




Book Review

Entheogens, Healing, and the Sacred

Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos¹ 
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Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences

By William A. Richards, Foreword by G. William Barnard
New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018, PP. 280.

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With the burgeoning rise of psychedelic use in the present day, it is important that we understand the significance of this phenomenon. One factor seems to be the search for more holistic forms of mental health treatment that go beyond just the management of symptoms—a desire for authentic healing and wholeness. As helpful as these integrated therapies are, we cannot forget the emptiness created by the loss of religion in modernity, and the existential crisis that this has brought about for millions of people.

The developments that led to the Enlightenment project—and its secular *Weltanschauung*—attempted to fill this void with everything except that which alone can truly heal the trauma of secularism. In this sense, it was the so-called Enlightenment that allowed modern Western psychology to emerge. It often goes unrecognized that the hegemonic dominance of modern science and its empirical epistemology (which rules out alternative modes of knowing) also came to flourish in these profane conditions. As the wounds of the collective psyche become more apparent in our day, there is perhaps nothing more urgent than the need to recover an authentically integrated psychology or

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eISSN: 2458-9675

Received: 03.05.2023

Revision: 07.05.2023

Accepted: 15.05.2023

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Citation: Bendeck Sotillos, S. (2023). Entheogens, Healing, and the Sacred [Review of the book *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences*]. *Spiritual Psychology and Counseling*, 8(2), 195–199. <https://dx.doi.org/10.37898/spc.2023.8.2.189>

“science of the soul” that is rooted in metaphysics, sacred science, and the spiritual healing of psychic illness.

William A. Richards is a psychologist in the Department of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. He brings a unique perspective to the discussion of the therapeutic import of psychedelics (etymologically, “mind-manifesting” substances) or entheogens (“generating God within”) having studied clinical psychology, theology, and comparative religion. He has also had personal experiences with these sacred medicines. His scientific research into psychedelics spans decades, before and after the prohibition on psychedelics. Richards argues that when entheogens are utilized in safe and “intelligent ways . . . they are but one of many tools that may be employed in the process of human psychological and spiritual development” (p. 8).

This book is divided into five parts. The first covers the history of psychedelic research, its prohibition, and its resurgence; along with the difficulties of choosing an appropriate vocabulary for these substances. The second part discusses a framework for undergoing psychedelic therapy and for understanding the distinct realms of mind as informed by the spiritual traditions. The third part explores the direct application of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy with individuals suffering from various afflictions, including those struggling with a terminal illness. The fourth part covers the present and future applications of psychedelics in medicine, education, and religion. The fifth part discusses where psychedelic science and research can go from here, and advocates for the necessity of an interdisciplinary paradigm. Some have suggested that this book is on par with, or a continuation of, the classic 1902 work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James (1842–1910) – the “Father of American Psychology.”

Regarding the present-day tendency to privilege the notion of ‘spirituality’ over ‘religion,’ he writes: “If indeed the word ‘religion,’ originating in the Latin *religare*, is to continue to signify that which most profoundly binds us together and reflects a shared perspective on what gives life its deepest purpose and meaning, I personally do not support abandoning it in favor of ‘spirituality’” (p. 28). What is often missed is that spirituality is the inner or mystical dimension found within all revealed religions of the world; as such, it cannot be properly accessed outside the protective boundaries of a traditional religious path.

Richards describes the importance of utilizing a framework for understanding religions, their transcendent unity, and the reality of diverse mystical experiences. He employs the common metaphor of a mountain – a “common summit [with] many paths leading from its base to its ineffable peak” (p. 42). He adds “Since no one person can travel all the paths . . . it generally makes sense to embrace the tradition of one’s childhood or culture” (p. 42). Additionally, “one can travel on one’s own path and still respect and appreciate the paths of others that may be different” (p. 42).

This perspective very much appears to align with the school of thought known as the ‘perennial philosophy’ when he writes: “In approaching [a] respectful understanding of the diversity of religious languages and traditions, it is also of critical importance to comprehend that there is a variety of very meaningful religious experiences” (p. 43). We need to be cautious and emphasize that the perennial philosophy has nothing to do with New Age pseudo-spirituality and should not be confused with it.

Richards, like others, has attempted to trace the rudiments of a sacred psychology to what Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) referred to as the “oceanic feeling” (p. 39) in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). Yet this inquiry is misplaced seeing as the Freudian “talking cure” is, at its core, anti-spiritual and opposed to metaphysics. The “oceanic feeling” for Freud likely refers to the primary narcissistic state of union between the infant and mother, and certainly not a unitive state with the Absolute. Richards also refers to the work of Carl Jung (1875–1961); in particular the “archetypes” and the “collective unconscious” yet, here too, these do not refer to the transpersonal order, but to the intermediary realm of the human psyche.

