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High Mysticism On the Interplay between the Psychedelic Movement and Academic Study of Mysticism

Karl Baier

ABSTRACT

The paper starts by discussing the manner in which the term 'mysticism' entered the discourse on hallucinogens. This is followed by an exploration of the conceptualization of mysticism by major proponents of the psychedelic movement, such as Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) and Timothy Leary (1920–1996). The second part of the paper deals with the debate on drugs and mysticism (Walter N. Pahnke (1931–1971), Robert C. Zaehner (1913–1974), Frits Staal (1930–2012), and the varying definitions of mysticism that played (and continue to play) a role in the different answers to the question of whether drug-induced experiences can be valid mystical experiences.

1 INTRODUCTION

The psychedelic movement (PM) that started in the 1950s was most prominent between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s (on the history of the movement see Partridge 2005: 82–134). It propagated the use of a species of virtually non-addictive (nevertheless under specific conditions possibly harmful) chemicals like Mescaline, LSD and Psilocybin, whose intake gives rise to profoundly altered states of the mind.¹ Different labels for this class of substances have been proposed, such as psychotomimetica, hallucinogens, psychedelic drugs or entheogens. In this article I will refer to them as psychedelics or psychedelic substances. The term 'psychedelic' literally means 'mind-manifesting'. It was coined in 1956

¹ Since the late 1950s there is a broad consensus among the investigators of psychedelics that they do not simply cause certain experiences. Their effects depend to a large extent on set (individual mind-set of the user) and setting (social, cultural and physical surrounding). Following Aldous Huxley, Huston Smith (Smith 2003: xvii) proposed to speak of psychedelics as "occasioning" experiences without determining them. I follow this terminology and sometimes also speak of experiences "induced" by psychedelics in the sense of "occasioned".

by psychiatrist Humphry Osmond (1917–2004) with the help of Aldous Huxley and it came to refer to the entire movement and a whole era. The theoretical background implied in this neologism will be discussed below. I simply chose it because of its historical significance.

The worldwide prohibition of the use of psychedelics from the late 60s onward halted the spread and public presence of the movement, but it stayed alive around the globe in the form of rhizomatic subcultures and a continuous stream of publications. In recent decades a psychedelic revival has taken place.

Although not every agenda of PM is related to mysticism, its most influential thinkers share the view that the experiences provided by psychedelics culminate in the experience of union with a divine ultimate reality. The use of these substances is considered to contribute to a renewal of religious life by awakening the masses to insights that in earlier times were restricted to elites within traditional forms of religion. The members of the movement expect that sooner or later this will also bring about a cultural revolution accompanied by social changes. It was Aldous Huxley who formulated the basic belief that defines PM as a religious and sociocultural reform movement. In his article *Drugs that shape men's mind* (1958) he writes:

The famous 'revival of religion' about which so many people have been talking for so long, will not come about as the result of evangelistic mass meetings or the television appearances of photogenic clergymen. It will come about as the result of biochemical discoveries that will make it possible for large numbers of men and women to achieve a radical self-transcendence and a deeper understanding of the nature of things. And this revival of religion will be at the same time a revolution. From being an activity mainly concerned with symbols, religion will be transformed into an activity concerned mainly with experience and intuition – an everyday mysticism underlying and giving significance to everyday rationality, everyday tasks and duties, everyday human relationships. (Huxley 1999: 156)

The chiliastic hope articulated in this text is not new. Since the late 19th century and especially after World War I, the growing interest in mysticism was connected with socio-cultural criticism and the expectation of a new age in which mysticism would become the dominant form of religion.

