the inside. (ID26)

I am not directly involved in any shamanic practice, but I have participated in several “shamanic courses” in Ireland which have given me a better understanding of myself among other things. (ID34)

I find no use or value in participating in organized religion. Religion and Spirituality are not necessarily the same thing! For me, the truest Spirituality exists outside corrupted, distorted, archaic, manipulative and controlling religion. (ID5)

In sum, entheogen use was commonly described as leading to a more spiritual life. The respondents of this study picked up a variety of spiritual practices as a consequence of their entheogenic experiences, and regarded improved empathy and relational skills, as well as a more intimate connection with nature, as integral aspects of spiritual growth and healing processes. To them, entheogenic spirituality is about infrequent drug-induced inner journeys that bring a broad range of benefits: personal transformation and growth, healing of physical, psychological, and existential trauma, peace and harmony with one’s surroundings, and the joy of being alive in the world. It is not regarded as a practice without risks, however, and does seem to demand from its adherents the willpower to resist overindulgence, as well as the strength to face challenging experiences.

Mushrooms have given me a closer connection to nature and a greater sense of gratitude for being alive and for experiencing and sensing what happens around me. That could be a form for spirituality. (ID33)

Spirituality has to do with what is within. It has to do with finding your inner core your center. It is about making contact with one's inner self and inner strength (or energy). (ID8)

You can find meaning in family, friends, society, religion, etc. But this security based on something external can disappear in an instant. A secure existential foundation comes through personal experience and insight. (ID27)

I would not really call it spiritual use. To me entheogens are more like a tool to achieve insight into myself, and personal development. (Although this is spiritual use to me.) (ID12)

## Chapter 6 - Discussion

We have seen in the previous chapter how the participants of this study described the characteristics of, reasons behind, and consequences of their entheogenic practices. The picture emerging from these narratives is one of predominantly male, adult psychonauts (median age mid-30s) from stable and secure backgrounds living well-integrated lives in modern Western societies. They use entheogens infrequently in mostly well-planned sessions for a variety of spiritual purposes and effects, seeing some risks but also a number of benefits from this practice.

This chapter will discuss the themes identified in chapter five in light of the research questions for the study presented in the introduction and elaborated in chapters one to three. The first section offers an analytical summary of the findings that places them in relation to previous research. Section two thereupon provides a closer analysis of entheogenic experience, seeing it as fundamentally heterogeneous and with somewhat unpredictable effects both on cognitive and emotional levels. It finds little support for the constructivist position that spiritual experience is constructed on the basis of cultural expectations. Section three discusses the attractions and consequences of entheogen use, finding the promise of spiritual experience and its integration in daily life a primary attractor. Users do not deny that entheogens has abuse potential, but see that their own infrequent, careful, and mostly well-prepared use – here presented as a distinct usage pattern – serves to minimize risks and maximize benefits. On the basis of these discussions, section four presents entheogenic spirituality as a type of neo-spirituality which emphasizes the balanced interaction between entheogen-induced special experience and the daily-life integration of such experience in a context of personal growth. Finally, section five suggests possible directions for future research into spiritual entheogen use.

### 6.1 Analytical summary

This study, we will recall, presented itself to participants as an investigation of the spiritual use of entheogens while declining to define either of the terms “spiritual” and “entheogen”. Thus the definitional power – and burden – was transferred to the participants themselves. I believe that this approach was vindicated particularly with regard to the term “spiritual”, and perhaps most obviously so in the last quote of chapter five, where a participant states essentially that his entheogen use is not spiritual in the eyes of others – in what he seems to understand as the

“official meaning” of that term – but nevertheless spiritual to him. The delegation of definitional authority thus allowed this participant to present his spirituality in his own terms, and similar, if less explicit, expositions were found in other narratives as well. I would therefore argue that this approach to “spirituality” was an unqualified success. This was less true for “entheogen”, which participants seemed to employ simply as a synonym for “psychedelic”. In fact they often substituted the latter for the former, and the drugs populating their narratives were almost exclusively psilocybin, LSD, DMT, MDMA, and cannabis. However, we may perhaps see this as a sign of communicative success, as the term obviously did not serve to confuse anyone while arguably leaving the door open, at least, for drugs not normally considered to be hallucinogens or psychedelics.

Each section in chapter five offers useful perspectives on entheogenic spirituality. We see in section 5.1 that respondents entered into the world of entheogens either as part of an explicitly spiritual quest, or from a curiosity as to the effects of such drugs that seems psychologically motivated, or in a context of partying. Some, in other words, were seeking spiritual experiences, some were exploring the realm of inner experience on a more general basis, and some just wanted to have fun. (Some were looking for several of these.) Even if the second group did not cite any explicit spiritual motivation, their project of psychological self-exploration fits very well in with the psychologization of religion earlier noted as a characteristic of New Age spirituality (Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996). Some are clearly enticed by entheogens as a land of forbidden adventure, as suggested by Aaslid (2007) and Sandberg and Tutenges (2015). As for the third group, it is interesting to note that they were looking for simple fun, but ended up with experiences of a spiritual character. This resonates with previously reported atheists undergoing entheogen-induced spiritual experiences (Anderstuen 2014; Saunders et al. 2000). Although one interviewee reported of a difficult familial background, and several had various challenges to mental and physical health, there are no indications that any of these were on an antisocial trajectory as per the drug abuse perspective of Odgers et al. (2008). While some admitted to being over-invested in drug-fueled partying at various points in their lives, these respondents also held full-time jobs at the same time.