The promises of more holistic approaches to psychotherapy lie not in augmenting the already desacralized foundations of modern Western psychology but, rather, in recovering the metaphysical roots of true healing found among the diverse religious traditions of humanity. Only a fully integrated “science of the soul” can support such an endeavor. This will not only benefit those seeking a more traditional form of therapy rooted in sacred realities, but will also provide therapists with the spiritual discernment necessary for a more holistic form of treatment.

Richards makes an important point regarding the potential healing benefits of entheogens and how they can be supported long-term by participation in a religious tradition: “Undoubtedly, such positive effects can be nurtured and reinforced by spiritual disciplines” (p. 55). The author points out that “if one simply wants [a] delightful escape from the pressures of life, psychedelic substances are very poor choices. Psychological and spiritual growth is indeed [a] serious and sometimes gut-wrenching business” (p. 112). At times Richards’s enthusiasm appears to suggest that he is promoting entheogens as an ultimate panacea. Yet he himself dispels this notion: “No psychedelic substance is a ‘magic bullet’ that will permanently cure any condition” (p. 143).

Richards speaks about the rare qualities required of a therapist to effectively administer psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy, stating that they would need to be “transparent to transcendence” (p. 145). However, he does not elaborate further on how this is to be developed within the secular confines of modern psychology, given that its mental health systems are bereft of any sacred dimension. That said, there is an abundance of published studies suggesting that entheogens may be of significant value for mental health treatment. Richards explains:

In the hands of skilled therapists, who can establish solid rapport and who understand the art of navigating within the human mind, psychedelics may be understood as tools that can intensify, deepen, and significantly accelerate the healing processes of psychotherapy. Claims are frequently made that some single psychedelic experiences are equivalent to several years of regular appointments for psychotherapeutic treatment. (p. 139)

The book speaks to the safety measures taken to screen the suitability of individuals prior to administering psychedelic therapy, and the preparation required before this can take place. It explores psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy, and discusses the pain, nausea, fear, guilt, paranoia, and even psychosis that can be experienced by individuals when subject to this therapeutic modality.

Richards concludes the work with many key questions that remain unanswered regarding the future use of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy:

In what ways should legal access and possession be granted? Who should be the guardians held responsible for their wise use? Should mental health professionals be the gate-keepers with psychiatrists writing prescriptions? Should religious professionals decide when one is ready to receive what has been called “the sacrament that works”? Should membership in a religion where entheogens are accepted as sacraments be required for legal access, or can freedom of religion be honored outside of affiliation with a particular church, synagogue, temple, or mosque? Can the man on the street be adequately educated or held responsible to obtain the requisite knowledge in order to make his or her own decisions about whether and how and when to use psychedelics? How can the purity, accurate labeling, and proper dosage of psychedelic substances best be ensured so that the probability of safety and effectiveness can be maximized? These are all important issues for us to explore, and the time is now. (pp. 208–209)

Many of the problems we see in modernity betray the undiagnosed symptoms of today’s spiritual crisis. We cannot help anyone to recover from the “dark night of the soul” without sacred remedies that are rooted in spiritual traditions and the necessary discernment to distinguish the Spirit from the psychic (Guénon, 2001; M. Perry, 2012; W. N. Perry, 1996). Mainstream psychology and secular ideologies cannot meet this abiding need, which is why people are turning to psychedelics as a pseudo-religious salve. Every faith provides a way of understanding the Spirit and a means of living in accordance with this reality. It is said that psychedelics have been known and used in sacred rituals throughout the world since time immemorial; yet they were likely used as supports only, not as the sole practice of a spiritual tradition. To reduce the *raison d’être* of a religion to psychedelics is to completely misconceive the nature of revelation.

We recall the following excerpt from an article co-authored by Richards and his friend, Walter Pahnke (1931–1971), published in 1966: “A significant danger confronting our society may lie in losing out on the benefits that the responsible use of these drugs may offer” (p. xxx). However, it remains unclear as to whether those

who do not adhere to a spiritual tradition can benefit—and to what degree—from these sacred medicines, even under the appropriate circumstances. As such, there are many questions that remain unanswered, reflecting, no doubt, the deeply anomalous conditions of our time.

Taking psychedelic medicine with a view to restoring the harmony of one's Spirit, soul and body is a fraught option, given the serious dangers that can beset such treatment when improperly administered. We need to acknowledge that what is poisonous in one context can also be curative in another. Keeping this essential principle in mind, we need to affirm, once again, the need to use these traditional medicines judiciously, and only in conjunction with the spiritual safeguards prescribed by each tradition.

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