It was considered perfectly feasible at the turn of the century to adhere to a communitarian vision and socialist principles while espousing a belief in an unseen spirit world, a cosmic mind, and Eastern religion, and many did. This potent mix remained a feature of both progressive thought and 'mysticism' into the 1900s. (Owen 2004: 25)

What was both new and scandalous was PM's claim that this "Age of the Holy Spirit in the modernized form of the psychedelic Age of Aquarius should be empowered by certain chemical substances. PM unleashed a public and scientific

debate on the dangers and positive values of altered states of consciousness occasioned by drugs and other means. As part of this larger discourse the question of how drug experiences relate to mysticism within conventional religious settings was discussed. This article focusses on the Anglo-American PM and its interaction with the academic construction of mysticism. Additionally, I will argue that there is a psychedelic matrix of thought shared by the masterminds of PM. It derives from the basic conviction that psychedelics help their users to transcend the range of ordinary perception and rational thinking and enable higher knowledge, especially experiential insights into ultimate reality. The psychedelic thinkers faced the challenge of justifying this claim and solving certain problems related to it.

2 DRUGS AS A TOPIC WITHIN THE STUDY OF MYSTICISM BEFORE THE PM

The relation between drug experiences and mysticism was a research topic long before PM emerged. Actually, it goes back to the classics of the modern study of mysticism, namely William James (1842–1910) and James H. Leuba (1867–1946). Their interest in the mystical dimension of drug experiences was stimulated by writings of cultural anthropologists on the use of drugs in certain religions, the results of medical research on the effects of drugs like hashish and mescal, and – at least in the case of James – through self-experimentation.

The chapter on mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) starts with James' famous four marks of mystical experience (ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, passivity) and then goes on to differentiate various types of mystic experiences. In this context he refers to experiences with alcohol, nitrous oxide, ether and chloroform. For him, at least some of the states of altered consciousness occasioned by chemical substances are without a doubt mystical. "The drunken consciousness is one bit of the mystic consciousness, and our total opinion of it must find its place in our opinion of that larger whole" (James 1985: 387).

He then places these experiences midway between the simplest rudiments of mystical consciousness within daily life and full-fledged religious mysticism, i.e. the methodical cultivation of mystical consciousness as an element of religious life. Like the mystical experiences at the low end of this scale, drug experiences happen only sporadically, but drugs are able to stimulate the mystical consciousness to a much higher degree.

Leuba starts his study *The Psychology of Religious Mysticism* (1925) with a chapter on "Mystical ecstasies as produced by physical means" that connects the analysis of drug induced ecstatic conditions which are regarded as uniting with the Divine with those produced by deprivation of food and sleep, isolation, rhythmic movements, etc. He considers both to be typical for the lower religions of

uncivilized societies. But he also sees “the continuity of impulses and purposes from the ecstasies of the lower to the ecstasies of the higher religions” (Leuba 1999: 36).

Thus, James and Leuba both affirm the existence of mystical experiences occasioned by drugs. Within a scale of lower and higher forms of mysticism they rank them among the lower forms. Both use reports of drug-induced mystical states to support the argument that they are basically of the same kind as ecstasies that take place within religious contexts and are not triggered by chemical substances. Leuba explicitly says:

Here James is certainly in accord with the facts as our investigation of drug-ecstasy has revealed them. However it may be produced, ecstasy is ecstasy, just as fever is fever whatever its cause. The truth-kernel of religious ecstasy is, as we have shown, no other than the truth-kernel of narcotic intoxication and of ecstatic trance in general. (Leuba 1999: 309)

Nevertheless, their opinions about the nature of this truth-kernel differ significantly. James sympathizes with the position that mystical states reveal a transcendent reality. “The supernaturalism and optimism to which they would persuade us may, interpreted in one way or another, be after all the truest of insights into the meaning of life” (James 1985: 428; see also *ibid.* 388). For Leuba, however, the experiences themselves have no persuasive power. He accuses James of confusing pure experience with its elaborations. The categories he uses for describing the kernel of immediate mystical experience would already interpret it as a kind of union with someone or something beyond the subjectivity of the experiencing person. Referring to his own studies of drug experiences and trances in non-religious contexts he seeks to substantiate the opposite. “Most of the users of narcotics and many of the subjects of spontaneous trance regard its contents, just as they do their dreams, i. e., as having no other than a subjective reality” (Leuba 1999: 311). For James mystical drug experiences point towards the universality and truth of mysticism, while for Leuba they indicate that the religious meaning of a state of ecstasy depends on the interpretation of *per se* neutral data of consciousness that he wants to explain further by reducing them to physiological processes. Both Leuba and James distinguish insufficiently between different classes of mind-altering substances. Alcohol, nitrous oxide, hashish, mescal etc. are all together indiscriminately labelled as narcotics, intoxicants, anaesthetics or simply drugs.