The narratives of section 5.2 indicate that even when the early experimentation was spiritually motivated, it was not driven to any substantial extent by the religion of participants’ culture and background. Some participants had an entirely secular upbringing, and seem to have stumbled upon entheogenic spirituality without looking for it. I am not aware of any previous study that has examined the religious background of entheogen users, but the lack of organized

religiosity observed among these users at the present time agrees with previous research (Rønning 2010; MacLean et al. 2012). The relation of entheogen use to religious background is an area requiring substantial further research.

Section 5.3 informs us that the participants of this study claimed to follow a usage pattern that is neither experimental, recreational, nor problematic, but rather characterized by infrequent, but often intense, entheogen sessions for purposes of self-development, therapy, and spiritual growth. The spiritual usage pattern hinted at by one participant in Aaslid's (2007) study therefore seems to have some broader validity. Cannabis use is to a larger extent recreationally motivated, but this drug is also treated as a full entheogen by some participants. Recreational use might be interpreted along the lines of drug craving and addiction (Drummond 2001; McSweeney et al. 2005), although we should probably distinguish between recreational and problematic usage patterns (Aaslid 2007; Kronbæk & Frank 2013). Some of the habitual use observed in this study does not seem to cause significant problems, but there are also reports – particularly that of section 5.6 – indicating the opposite. The emphasis on set and setting is in agreement with advice commonly given in entheogenic literature (Fadiman 2011; Goldsmith 2011) and with research by Studerus et al. (2012). We can see a parallel in the fact that many traditional religious rituals have a well-defined setting, and that some, like the Muslim prayer, require a purification of the body and mind before being commenced. A further comparative exploration of the ritual dimension of entheogen use might be profitable.

We see in section 5.4 the obvious centrality of entheogen-induced experience for entheogenic spirituality, and learn from this and the two subsequent sections that such experience is highly heterogeneous. The participants of this study were clearly at a loss for words to describe their entheogenic experiences as what has previously been described in the empirical literature (Aaslid 2007; Anderstuen 2014; Galaaen 2015; Garcia-Romeu et al. 2015). This agrees also with the emphasis on ineffability in Stace's (1960) model of mystical experience. The descriptions that were offered otherwise harmonize on many levels with Tart's (1975), Watts' (1968), and Shanon's (2010) models of altered states of consciousness and entheogenic experience. We recognize for instance Watts' focus on the present moment and Shanon's emphasis on a feeling of homecoming or return to one's true essence. The experience of insight and the feeling of peace and joy are common to the findings of both Stace and Shanon, while the dissolution of personal identity and the experience of unity with an eternal power are emphasized by Stace, Tart, and Watts. Visions were particularly common among DMT and psilocybin users, reflecting Shanon's focus on the visual effects of DMT-containing ayahuasca.

Some of the narratives in chapter five furthermore resonate with what was found in studies such as Pahnke 1966 and Griffiths et al. 2006 as regards profound and life-changing experiences, but most entheogenic experiences in this study seem to be of a more ordinary type: not life-changing in and of themselves, but perhaps parts of a wider life-changing growth process. The overall spiritual emphasis of induced experiences generally agrees with previous findings by Carhart-Harris and Nutt (2010) and Lyvers and Meester (2012).

In section 5.5 we learn that even negative experiences may be regarded as valuable from a spiritual perspective. This agrees with Majić et al.'s (2015) finding that painful and difficult experiences are sometimes considered fruitful, but may also reflect the fact that the interviewees of this study are mainly mature men of long-standing entheogenic experience. Warnings against panic reactions from entheogen use (Abraham et al. 1996; Iversen et al. 2009; van Amsterdam et al. 2011) are probably apposite to less experienced users. The causes, characteristics, and consequences of “bad trips” remain understudied.

Section 5.6 extends the theme from 5.5, corroborating warnings that entheogen use – and especially overuse – may sometimes result in psychotic reactions (Abraham et al. 1996; Iversen et al. 2009). While the generalization potential of one single narrative is obviously low, the long-term high-frequency use of entheogens here indicated appears to explain the psychotic episode at least in part. There was also a disregard of emerging warning signs, and accidental overdosing caused by drug combinations. We note however that even in this case there was an emphasis on positive long-term consequences, including the healing of childhood-induced trauma. There may be similarities between psychotic reactions to entheogens and various forms of “holy madness” that merit further investigation.

As we see in section 5.7, however, entheogen use may possibly result in lasting psychological damage. This finding corresponds with self-identified health risks in the survey by Carhart-Harris and Nutt (2010) and with research linking especially cannabis use to a risk for schizophrenia (e.g., Casadio, Fernandes, Murray & Di Forti 2011). Respondents saw the risks in this regard mainly as a consequence of overuse, and cannabis and MDMA appeared to lend themselves more easily to such overuse than the classic psychedelics. This harmonizes with Aaslid's (2007) and Kronbæk and Frank's (2013) identification of a problematic usage pattern for cannabis. While not physically addictive, entheogens have the potential to induce experiences of such a nature as to be highly appreciated, at least among the participants of this study, and the desire for a repetition of these experiences can sometimes lead to overuse. Such overuse is however limited by a tolerance effect. Some respondents discussed spiritual



repercussions of overusing entheogens in terms reminiscent of Aaslid's (2007) warning that the drugs may become substitutes for personal developmental processes. The majority of the participants in this study did not see any significant negative consequences from their entheogen use, however. They function well in full-time jobs and in personal relationships, and do not appear to suffer from any neurological damage despite many years of entheogen use. Preliminary findings of such damage from cannabis (Battistella et al. 2014; Rigucci et al. 2015) and MDMA (Erritzoe et al. 2011; Benningfield & Cowan 2013) use therefore seem not to apply to – or at least to result in limited behavioral effects for – the moderate long-term users of this study.

