

Entheogens and the First Sin Revisiting the Bodhi Tree and the Tree of Life

By
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Today's subject is of great personal interest to me, though it obscure to many, misunderstood by most, and controversial to say the least. It concerns what theologians today call *entheogens*, more commonly referred to as *hallucinogens*, and what were once known as *consciousness expanders*. I like to use the term *entheogens* because my interest is largely theological. What religious value, if any, is there in ingesting naturally occurring substances like peyote, ayahuasca, psilocybin, salvia divinorum, and, perhaps, even marijuana?

It's an uncomfortable question to pose because even the most open-minded and liberal among us have lived in a culture that has waged an unrelenting and merciless "Drug War" for the past 37 years, throughout which the aforementioned compounds have been classified among the worst. Although the biases against using them have been instilled in us much less overtly than those presented in the ridiculous 1936 film, *Reefer Madness* (about how smoking marijuana leads to car accidents, murder, suicide, and rape, much like a current TV campaign against cannabis that is currently running) we have all gotten the message that *drug use* is both dangerous and wrong.

As a society the result of this offensive has been cataclysmic. We have spent, if not wasted, hundreds of billions of dollars to keep these illegal substances out of our country and off our streets. According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy, we have increased our spending abroad 137 percent, and 21 percent domestically, just since 2001.¹ Our growing prison population is the highest it has ever been, and our country has the greatest percentage of its population imprisoned than any other in the world. We have also funded and otherwise supported cruel foreign dictators, trained violent militants, and created tremendous hatred, suffering, and poverty in other countries in our efforts to eradicate controlled substances.

So this subject, at the outset, seems to be purely political, and has little to do with religion. Indeed, it can be argued that it was Richard Nixon himself who started the Drug War in an effort to disenfranchise his major political opponents so they could not vote against him—young people who were largely smoking marijuana at the time, and black voters involved with heroin. If this sounds like mere conspiracy theory to you, consider this 1969 excerpt from Nixon's Chief of Staff, H.R. Haldeman, "[Nixon] emphasized that you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not

¹ www.cfr.org/publication/10373/

appearing to.” The result has been the Drug War, which continues to disenfranchise African American voters at a rate of 10 to 1 as compared to White voters. If you want to know how this plays out politically, just consider that in the 2000 Presidential election in Florida, in which the disputed difference between votes cast for Al Gore and those cast for George Bush was less than 1 percentage point, that 4.6 percent of the Florida population, mostly minorities who statistically vote Democrat, had been disenfranchised. This information has led me to sometimes refer to our 37 year Drug War as “Nixon’s reelection campaign.”

So, again, what does this matter have to do with religion or theology? Even if it should concern us as citizens who want to live in a more just society, or who prefer our tax dollars be spent in a less costly and more productive manner, why should we, purely as spiritual beings, be concerned about it?

Obviously it is difficult to truly separate our politics from our sense of morality, and our morality is usually based on our religious beliefs and values. Etymologically speaking, the words “politics” and “liturgy” are very similar and share the same root, “lit,” meaning *public* and *people*. As Unitarian Universalists, in particular, we value faith in action. We believe our religious ideas are only as good as they are practiced. Justice is not a belief for us; it is a way of living. So we want justice for those political prisoners held captive in our nations jails, as well as for those who have suffered the Drug War’s damaging effects in places like Columbia, Cambodia, Afghanistan, and so many other places around the world.

What is more interesting, however, and less obvious, is that in outlawing these compounds, our government is oppressing religion. Now, some among us would argue that we do not need to ingest certain plants to be spiritual, or to experience the divine. Perhaps this is so, though I’m not wholly sure. Suppose I were to say you don’t need to eat plants to be healthy, or that people are completely independent of plants and could live perfectly fine if there were no plant life on our planet. Such statements, of course, are ridiculous. Humans and plants have coevolved and are dependent upon each other for our survival. Plants make the oxygen we breathe and provide us with the nutrients our bodies have become dependent upon through the course of evolution, and we, like other animals, help them reproduce by carrying their seeds to new locations, cultivating them, and transferring their pollen from flower to flower. Even if we eat mostly meat, which isn’t exactly a healthy diet, the meat originated in plant eating animals somewhere along the food chain. It may take a Big Mac to make a big man, but it only takes grass to make a cow!