3 ALDOUS HUXLEY’S PSYCHEDELIC PERENNIALISM

3.1 Huxley’s Perennial Philosophy in Relation to *The Doors of Perception*

As already indicated above, Aldous Huxley’s views about psychedelic experiences and their sociocultural relevance are fundamental for all of PM. Between

1953 when he first took mescaline and his death in 1963, he experimented with psychedelics, not as an intensive user but around nine to eleven times (see Bedford 1974: 543, 715). With his psychedelic classics *The Doors of Perception* (1954) and *Island* (1962), the less important *Heaven and Hell* (1956) and a number of articles and interviews he not only prepared the ground for PM but became its most influential author. Whereas *Doors of Perception* is the key text of psychedelic mysticism, and, moreover, provides “a sort of charter for sixties mysticism” (Ellwood 1994: 43), *Island* had a large impact on the counter-culture of the 60s as a whole (for the importance of Huxley’s writings see Partridge 2005: 88, 93, 124, 133).

From 1937 on, the British writer resided in California where he participated in a cultic milieu of artists and intellectuals who were highly interested in occultism, alternative healing methods, meditation and Eastern religions. He had contact with Krishnamurti (1895–1986) and for around two years was a regular visitor to the Vedanta Society of Southern California where he learned to meditate under the guidance of Swami Prabhavananda (1893–1976). Even after this period of intense contact he stayed in touch with the Neo-Hindu movement. Between 1941 and 1960 he wrote many articles for *Vedanta in the West*, the journal of the Vedanta Society.

In 1944 Huxley published a synopsis of his extended religious studies titled *The Perennial Philosophy*. With this annotated anthology of philosophical and religious texts from several religions he wanted to present the “core and spiritual heart of all the higher religions” (Huxley 2004: 270). Since for Huxley perennial philosophy is identical with the principles of mysticism, one can argue that the whole book represents a perennialist approach to mysticism. As Richard King rightly says, it is “in terms of the modern study of mysticism the most influential work of this genre” (King 1999: 162). Although far removed from contemporary methodological standards, the book was at the time of its first publication a milestone in the comparative study of mysticism.

In this article I use the term perennialism as a category for all approaches to mysticism that suppose the existence of a transhistorical, transcontextual mystic experience or a limited number of types of such an experience. Perennialists usually consider mystic experience as the core and foundation not only of mysticism but of all religion. Sometimes this type of theory is also called ‘essentialist’ or ‘universalist’. Its counterpart, the ‘contextualist’ or ‘constructivist’ theory denies a universal core of mysticism and supposes that all mystic experience is shaped by context-dependent elements. Huxley represents a moderate common core perennialism supposing that there are fundamental universal characteristics of mystic experience, but at the same time these are influenced by cultural, historical, religious and personal conditions that give raise to different interpretations of this experience. He breaks down what he understood as perennial mystic religion into three principles: 1. a transcendent and at the same time immanent divine reality is the ground of all being; 2. within human beings there exists something similar or

even identical to divine reality; 3. the final end of human life is the direct awareness of the divine within the soul and in the world. It can be reached above all through selfless action and meditation (cf. Huxley 2004: 1, 337). Huxley criticizes monastic asceticism, severe physical deprivations etc. and calls for a world-affirming spirituality. The elimination of self-centered thinking should be achieved through “the acceptance of what happens to us [...] in the course of daily living” (Huxley 2004: 118). Mastering daily life without covetousness and self-assertion is the beginning and end of the mystical journey.