Thus the positive consequences outlined in section 5.8 clearly outweighed the negative consequences from the users' own perspective. Positive long-term effects included personal growth and psychological healing, which harmonizes with the increased openness found by MacLean et al. (2011), the increased insight, self-understanding, and self-esteem found by Carhart-Harris and Nutt (2010), and the positive correlation with coping obtained by Móró et al. (2011). These benign consequences were often understood in terms of a spiritualization of life, reflecting earlier research that associates the use of psychedelics with spirituality (e.g., Griffiths et al. 2008; Lerner & Lyvers 2006). The doubts over the long-term spiritual implications of entheogen use voiced by Smith (2000) and Strassman (2001) were not corroborated by the user reports of this study, where several participants described taking up some form of spiritual practice partly as a consequence of their entheogen-induced experiences. These practices were commonly inspired by Asian – especially Indian – or shamanistic traditions, and thus the traditions presented as most influential over New Age spirituality in section 1.4 also had the most influence over my interviewees.

In conclusion, it is probably fair to say that the findings of this study of entheogen use contrast with much general research on drug abuse and addiction, but are broadly convergent with the extant literature on entheogen use. The contribution of this qualitative study is not however to support, but to contextualize and deepen, the more representative findings provided by quantitative survey data and similar methodologies. While we cannot generalize from the results of this study, their congruence with published results indicate at least a probable relation to a broader segment of the entheogen-using population. In other words, the participants of this study appear to be broadly similar to the participants in previous entheogen research, rather than constituting a set of statistical outliers. This does not mean that we can take the more in-depth analyses of the following sections as representative for the entire entheogen-using

population, but neither is there any obvious reason to believe these findings are in some way distinctively unrepresentative. Future research, some prospects for which I discuss in section 6.6, will serve to clarify and refine these explorative findings.

## 6.2 Entheogenic experience

Based on the interviews of this study, it is difficult to summarize entheogenic experience in a few sentences. Experiences induced by entheogens are clearly heterogeneous, encompassing a broad range of characteristics. Some are joyful and bring out various kinds of positive emotions – including at the extreme end feelings of ecstasy – while others bring out negative emotions of similar intensity. One experience resulted in what was probably a psychotic episode, involving both confusion and extreme fear. It thus seems safe to say that there is a fundamental unpredictability to entheogen use, which is a finding compatible with earlier observations (e.g., Nichols 2004). Experienced interviewees appear to have learned to stack the odds of a positive entheogen trip in their favor, however, through careful preparations and attention especially to factors of set and setting. They have also learned to weather the occasional storm, and claim to draw much benefit even from bad trips. We might infer from this body of narratives that there is a learning curve to entheogen use, and that the participants in this study have been generally successful in mastering the challenges that arise on the psychonaut path. Others, perhaps, have been less capable or less lucky, and might have incurred unsustainable damage along the way.

Cognitive content is as varied as emotional valence. Some speak of insight, others of visions. There is talk of interactions with non-ordinary beings, and sometimes of mental chaos. As Tart's (1975) model predicts, insights often seemed based on an increased access to subconscious material, and entheogenic experiences may furthermore involve profound changes to one's sense of identity. These changes have been described as ego dissolution, a merging with other personalities, and as a unity with transcendent forces.

According to a constructivist perspective on spiritual experience, language and beliefs serve essentially to produce the experience. This position is not supported by the studies on mystical and psychedelic experience reviewed in section 2.3, nor by the findings of this study. The fundamental challenges for constructivism emerging from the narratives of chapter five are that participants clearly struggle with finding words to describe their experiences, sometimes expressing frustration (or in one case, satisfaction) at their ineffability, and that the experiences seem far removed from the tenets of their religious background.

All participants in this study were citizens of Western nations. I did not ask them what languages they spoke, but it is probably safe to assume that they were generally restricted to European languages. With these linguistic tools at their disposal, they declared themselves largely unable to put their entheogenic experiences into words. Admittedly, this declaration was followed by a range of descriptions that were often very expressive and which may seem to indicate communicative success. Nevertheless, we should probably take their reservations seriously and concede that entheogenic experience is not fully expressible in language. This, of course, agrees well with the tradition of negative theology in Christianity and other religions, and with an academic tradition of understanding mysticism that ranges from Underhill (1911/1999) via Stace (1960) to and Hood and collaborators (Hood 1975; Hood et al. 1993; Hood et al. 2001).

The second challenge to constructivist accounts of spiritual experience in this interview material is that its participants have all grown up in Christian cultures, yet their reports touch upon Christian themes only to a very limited degree. There are some accounts of interactions with a higher being that might be interpreted in terms of the Christian God (or perhaps a New Age “higher self”), and one account of a meditation upon the Christian concept of love. Some respondents also reported on encounters with beings that could be interpreted according to Christian conceptualizations of angels and demons (or New Age “light beings” and “aliens”). More common than encounters with a divine being, however, were narratives of ego death and mystical unity that participants seemed to have no cultural background for, and which they in some cases found to correspond with the teachings of Advaita Vedānta or other Eastern traditions only at a later point. Furthermore, most of my interviewees did not come from an explicitly religious family, and the majority of those who did had actually broken with the religion of their past; in some cases this break-up was apparently informed by the entheogenic experiences themselves. Thus there is evidence here against the tenets of constructivism.

