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Religion and Psychoactive Sacraments: An Entheogen Chrestomathy

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A Brief History of Drugs: From the Stone Age to the Stoned Age

Escohotado, Antonio. (1999).
Rochester, VT: Park Street Press.

ISBN: 0-89281-826-3

Description: paperback, viii + 168 pages.

Contents: Preface, introduction, 18 chapters, index.

Note: Translated by Kenneth A. Symington, originally titled *Historia Elemental de las Drogas*.

Excerpt(s): In 1989 as I was finishing a long investigation on this sub-ject-which in the end filled three volumes in small print with narrow margins-it seemed that the probable future of that book was to rest in the bookcases of different university libraries, a summary of suggestions to students as to how to consider the effect of this or that drug in the evolution of medicine, morals, religion, economics, and the mechanisms of political control. The book was printed as *Historia General de las Drogas* in Spanish, my native language. ...

Whoever wishes to go beyond my schematic narration (or to know the background for my conclusions) may consult the longer *Historia General de las Drogas in Spanish*, which contains a detailed index and a meticulous bibliography. Those who just want an overall view, with main salient points, will be satisfied with a brief history. In any case, I dedicate this book to the sec-ond category of readers. (pages vii - viii)

To complete this perspective of the Greek world, it becomes necessary to allude to the Mysteries of Eleusis, begun at a very early time-before the Homeric poems were composed, without a doubt-and which for more than a millennium became the spiri-tual symbol of that culture. We know that the initiation took place in autumn, at night, and that the pilgrims-called *epoptes* or witnesses-received a potion (*kykeon*) composed of "flour and mint"; they also swore upon their lives to keep absolutely secret all details of their experience.

Initiation was prohibited only to murderers. Kings, courte-sans, merchants, poets, serfs, and persons of varied professions and origins came to take it. Among them were people of the in-tellectual capacity of Sophocles, Pindar, Plato, Aristotle, and Marcus Aurelius. We know that by the second century between two and three thousand people came to be initiated each autumn. Cicero, one of the initiates said:

The Mysteries gave us life, nourishment; they taught societies the custom and the law, they taught humans how to live as humans. (*De leg.*, II)

The kykeon at Eleusis could well have contained flour con-taminated by a visionary fungus (the ergot of rye and other cere-als, wild as well as cultivated), which today still grows in the Rarian plains, very near Athens, where the rites were celebrated. It is a much less toxic ergot than that of other European regions, al-though quite psychoactive; to obtain its effects, one needs only to pass the cereal sheaves through water and then discard the cereal, because the lysergic acid amides are soluble in water, while the poisonous components are not. Considering that water was the medium utilized by the administrators of the sanctuary, we can therefore explain-without resorting to miracles or to the simple credulity of the devotees-the deep and infallible effect of the initiation.

The Eleusinian religion, based on a single act of great inten-sity and oriented to produce an ecstatic experience of death and resurrection, was probably an ingenious adaptation of

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older shamanic rites to the new culture emerging in Greece, as a bridge between the natural cults, proper to villages, and the civil cults, purely formal, that were beginning to consolidate in cities protected by commercial development. This model was to have immense success in all of the Mediterranean basin, and under its shadow would grow many local mysteries, such as the Sabazios and Samothrace, or the itinerant ones, like those devoted to Bacchus, Isis, Mithra, Attis, and other gods, temples being opened wherever there were sufficient followers.

All of them kept secret all details about the initiation, and all of them administered some equivalent of the sacramental kykeon. Some, like the Egyptian Mysteries or those of Isis, were designed by a member of the Eumolpid family, perpetual administrators of the sanctuary at Eleusis. (pages 16 - 18)

Ritual priesthood and sorcery coexisted for a long time without open conflict in many different spheres: the basileus of the Greek civil religion coexisted with the hierophants of Eleusis and other cults, Roman pontiffs with officiants of numerous mysteries, Confucian mandarins with Buddhist and Taoist saints, rab-bis with prophets.

War begins when a sect originally connected with archaic communion trances demands to administer natural religion as well as the prosaic or civil one. That has already happened in Brahmanism, where the old "soma imbibers" later begin to defend an antiestatic cult. But this can be observed with greater clarity in Christianity, a mystery cult based on banquets of wine and bread, when the Mediterranean basin had been already celebrating flour as a symbol of Eleusis and wine as symbol of Bacchus for more than a thousand years.

In its more ancient forms, Eucharistic ritual demanded prior fasting-as other pagan mysteries did-and after several days of bread and water, a single glass of wine has the efficiency of several. Such was the Eucharist in the Coptic branch, the most vital Christian sect until it was condemned as a monophysite heresy. (pages 24 - 25)

The surcease of rigidity, the "relaxation" introduced by in-ebriation, had been one of the pagan's gifts from Dionysius, accepted as well by the Old Testament. But now it became necessary-as St. Paul says-to liquidate all stimulus toward a "relaxed behavior." That gave rise to rigorously abstemious sects, such as the Encratites, Tatians, Marcionites, and Aquarians, to whom drinking was a mortal sin; according to their traditions, when Lucifer fell from the heavens, he united with the Earth and produced the grape. Lucifer and Bacchus become the same person, or-in other versions-are father and son.

Formalization of the Eucharistic rite began by reducing fasts to a mere symbol, only later to reserve wine only for the priest. This allowed retention of the nucleus of all natural religions-which is partaking in food and drink of the god-while discarding at the same time the substances that provoked an intense psychic trance. Instead of a trance, what is demanded is the wish to believe-in sum, pure faith. Even though the senses themselves may not have noticed a before-and-after difference upon ingestion of the blessed host, faith will consummate the miracle of having the god inside, in physical form.