Huxley’s psychedelic writings are based on his perennialism. Ronald Fisher (1890–1962), one of Huxley’s critics, said *The Doors of Perception* contained “99 percent Aldous Huxley and only one half gram mescaline” (cf. Novak 1997: 93). This may be correct but let us see what this half gram did with his concept of mysticism.

I took my pill at eleven. An hour and half later I was sitting in my study looking intently at a small glass vase. The vase contained only three flowers [...] I was not looking now at an unusual flower arrangement. I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation – the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence. [...] *Istigkeit* – wasn’t that the word Meister Eckhart liked to use? ‘Is-ness’. (Huxley 1994: 7)

No great surprise for the reader of *Perennial Philosophy*. Huxley describes an experience of Pure Being in the sense of “a transience that was yet eternal life” (ibid. 7) or in the language of Advaita: “*Sat Chit Ananda*, Being-Awareness-Bliss – for the first time I understood, not on the verbal level, not by inchoate hints or at a distance, but precisely and completely what those prodigious syllables referred to” (ibid. 8). The experience did not change his understanding of the world and its divine ground of being, but instead revealed to him what he had already known intellectually in a new mode: as direct, nonverbal experience (I will later come back to the tension between language/conceptual thought and mystical experience in Huxley’s theory).

Secondly, his experience brought “unprecedented poignancy” (ibid. 25) into the problem of the relationship of active and contemplative life. “How was this cleansed perception to be reconciled with a proper concern with human relations, with the necessary chores and duties, to say nothing of charity and practical compassion” (ibid.). Huxley had already thought about this issue in the last chapter of *Perennial Philosophy* that deals with “Contemplation, action and social utility”. There, he defends the social value of contemplation and argues in favor of a *vita mixta* “in which action alternates with repose, speech with alertly passive silence” (ibid. 300). Furthermore, he asserts that for the fully enlightened person “*samsara* and *nirvana*, time and eternity, the phenomenal and the Real, are essentially one. His whole life is an unsleeping and one-pointed contemplation of the Godhead in and through [...] the world of becoming” (ibid. 299). From this point of view, there exists no fundamental contradiction between contemplation and action. It

should be possible to live one’s whole life in constant contemplation and at the same time fulfil one’s tasks within the world. Referring to Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), Huxley distinguishes the inferior realization of God “in the interior height of the individual soul” from “the realization of God in the fullness of cosmic being” (ibid. 299). The differentiation between height and fullness reappears in *Doors of Perception* but with a slightly different meaning. Huxley now confesses that before his mescaline experience he had only known superficial forms of contemplation

as discursive thinking, as a rapt absorption in poetry or painting or music; [...] as systematic silence leading, sometimes, to hints of an ‘obscure knowledge’. But now I knew contemplation at its height. At its height, but not yet in its fullness. [...] For in its fullness the way of Mary includes the way of Martha and raises it, so to speak, to its own higher power. Mescaline opens up the way to Mary, but shuts the door on that of Martha.² (Huxley 1994: 25–26)

In Perennial Philosophy he connected contemplation at its height with a turning towards the presence of God within one’s own soul that excludes the world, whereas the fullness of contemplation is identified with the realization of the omnipresence of God that should be compatible with worldly activities. Obviously, Huxley learnt from his psychedelic experience that the latter could also be a form of contemplation that excludes activity. Under the influence of mescaline he was so overwhelmed by the “Allness and Infinity” (ibid. 20) present within every little thing, that he had no interest at all in doing anything except immersing himself into what he saw. “This manifest glory of things left no room, so to speak, for the ordinary, the necessary concerns of human existence, above all for concerns involving persons” (ibid. 21).