It should be mentioned, however, that the participants of this study sometimes read trip reports and other material relating to entheogenic drugs before embarking on their own journeys. This is consistent with their emphasis on careful preparations of entheogen sessions, but also means that they did not approach the realm of entheogens from a position of complete naiveté. Having read the trip reports of others, they knew to some extent what to expect, and a constructivist might therefore claim that their experiences were constructed on this basis. While there may be some truth to this, one might also object that a relatively brief interaction with subcultural readings seems a poor substitute for a full cultural immersion via familial

upbringing, schooling, lifetime social environment, and influence from the media, and appears to confer vast creative powers even to minor cultural influences. To say the least, there is a difference between being brought up by, say, a Catholic family in a Catholic nation, with all the implications this would seem to have for one's formative years, and engaging with a drug subculture over the Internet for a few years in early adulthood. Some participants, furthermore, gave no indications of having perused trip reports and other drug narratives before embarking on their own entheogen journeys.

The apparent ineffability of entheogenic experience informs us also about the inherent tentativeness of attempts to analyze such experience in academic works. Something fundamental seems to be lost in the attempt to explicate the ineffable, and the resulting narratives are frequently described by interviewees themselves as inadequate. If we accept this view, it would seem clear that our academic understanding of these experiences is highly curtailed, and perhaps in ways that cannot be overcome. This does not imply that attempts at understanding entheogenic experiences are meaningless, but it does imply that our findings are necessarily tentative. Something is left beyond our reach; we cannot, so to speak, close the deal.

### 6.3 Attractions and consequences

What attracted the participants of this study to repeated entheogen use was clearly the spiritual experiences made available through induced alterations of consciousness. For some, such spiritual motivation was predominant even for their first experimentations with entheogenic drugs. However, this emphasis on spirituality does not mean that there is not also a hedonistic motivation underlying entheogen use. The feelings of love, unity, empathy, liberation, peace, and joy that are reported as elements of the entheogenic experience clearly have a hedonic quality, even as they are also interpreted as spiritually significant. Perhaps it is unwarranted to impose any kind of clear boundary between spiritual and hedonistic motivations for entheogen use, although it is probably true to say that there can be an emphasis on one or the other. The spiritually motivated users interviewed in this study are not against having a good time, but it does not seem to be a primary reason for engaging with these powerful drugs.

What differentiates the spiritually motivated entheogen user from the hedonistically motivated user of the same drugs is therefore not that the former is in any way anti-hedonic, but that the sought-for emotions of positive valence have a place within a larger spiritual context that also includes perceived benefits to cognition, insight, and personal growth. Indeed, the positive emotions often seem to arise as a consequence of these other elements. By contrast,

more hedonistically motivated users probably seek out positive emotions rather as a goal unto themselves. Spiritually motivated users furthermore find value even in anti-hedonic experiences such as bad trips, which are often regarded as important learning experiences even when they are very unpleasant. This would seem absurd from a hedonistic perspective.

Thus there is evidence here of a spiritual usage pattern of entheogens that might serve to extend Aaslid's (2007) triad of experimental, recreational, and problematic patterns. A spiritual usage pattern is spiritually motivated as per the above discussion, and includes an aim to balance the interaction between special experience and ordinary life. Generally speaking, therefore, the spiritual usage pattern is characterized by infrequent drug use, allowing for plenty of time in ordinary life to work with and integrate insights and other material obtained in entheogen sessions. Interviewees had somewhat divergent views as to whether the appropriate frequency of use is for instance once per month or a few times per year, but most seemed to accept the former. However, several pointed out that there are different stages of the path, and that a higher or lower frequency may be appropriate at some stages.

This brings us to the issue of addiction or habitual use. The entheogens populating the narratives of this study are mostly not addictive in the physiological sense, and many are subject to a tolerance effect that imposes a clear limit on the value of repeated use. Nevertheless, as we have seen in some interviews, it is clearly possible to use entheogenic drugs habitually, and thus perhaps to embark on what Aaslid called a problematic pattern of use. In fact, her recreational pattern also seems to imply habitual use for mainly hedonistic purposes, and it would seem possible that a spiritual usage pattern might turn into such a recreational pattern if attention to the balance between the phases of special experience and ordinary life is not maintained. Some of the cannabis use reported in chapter five might represent such a "recreationalization" of a drug with entheogenic potential.

The classical hallucinogens seemed to lend themselves less readily to habitual use, perhaps because of the intensity of the experiences they induce. Some respondents reported overusing LSD and psilocybin during certain periods of their lives, however, and this has resulted in one dramatic psychotic episode and perhaps one long-term psychiatric condition. One other interviewee who overused classical hallucinogens experienced only a loss of drug effect, but it nevertheless seems clear that the maintenance of infrequent use is a critical factor for success on the psychonaut path.

The path of entheogenic spirituality therefore appears to be a challenging one, imposing a range of demands upon the self-awareness, willpower, and resilience of those traversing it. For

this reason it is probably a wholly inappropriate choice for some people, and with the very limited extent of support systems currently available in most Western nations, we should not be surprised that some suffer serious damages along the way. Reorganizing societal responses to Western entheogen users – what Fuller termed the religious underground – might serve to reduce the risks for vulnerable psychonaut aspirants.

For the majority of participants in this study, however, the positive consequences of entheogen use seemed to outweigh the negative consequences by a substantial margin. Having reached a position of experienced maturity as regards their entheogen use, they reported of no significant adverse effects on their daily lives, and saw considerable success both in their careers and in their social and familial relations. The only potentially life-destroying effect that respondents mentioned is the risk of being caught by the police, which might severely impact upon their careers, economic situation, and social life. On the positive side, interviewees spoke of insight into themselves and their worlds, improved social relations, the healing of psychological problems, increased aesthetic awareness, and a more meaningful and joyful life. The integration of entheogen-induced special experiences into daily life was therefore seen to result in personal growth on several levels, and this growth process was often understood as a spiritualization of life. Long-term consequences of entheogen use should thus be understood as one of the primary attractions of such drug use among the participants of this study.