This turn of events required erasing any point of comparison, any communion not based on autosuggestion. All other mystery rites in the Mediterranean swiftly became "dealings with Satan." God was no longer to have any vegetable mystery or multiplicity; it was to be one, and transcendent, in the same manner as the authority of the faith itself.

Not only were the magical and religious uses stigmatized; all inebriation implied guilty weaknesses. Euphoria, whether positive (by providing contentment) or negative (by relieving pain) constituted an end in itself for the pagan. Euphoria is simply therapeutic, healthy. The Christian faith, however, desired a considerable measure of affliction, since pain was welcome to God as long as it "mortified the flesh": that which didn't relieve momentary pathologic states was seen as unworthy flight from the misfortunes affecting human beings. (pages 25 - 26)

In summary, nothing could hurt the pharmacologic tradition more. A few innocent applications, for temporary and localized illnesses, were nothing compared with the temptation of euphoria as an end in itself, added to the threat of orgiastic cults, hedonism, and euthanasia.

These principles were soon to obtain legal force. An edict of Emperor Valentinian decreed the death penalty for celebration of "nocturnal ceremonies" or mere participation in them, a measure that implies declaring illegal any mystery rite of the ecstatic type. In the year 391, Bishop Theophilus incited the burning of the library at Alexandria, causing the disappearance of 120,000 volumes, and after that, the number of archives and texts destroyed is incalculable. Pagan knowledge-especially that related to drugs-was considered contaminated by witchcraft, while St. Augustine declared that scientific inquiry itself constituted an "unhealthy curiosity." Successive councils decreed that drug sellers be exterminated or else sold as slaves. The Frankish king Childeric declared in an edict that



the use of "diabolic plants" was treason to the Christian faith, and Charlemagne defined opium as "the work of Satan." By the tenth century-when the church and the state formed a unity without fissures-the use of drugs for therapeutic purposes could be a synonym for heresy. (page 27)

Coffee was discovered in Arabia sometime after the tenth century. Even though the plant was millions of years old, only then did someone think of toasting the berries and liberating the caffeine by percolating water through them. The legend of Mullah Schadelich tells of a believer overcome by sleep at night while reading the Koran, who used coffee to combat drowsiness. Five centuries later a tradition describes coffee as being consumed without limit by dancing dervishes in Mecca, who were incarcerated by the Sultan while a council of theologians, lawyers, and notables deliberated on their goodness or evil. The council decided that the drinkers must be punished by placing them on the dock for public exhibition, whereupon the Sultan himself, a great coffee addict, learned of the decision and promptly revoked it. The Sultan then hand-picked a new council of notables, which authorized the use of the substance so that one might read sacred scriptures without getting tired. (page 32)

In speaking of Islam, however, it is necessary to address a period of creative impulse that extended barely to the fourteenth century, and another time of consolidation and decadence. Their great mystics, poets, doctors, mathematicians, and philosophers belonged to the first era, and during that time all drugs were neutral spirits, considered in a manner equivalent to what the Greco-Roman culture thought of them. What eventually took over classic Islam was a succession of fundamentalist revivals, which considered the matter in quite a different way.

Toward the end of the thirteenth century, when the Arabic language had over one hundred different nouns to describe hashish, the judge Ibn Ganim said, "Whoever drinks wine is a sinner, and whoever eats hashish is an infidel." He wanted expressly to condemn several branches of Sufism, which were convinced that it helped one "approach the divine presence." ...

... Islam had a censorship in the matter of drugs comparable to that which was to be established by a growing Christianity upon Greco-Roman pharmacology.

These data have historical value in pointing out a change. In the beginning, what was objectionable is alcoholic drunkenness, which led to lying through provocation of senselessness; that did not imply renouncing the gifts of inebriation in general, since-as declared by the poet Ibn Jafaya among many others-to be sober is an attribute of beasts. But on the second instance, any form of inebriation became guilty, because the induced relaxation became not a sign of culture but a forbidden pleasure.

Excluding alcoholic beverages, this was the criterion adopted by the European inquisitors for all other drugs, with the consequences we will now look at. (pages 27 - 28)

In 1324 a document of the Inquisition explained the belief in flying brooms: "While searching the attic of the lady, an ointment was found that she used to anoint a walking stick, mounted upon which she could wander and gallop through any obstacle." In 1470 another inquisitorial document declared that "the witches confess that on some nights they anoint a stick in order to reach a certain location, or else they rub themselves with an ointment in their armpits or in other places on the body where hair grows."

In a woman, the other place where hair grows is that which is in contact with a broom when she rides it. The stick was used to rub or insert the ointment in areas that the modesty of the inquisitor prevented him from describing, the stick serving as a sort of chemically reinforced dildo. The same thing is suggested by a confession extracted from two women in 1540, since they many times, in solitude, carnally knew the Devil; and when questioned whether they had known some special delight in doing so, they repeatedly denied it, and that because of the incomparable coldness they felt in their diabolic parts." (page 36)

It was finally a German Jesuit, Friedrich von Spee, who launched a direct attack upon the inquisitorial emporium. After receiving confessions from witches for more than a decade, von Spee made a moving declaration in 1631:

Treat the ecclesiastic superiors, the judges, and myself in the same way as these unhappy creatures are treated, submit us to the same martyrdom, and you will discover that we are all witches. (page 40 - 41)

Instead of going to the New World to substitute for the local shamans, enough Spanish druggists and doctors went there only to learn from the native herbalists and to sell or spread the knowledge of these plants and preparations in other lands. Their admiration and scientific curiosity were crystallized in the seven-teen volumes of the *Natural History*