The point is, our dependence upon plants is undeniable, no matter how independent we like to consider ourselves. And if our bodies need plants, why so readily presume our minds and spirits and souls don’t? What if plants are as good for the soul as they are the body? What if our minds are as dependent upon ingesting certain nutrients, as is our flesh? What if, in neglecting to eat all our vegetables, no matter how unsavory some of them might taste, in favor of cheap processed snacks, we have become spiritually obese or malnourished? What if

televangelism is the spiritual equivalent in eating a box of Hostess Ho Hos? Or if in merely going to a mega-church for our spiritual needs we run the risk of becoming spiritually fat and lazy? What if, even in our small congregation, to which we come, at least in part, for spiritual insight, we are missing out on truly expanding our minds because we do not eat all our vegetables—so to speak? And is this notion that, “we do not need to take drugs to be spiritual or have divine encounters,” really true, or is it just the excuse we have had to concoct in order to fit into a society that demonizes drug users, and, more importantly, diminishes and dismisses entheogenic visions as hallucinations?

This may be true of our culture, which has outlawed entheogenic compounds for 35 years, but human beings have been using them to gain spiritual insight for at least the past 3,500 years, according to records in Chinese medicine. Ancient Persians used a psychedelic substance called *haoma*, which was probably the same as the *soma* introduced in India by nomadic Aryans. According to Dr. Stanislav Grof, “One hundred and twenty verses of the *Rig Veda* are dedicated to soma and praise the extraordinary effects that this divine potion had on worshippers. Those who drank it were overcome by ecstatic rapture, where ‘half of them was on earth, the other half in heaven.’”² Although *cannabis* is the most widely used recreational drug in America, it has long been used for religious and sacramental purposes in the Middle East, Africa, India, China, Tibet, the Americas, Jamaica, and other places around the world. Pre-Columbian cultures like the Aztecs, Toltecs, and Mayans, as well as modern peoples in Mexico, like the Yaquis, Masatecs, and Huichols, used and use peyote and mushrooms, also called, “flesh of the gods,” for religious purposes. The Huichol mythology, in particular, suggests peyote buttons grow in the footsteps of a divine being so that we can follow them back to our origins in the realm of the gods. And in places like Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, and the Amazon, *ayahuasca* is the substance most commonly taken to induce visions and spiritual awareness. There’s even a unique Amazonian church, the Santo Daime (die-may), which blends Christianity with the sacrament of *ayahuasca*.

So, even if banning these substances is purely political, their use is historically and widely religious. To ban them, is to ban religion. Hence, I’m saying the Drug War, if nothing else, is a religious war! And, like all religious wars, it is, ultimately, a war of ideas, or, more precisely, a war against thinking itself. The one thing dreaded by religious *oficionados* is that people (the body *politik*) should become aware for itself. One way to prevent this is to convince us all that this source of greater awareness is wrong, immoral, and false—illegal hallucinations!

But if the best religion has to offer us is greater awareness and the worst is delusion and ignorance, perhaps we ought to change our attitudes toward those things that promise to expand our awareness and increase our consciousness.

² Grof, Stanislav, *The Adventure of Self-Discovery*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 1988, p. 275.

According to the Eastern tradition, *Bodhi*, meaning “enlightenment,” actually refers to a fig tree, the *Bodhi Tree*, of which the Buddha ate just before awakening, near which he remained in gratitude and meditation for a week, and to which a shrine remains erected to this day. Does this story suggest the Buddha’s awakening came by ingesting an entheogen?