## 6.4 Entheogenic spirituality

On the basis of the above discussions, I offer the following analysis of entheogenic spirituality. In academic terms we can probably understand it as a form of New Age spirituality, although I believe my informants would balk at the term “New Age”, which they never used themselves. Indeed the term appears to me as rather dated, and might perhaps be replaced by more generic terms such as “neo-spirituality” or “neo-religion”.<sup>9</sup> Given the preference of spirituality over

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<sup>9</sup> The term “neo-spirituality” was first used, as far as I can determine, by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1941/1978). Its first use as a label for a extant Western social phenomenon was, again as far as I can determine, by Frits Spangenberg and Martijn Lampert (2000, section 1.3), who described it as “seeking new types of spirituality not necessarily related to one particular religion or church.” The term “neo-religion” for its part goes back at least to 1953, when Judd L. Teller used it to describe religious modernism in Israel. In 1954, Philip Wylie used it to describe UFO religiosity among the American public.

religion among the participants of this study, the former would seem most appropriate in this context. We might perhaps critique these terms as providing only residual categories for anything religious or spiritual that is going on these days but is not covered by existing categories, but perhaps such residual categories nevertheless have analytical utility. With this terminology, it seems clear that entheogenic spirituality would be a form of neo-spirituality. This would apply even to an entheogen-using Christian congregation, which would represent such a break with Christian conventions as to deserve the designation even if it was otherwise in conformity with mainstream Christian dogma and practice on every level.

Regardless of its position within the broader taxonomy of religion and spirituality, the entheogenic spirituality observed in this study has the following main characteristics. First of all, it is to a large extent about gaining insight into oneself and the world, and initiating personal growth processes on the basis of such insight. This point is largely in agreement with the perspectives of Hanegraaff (1996) and Heelas (1996), which emphasize the role of self-development in New Age spirituality. Personal growth encompasses the healing especially of psychological issues including depression and anxiety, the discontinuation of habitual non-entheogenic drug use, and improved emotional, relational, aesthetic, and cognitive capacities. In this spiritual program, entheogens seem to serve as somewhat reliable providers of Maslovian peak experiences, which again serve as periodic focus points or anchors for long-term growth processes. Every once in a while, the psychonaut embarks on a strange and unpredictable trip into the unknown, facing numerous challenges along the way, while aiming for a state of consciousness that is intensely positive, inspirational, and transformative. What is perhaps surprising is that even when this project might seem to fail – when the trip turns bad and the obtained state of consciousness has a negative instead of positive emotional valence – it may still serve a purpose for the personal growth program. To the experienced psychonaut, bad trips seem to carry an abundance of growth potential and are therefore inherently useful, even if they do not always seem so at the time.

Entheogenic spirituality is thus centered on spiritual experience, including interactions with what Strassman (2001) calls invisible and transpersonal realms. Visionary encounters with alien beings were not uncommon among psilocybin and DMT users, while some others reported of a connection to some kind of higher being, or of a more abstract form of existential unity. Even in the absence of such mystical experience, entheogens gave rise to feelings of love, unity, empathy, liberation, peace, and joy, which were in themselves commonly interpreted as spiritual. The spirituality of my informants is therefore to a large extent about the experience of

feelings, or more precisely of *good* feelings, and especially feelings that have an intensity to them not normally experienced in the baseline state of consciousness.

By contrast, there was no mention of faith or belief among my interviewees. When there was talk of a God or higher being, the context was always experience rather than belief. This finding agrees with the perspective of Anderstuen (2014), who understands the spirituality of his DMT users as a form of neo-Gnosticism where the purpose is to obtain direct access to transcendent forces. Tendencies towards such a neo-Gnostic program were discernable among some of the participants in this study, but was not however a majority trend. Most interviewees aimed for insight on more mundane levels, especially pertaining to the psychological understanding of oneself and one's relations.

As is obvious from the above, the entheogenic spirituality observed in this study is relational. The inherently relational feeling of love has already been mentioned, and the program of personal growth includes improving relations both to oneself and to other people, as well as to nature. Furthermore, there is the more radical experience of ego dissolution and a relation of unity with other people and beings, and sometimes to transcendent beings or forces.

At the same time, this spirituality has an individualistic component. Entheogenic experiences were often pursued in solitude, and truth (or "truth") was obtained not from the human collective and its cultural traditions, but from within the individual psychonaut. There was an emphasis on experiencing reality for oneself, and personal experience was regarded as the final arbiter between spiritual truth and falsehood. Authority is thus transferred to the individual and his or her inner experience. We may therefore say that entheogenic spirituality is largely interiorized: the psychonaut is inward-directed, aiming for explorative journeys of one's personal psyche. "The cosmic drama turns into a psychic drama," says Anderstuen (2015, p. 92; my translation), understanding DMT trips in the terms of Jungian psychology. Clemens Cavallin (2013, p. 119) sees such interiorization – a push "toward the interior in search of the really real and a secure foundation of knowledge" – as characteristic of modernity in general, and in this sense entheogenic spirituality would appear aligned with modern sensibilities. Yet as we have seen, the inner explorations are also reported to have deep implications for one's relations to and interactions with other people.