Seen from Huxley’s religious and philosophical background this meant that the psychedelic experience could only be of limited value for him. He clearly states that what happens under the influence of psychedelic substances is not equal to “the ultimate purpose of human life” (ibid. 51) and he evaluates the psychedelic experience as “what Catholic theologians call ‘a gratuitous grace’, not necessary to salvation but potentially helpful and to be accepted thankfully, if made available” (ibid.).³

2 Since Origen and Augustine the pair mentioned in Luke 10:38–42 and John 11:1–44 had stood allegorically for *vita contemplativa* (Mary) and *vita activa* (Martha). As Huxley knows, this allegory became an integral part of Catholic theology throughout the ages and he follows those theologians who considered contemplation, the way of Mary, as the superior way. (See Huxley 2004: 147–148)

3 His use of the term “gratuitous grace” is not identical with the technical sense it has in scholastic and neoscholastic Catholic theology. From Thomas Aquinas onwards, the mainstream of Catholic theology used the list of *χαρίσματα* (charismata, gifts of the Holy Spirit)

Huxley again refers to the concept of gratuitous grace when reflecting upon the relationship between the psychedelic experience and religious exercises, especially regular meditation practice. Whereas psychedelic drugs prepare for the reception of gratuitous graces, meditation cooperates with divine grace by cultivating a state of mind

that makes it possible for the dazzling ecstatic insights to become permanent and habitual illuminations. By getting to know oneself to the point where one won't be compelled by one's unconscious to do all the ugly, absurd, self-stultifying things that one so often finds oneself doing. (Huxley 2005: 184)

Meditation enables the insights gained by the graces of psychedelic ecstasy to become habitual and allows one to develop self-knowledge about one's own unconscious drives and wishes. In a letter from 1959 he says: "Ethical and cognitive effort is needed if the experiencer is to go forward from his one-shot experience to permanent enlightenment" (Huxley 1999: 160). The psychedelic mystical experience is not an end in itself. To become an active contemplative, one has to stabilize the gained insights and let them permeate all of life. For this purpose, the intake of psychedelic substances has to be supplemented with regular practices that help to sacramentalize ordinary life, such as meditation (especially down-to-earth practices that habitualize what Huxley calls alertness, attention or awareness), ethical conduct, and the aspiration for a proper cognitive understanding of the world that we are living in and its relation to Ultimate Reality (see Huxley 1994: 26; Huxley 1999: 235).

Huxley was d'accord with William James' view that mystical experiences induced by psychoactive substances are not able to replace the dimensions of religious life developed within the religious traditions. But neither James nor Leuba considered the possibility of combining the use of drugs with a fully elaborate mystical religiosity. That was exactly Huxley's vision of a psychedelic culture that combines the occasional use of psychedelics with ethics, rituals such as rites of passage, meditation or sacramental sex and an elaborate worldview that integrates the mystic experiences in life.

in 1 Cor.12:8–10 (prophecy, speaking in tongues, grace of healing, discernment of spirits etc.) as classification of the gratuitous graces (*gratiae gratis datae*) in the sense of special charisms that are only given to certain persons mainly with the purpose to help others. Only a few theologians such as Antonius ab Annuntiatione (1634–1713) conceived of infused contemplation (gratuitous experiential and unitive knowledge of God) as a *gratia gratis data* as Huxley does. Most of them would say that it is a infusion of sanctifying grace (*gratia gratum faciens*) culminating in *visio beatifica* whereas the gratuitous graces are not sanctifying and do not prove the sanctity of those who receive them.