Yet consider this in contrast to our western attitude. In our mythology the first sin, the sin that marks and condemns us all, was the forbidden use of an entheogen, the Tree of Knowledge. “If you eat of it,” the serpent said, “You shall become like gods, knowing the difference between good and evil.” Can our current Drug War, and our general attitude about the use of certain chemicals, be considered coincidental in light of our greatest myth about the introduction of evil into the world? Indeed, the *Genesis* account not only condemns the entheogen, the consciousness expander, it also condemns the serpent, which, nevertheless, remains a symbol of medicine, healing, and wisdom. In our culture awareness—wisdom—is often condemned, especially awareness gained through plants.

If this is not enough to convince you that this political issue is really a religious one, consider this, that non-addictive compounds like mushrooms, peyote, and marijuana are Schedule I, meaning they are among the most controlled substances by the Drug Enforcement Administration, as compared to dangerous and addictive drugs like cocaine, crank, speed, ICE, opium, OxiContin, PCP and Methadone, which are only Schedule II. What is the real forbidden fruit here? Could it be, as in our cultural origin myth, awareness?

So here’s the real issue for me, and why I think it’s important to bring this up from the pulpit, and why I believe we need to begin truly discussing the matter as a society. As I mentioned, humans, like other animals, have coevolved with plants. As Darwin wrote, “There could have been no flower before there was an eye to see it,”³ meaning that plants evolved flowers in order to be seen. Plants, as we all know, depend upon other creatures for reproduction, so they have evolved certain characteristics, like flavors, smells, and visual beauty to allure us. Many have also developed certain nutrients to makes us healthy. Why? Because they need us to be so we can help them procreate. Some nutrients actually make us more aware, like carrots, which are good for our vision. Plants want us to see them, which is why they produce colorful flowers in springtime, and why their camouflaged green fruit turns an array of brilliant colors when it ripens and is ready to have its seeds dispersed with the help of us vertebrates.

So doesn’t it make sense that some of these plants, like peyote and ayahuasca and psilocybin mushrooms, might have developed properties to actually make those creatures that ingest them more aware of their environment? That is, to help us see

³ Sheldrake, Rupert, and Fox, Matthew, *Natural Grace*, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1996, p. 59.

better and, more importantly, to make us smarter? Some scientists have suggested this may help us understand why the hominid brain inexplicably tripled its size in just three million years, much faster than seems possible in evolutionary terms. For there is some evidence this transformation happened when our early hominid ancestors wandered from the forests to the fields and began including entheogenic mushrooms in their diets, which actually stimulate the central nervous system, the optic nerve, and the frontal lobe. If this is the case, then, yes, these compounds have the power to quite literally make us more aware of our environment.

This also helps explain why these compounds influence us to begin with. The truth is that chemical neurotransmitters in our brains, like serotonin, dopamine, and adrenaline, are shaped exactly like the plant chemicals, psilocin, mescaline, and methamphetamine. They are, as anthropologist Jeremy Narby writes, “like similar keys fitting the same lock.”⁴ Our brains share the same molecular design and chemical makeup as plants because we have coevolved. And thus, some plants, at least, hold certain keys for unlocking our minds, for their purposes, which are, as we know, are to make us more aware of our environment so we might become more aware of them. I should add, the human brain also produces, completely on its own, the DMT molecule, N-dimethyltryptamine, the very molecule that is the active agent in most entheogens, like peyote, magic mushrooms, and ayahuasca, which may explain spontaneous, non-drug-induced, visions and states of ecstasy that some people have.

So, the real problem with banning these substances, the principle of religious freedom and separation of Church and State aside, is that we may actually be inhibiting this process of co-evolution that has been going on since before human beings even existed until, about 1972, when Nixon first restricted it in this country, and began making it difficult for folks around the world to continue exploring human depth through our intimate marriage to plants ever since.

Now, I am tempted to conclude with some apologetics, perhaps explaining that I am not a “pot head,” don’t use drugs, illicit or otherwise, and, thus far, have only had one entheogenic experience in my life, which was, no doubt, both the most spiritual experience I’ve ever had, and my greatest moment of clarity ever! But I will resist the temptation to apologize for this sermon, and, instead, indulge my temptation to eat the forbidden fruit, and say to all, like the serpent in the Garden, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁴ Narby, Jeremy, *The Cosmic Serpent*, Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1998, p. 49.