Entheogenic spirituality, finally, is eclectic. It often involves taking up spiritual practices from a variety of traditions, not least those of the East. Several interviewees reported starting with meditation and yoga practices as a consequence of their entheogenic experiences. This eclecticism and the abovementioned focus on individual experience leave little space for



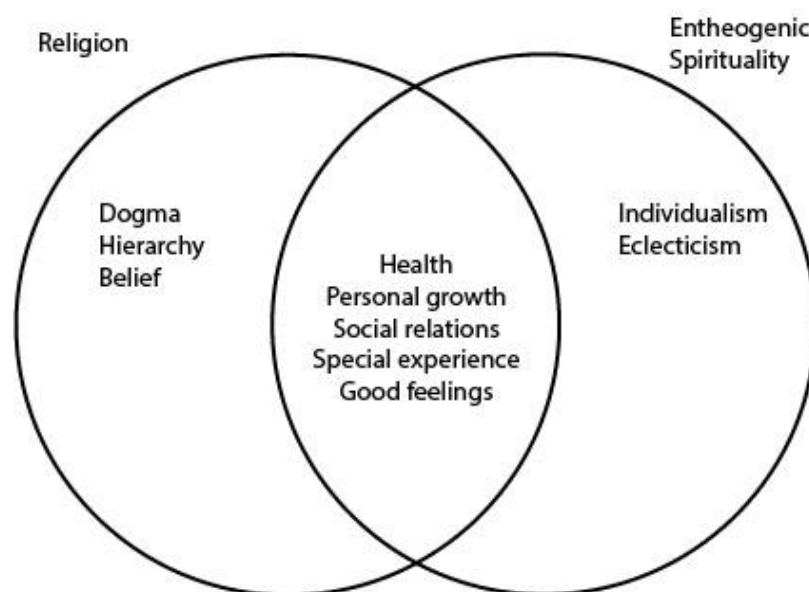
dogmatism. There is no obvious room in this spirituality for adherence to dogmas unsupported by personal experience, and it does not seem possible that one person's experience should gain a position of authority over and above what others experience. Entheogenic experiences were in any case broadly regarded to be fundamentally incommunicable, and written reports are therefore almost by definition secondary and subordinate. Thus there can be no dogmas in entheogenic spirituality, because the truths these psychonauts claim to gain access to cannot be captured by language. The individual is sovereign, and truth is discovered through essentially private inner experience.

The answer to the research questions of what spirituality means in a context of entheogen use and what an entheogen-supported spiritual life looks like may therefore be formulated as follows. Entheogenic spirituality, according to the participants of this study, is a developmental journey consisting of two interacting phases: one brief, "special" and intense, the other drawn-out and more ordinary. The former is the entheogenically induced spiritual experience itself, the latter the period between these trips. When the interaction between them is healthy, the two seem to nourish each other: the entheogenic experience inspires one's daily life and brings forth insights that one works to integrate in everyday activities. A positive and growth-oriented daily life for its part appears to serve as a foundation for a successful entheogen trip, which might explain the emphases on preparations and infrequent use. It seems relevant here to draw a parallel to the *Noble Eightfold Path* of Buddhist tradition, whose three divisions of wisdom, ethical conduct, and practice are understood as mutually supporting and reinforcing.

This latter observation brings us to the question of what relation entheogenic spirituality has to religion. It has been argued in section 1.2 that religion is best understood as a Wittgensteinian family concept whose core is constituted by the world's largest religions, and to which other cultural phenomena may be connected through a degree of family resemblance. Resemblance between the developmental programs of entheogenic spirituality and Buddhist tradition has been noted, although it may be debatable whether this developmental aspect of Buddhism has counterparts in other core religions (Hindu Yoga seems a good candidate). The emphasis on direct experience in entheogenic spirituality is arguably reflected in both Hindu, Buddhist, and various shamanistic traditions, providing another dimension of family resemblance. The emphasis on love is, perhaps, universal among religions. Individualism and eclecticism, on the other hand, are not among the core values of any large religion, indicating an area of difference. Thus even with a liberal approach to conceptual inclusion that requires only a weak extent of family resemblance, where the sphere of religion in figure 1 (section 1.2) would nearly engulf

the sphere of spirituality, the hierarchy-negating individualism and dogma-negating eclecticism would remain apart as non-religious dimensions of entheogenic spirituality. There is also no talk of belief among my interviewees. Shared aspects would seem to include the relative emphasis on health, personal growth, special experience, social relations, and good feelings. This relationship, necessarily tentative and non-exhaustive, is summed up in the Venn diagram of figure 2.

**Figure 2: Suggested relationship between religion and entheogenic spirituality**



## 6.5 Research prospects

As indicated above, the findings of this explorative study remain tentative. Even in the best of cases, the study demonstrates only that there are a few dozen people in the Western world who use entheogens in a mostly responsible and profitable manner. The extent to which the entheogenic spirituality here observed represents any broader social phenomenon therefore remains unknown until corroborated by additional research. This section will discuss some prospects for further research into this branch of neo-spirituality. My focus here will be on research in a social science framework, but there are of course many other promising venues of investigation. Clinical studies within a medical framework are obviously relevant, and perhaps neuroimaging techniques may afford perspectives on entheogen-induced inner experiences that

help us overcome their alleged ineffability. Depth interviews within a psychotherapeutic framework would also afford us with a more holistic and penetrative understanding of the therapeutic dynamics of entheogenic practices.

As pointed out in section 4.1, quantitative studies in this field are hampered by constrained access to the full population of entheogen users. It is possible that high-end users may deny illegal practices out of privacy and security concerns, while low-end users may not have the capacity to participate. Of course, even if they are not fully representative, quantitative studies nevertheless enjoy a much higher degree of representativeness than qualitative studies such as my own. A different objection that is relevant particularly for quantitative survey studies, as mentioned in section 2.3, is that their closed questionnaires may essentially serve to entrap participants within conceptual boundaries determined by the researchers. Several aspects of entheogenic spirituality observed in this study would probably have remained undetected in a survey limited to predetermined response options. While there is nothing new in pointing out the increased representativeness obtained by quantitative methods, and the increased openness and investigative depth obtained by qualitative methods, entheogenic spirituality may, not least due to the legal sanctions against entheogen use, be a field that is uniquely open to combinations of such methodologies. This study has attempted to lend a touch of representativeness from survey studies via the congruence of our findings, but it would be more convincing if the interplay between representativeness and investigative depth took place within the framework of a single study.

Combined methodologies therefore seem a promising way forward. One straightforward approach would be to conduct a survey of entheogen users, and include one question about willingness to participate in interviews at the end of the survey. Interviews could thereupon build on the information obtained in the survey, and the extent to which interview participants resembled survey participants would be clear to researchers. The relation between quantitative and qualitative findings would therefore be far more defined than what is the case with my study. Participants for the survey might be recruited via the various web fora where entheogen users converse about their practices, and via websites such as *maps.org* and *rollsafe.org*. One further option would be to clone the survey into several parallel copies, matching each copy to one specific recruitment channel. This would allow for comparisons between different online communities.

In my analytical summary in section 6.1, I mentioned some specific areas requiring further research. We know very little about the religious background of entheogen users, of how their

drug-taking rituals compare to conventional religious rituals, and about the specifics of bad trips. Even more importantly, I observed in section 4.2 a gender imbalance in drug studies that seems to leave women users underrepresented. There may be viable methodological means for handling each of these deficiencies.

A study of bad trips might in fact not have to recruit any participants at all. There is a large number of trip reports published at various web fora, at *erowid.org*, and probably in individual blogs, and among these one can find numerous descriptions of bad trips. These reports are freely accessible, although it will not always be possible to obtain the author's informed consent to their reproduction in academic work. This will apply especially to older reports whose authors may have migrated to different Internet fora and are therefore rendered unreachable. As far as it is necessary to obtain consent, the usage of these reports will therefore be limited. Some forms of analysis that render the source untraceable would probably be exempt from informed consent requirements, however, and this would obviously include most quantitative analyses. One simple study would be to count instances of specific content – fear of insanity, fear of death, reckless behavior, the appearance of hostile spiritual entities (“demons”), social anxiety, existential angst, and so forth – which would allow for descriptive statistics of the bad trip phenomenon. Where it is possible to pose follow-up questions, this is however clearly advisable as it allows for contextual information and an analysis of long-term consequences. Requests for consent that are affirmed to by the author could serve as a basis for interview recruitment efforts, as the fact that a researcher has already engaged with one's writings and found them to be of interest normally will increase the probability – and perhaps the quality – of participation.

The study of entheogenic rituals would probably require some form of participant observation, as observation without participation would most likely be regarded as suspect by entheogen-using groups, especially if the drugs taken are illegal. On the other hand, the active participation in such rituals obviously raise several ethical concerns, as the researcher will then take part in, and therefore condone, illegal drug use. One possible way out of this dilemma is to participate in rituals where only legal entheogens are used. In the Netherlands, for instance, plant-based entheogens such as ayahuasca and peyote are not under legal sanction, and there are several legal ayahuasca-using organizations in Brazil. Active participation might also cause methodological complications, however, as the researcher will have to observe the proceedings from a perspective of personal inebriation. Hultkrantz (1997) describes a partially successful attempt at combining participation and observation at a Native American peyote ceremony, and it might be concluded that the method of active participation is probably not sufficient for an

academic analysis of entheogen rituals. Perhaps it might be possible to establish rapport with entheogen-using groups by first participating actively in a few rituals, and then continue from there as a non-participating observer.

The religious background of entheogen users might for its part seem easily accessible through survey methodologies, but as my study has shown there are many nuances to this question that may be important, and which only qualitative methods will reveal. One person did not have a religious upbringing, but his mother converted to Christianity when he was older, resulting in “many interesting discussions”. Others moved from a secular background into some form of religiosity, which in some cases informed their entheogen use and in other cases was shattered by entheogen use. These developments are complex and not necessarily amenable to straightforward survey questions, although that might be a starting point to be followed up with interviews.

Finally, there is the question of female entheogen users. There seem to be fewer female than male users, and the female contingent furthermore seems to be underrepresented in many studies. Obviously it would be interesting to know why, and to establish the nature of gender difference in entheogenic practices. One possibility might be that women are, to a larger extent than men, discouraged by the illegality of entheogen use. Perhaps, we might speculate, they are also more concerned about their children than men are, and therefore less willing to take risks that might cause authorities to question their mothering capacity. It might also be a factor that some entheogen use renders a person rather useless in crisis situations, and therefore unable to take care of a child in the case of a fire or some other accident. If legality is an issue, we should probably find that women are more plentiful in Brazilian and Dutch entheogen-using organizations. If there is a particularly female concern about child welfare, we would expect to see more widespread usage among childless women than among mothers – and with a higher degree of difference than what is the case for men – and we would also expect to see fewer mothers than fathers among entheogen users.

One methodological problem here might however be that women are not only less interested in entheogen use than men, but also be less inclined to participate in research on entheogen use than are men – even when the gender difference in entheogen usage is controlled for. A woman concerned with privacy might therefore be even less inclined to participate in research than a man at the same level of concern. Studies based on voluntary participation thus risk inflating the true gender disparity for entheogen use, as women perhaps drop out of participation at a lower level of concern. Comparative analyses of female entheogen usage and study

participation willingness under different legal regimes may obtain useful perspectives on these questions.

Perhaps it is surprising that I have not mentioned the recruitment potential of social media in this overview of research prospects. The reason is that I believe the potential is low, as social media generally do not allow for anonymity. It is, of course, possible to set up a fake Facebook account, but this requires a fair amount of work and thus raises the cost of participation by a substantial amount (more so than the construction of an anonymous email account). When it comes to legal entheogen use, however, social media may have a considerable recruitment potential. It is also worth noting that Anderstuen (2014) reports of successful recruitment efforts via Twitter for a study of (generally illegal) DMT use.

In conclusion, the present interview study is only an early exploration of the spiritual dimension of psychoactive drug use. Several issues relating to entheogenic spirituality appear relatively under-explored at this point in time, and others await corroboration or clarification by additional research. It is hoped that the present study will serve to encourage further endeavors in this promising, and in many ways wide open, field of research.

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# Appendix A: Participation consent form

## Request for participation in research project

### *Entheogens in Spiritual Practice*

## Background and purpose

The study examines the use of entheogens in spiritual contexts, with the purpose of discovering long-term implications for spirituality, health, and life through in-depth interviews.

This is a master project conducted by the Institute of Religious Studies at the University of Bergen. Respondents are recruited through web forums and other internet arenas, with the only criteria for selection being adulthood and a self-identified spiritual context for the use of entheogenic drugs.

## Consequences of participation

Participants in the study are requested to engage in an email conversation or interview with the author stretching over several weeks. **In order to preserve privacy, participants are encouraged to create an anonymized web email account for the purpose of communication with the author.** In the interview you will be asked questions concerning your personal background and life circumstances, use and usage history of entheogenic drugs, psychological and psychiatric situation and history, and encounters with law enforcement agencies. **Please respond in general terms that cannot be used to identify you as a specific individual.**

## What happens to the information you provide?

All personal information is treated confidentially. Only the author of the project and immediate collaborators will have access to the data, although anonymized selections will be included in research papers for publication. The author guarantees that no participant will be identifiable from any published material.

The project is scheduled for completion by summer 2016. Email correspondence will be preserved indefinitely **in anonymized forms** for research purposes.

## Voluntary participation

Participation in the study is voluntary, and you can withdraw your participation at any point without offering any reason. If you withdraw from the project, all information from and about you will be deleted.

If you wish to participate in the study, please contact [petter@entheogenstudy.org](mailto:petter@entheogenstudy.org). The university board of research ethics (*Personvernombudet for forskning, Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste AS*) has approved the project.

## Participation agreement

I have received information about the study, and am willing to participate

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(Please sign with email address and date.)

# Appendix B: Interview guide

This guide describes some common questions used to guide the interview. Note that this guide was used only as a starting point. The most important questions for an interview were often not the questions from this guide, but rather individualized follow-up questions to an earlier interviewee response.

## 1. Background and life situation

### 1.1. Nationality, age, gender

1.1.1 What is your nationality?

1.1.2 What is your age?

1.1.3 Which gender are you?

### 1.2. Education, vocation, family

1.2.1 What education do you have?

1.2.2 In which field do you work?

1.2.3 How is your home situation?

Do you have a partner?

Do you have any children?

### 1.3. Psychiatric history

1.3.1 Have you ever had psychological problems?

Did you get professional help for these problems?

Did you use any medication?

How long did the problems persist?

1.3.2 Is there a history of psychological problems in your family?

### 1.4. Religious background

1.4.1 What is your background in terms of religion and spirituality?

Were your parents religious?

Was religion a part of your upbringing?

1.4.2 Did you ever convert into a new religion?

### 1.5. Spiritual beliefs and practices

1.5.1 Can you sum up a few main points about your worldview?

1.5.2 Do you do any kind of spiritual practice?

1.5.3 Do you take part in any organized religious activities?



1.5.4 Do you recall any spiritual experiences from the time before you started using entheogens?

## 2. Entheogenic experience

### 2.1. Use of drugs

2.1.1 Why do you use entheogenic drugs?

What was it that first attracted you to entheogens?

2.1.2 What kinds of entheogens have you used?

For how long?

How often have you used them?

Do you still use these entheogens? How often?

2.1.3 Can you describe the social situation of your entheogen use?

With whom do you use these drugs?

Where does it take place?

On which days of the week? At what time of day?

2.1.4 How do you prepare your use of entheogens?

### 2.2. Descriptions of experiences

2.2.1 Can you describe some drug-induced experiences that were important to you?

Was this a typical or an exceptional experience?

What, if anything, was different with this drug session in comparison to others?

### 2.3. Consequences for life, health, spirituality

2.3.1. How do you feel your use of hallucinogens has influenced your life for better or worse?

Have you noticed any negative consequences?

2.3.2. How does your use of hallucinogens fit in with your daily life?

Are there any consequences for work or school?

Did your drug use ever lead to conflicts with your family?

Have you had any trouble with the police?

2.3.3. How has the use of hallucinogens affected your personality?

Are you aware of any psychological consequences?

Are you aware of what you would call spiritual consequences?

Have you started doing any spiritual practices as a result of using hallucinogens?

2.3.4. Is it possible to develop an addiction to (the positive effects of) these drugs?

How do you feel about the addictive capacity of the drugs you have been using?

What exactly is it about these drugs that makes or does not make them addictive?

Did you ever try to quit anything without succeeding?

2.3.5. Have you ever felt that you were overdoing or abusing drugs?

What are the consequences of such abuse?

Could it lead to «bad trips»?

Some people report that frequent use has a negative effect on their energy level, ability to concentrate and focus, and short-term memory. Did you experience any such effects?

2.3.6. Have you ever had any bad trips?

How did you recover?

What exactly was the problem?

How did you deal with the situation?

Were there long term consequences?

How do you prepare sessions to minimize the risk of bad trips?

2.3.7. Have you ever experienced healing of physical or psychological issues as a result of using hallucinogenic drugs?

Is it possible to explain how this healing happened?

Over what period of time did it happen?

Do you feel that the healing is an ongoing process, or does it belong to the past?

Have previous problems ever returned?