3.2 The Consummate Stage of Huxley's Psychedelic Mysticism

It is worth mentioning (particularly if one considers Zaehner's criticism of Huxley discussed below) that Huxley's psychedelic experience did not come to a standstill after his first experiment. In October 1955 Huxley had a second mescaline session guided by his future wife Laura Archera. (1911–2007) Soon after he sums up the outcome in a letter to the psychiatrist Humphry Osmond who had accompanied his first trip:

What came through the closed door was the realization [...] the direct, total awareness, from inside, so to say, of Love as the primary and fundamental cosmic fact. [...] The result was that I did not, as in the first experiment, feel cut off from the human world. I was intensely aware of it, but from the standpoint of the living, primordial cosmic fact of love. (Huxley 1999: 81)

He now perceived the impressions of the heavenly beauty of inanimate things that fascinated him so much during his first mescaline experience as mere temptations, "temptations to escape from the central reality into false, or at least imperfect and partial Nirvanas of beauty and mere knowledge" (ibid.). In a letter to Thomas Merton (1915–1968) from 1959 Huxley writes that he learned three things from his later experiments with *psychedelics*: gratitude for the privilege to be born into this universe, loss of the fear of death, the conviction that despite all evil everything is somehow all right, and the insight that God is Love (cf. ibid. 158–159). To remain in the pure white light of ecstatic consciousness that cuts the ecstatic off from love and work within this world ceased to be "the real thing" for him even while he was under the influence of psychedelics (cf. ibid. 222). The same light that appeared to him as Ultimate Reality itself on his first trip, he now ironically calls "the ultimate ice cube" referring to an aphorism of his wife Laura ("Don't try to make ice cubes out of a flowing river" cf. Huxley: 1999: 221). Again, what he experienced is based on an insight that Huxley had already gained years before. He had written about love as a personal aspect of God in *Perennial Philosophy* (cf. Huxley 2004: 21–24) where he also quoted 1 John 4: "God is love" (ibid. 80). At the end of the day he learnt two major things from his psychedelic experiences. Firstly, that there exists a danger of getting stuck in the contemplation of divine beauty present in all kinds of things (especially under the influence of mescaline) and that it is more enlightened to follow the flow of God's love and to stay in active contact with the human world as he had already outlined in *Perennial Philosophy*. Secondly, for Huxley the personal loving God became more important than the ineffable, immutable and attributeless Godhead.

3.3 Huxley's Filter Theory

Huxley and the other masterminds of PM thought that the Divine ground of being is present everywhere in each and every moment. Furthermore, they assumed that the experience of Divine Presence lies within the reach of every human being and that psychedelics are able to mediate it. Theories built on this foundation must face the question of why ordinary life is usually more or less disconnected from ultimate reality and why psychedelics are at least temporarily able to contribute to the removal of the causes of this disconnectedness. The answer of our psychedelic thinkers to this question lies in a filter theory of knowledge whose foundation was led by Huxley.⁴ As is well known, the title of Huxley's *Doors of Perception* quotes William Blake's (1757–1827) *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (written between 1790 and 1793). The aphorism from which it is taken also functions as motto of the whole book: "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite". Huxley's explanation of the effects of psychedelic drugs is an interpretation of this dictum. What pollutes the human mind are 'valves' that filter out every perception that does not contribute to our biological, social or economic survival. For Huxley, the biological basis of these filters consists of the brain and nervous system. He agrees with the Bergsonian theory that the average functioning of both is in the main eliminative. They do not produce consciousness but reduce it (cf. Huxley 1994: 11). Psychedelics temporarily widen or circumvent the biological filters for a certain time. As Jeffrey Kripal puts it:

He speculated that the main function of such chemicals is not to produce or cause something, but to *suppress, inhibit, or stop* something, namely the brain's basic utilitarian function as a filter or 'reducing valve' of consciousness. By doing so, such chemicals allow other forms of mind, which are probably always present, to rush in. The mescaline, then, is no biochemical cause. It is a trigger. It is *a door*. (Kripal 2014: 381, Kripal's emphasis)

In line with Charlie D. Broad (1887–1971), Huxley speculates that a "Mind at Large" exists whose content is the immediate and complete awareness of everything that is happening everywhere in the universe (cf. Huxley 1994: 13). Psychedelics thus are literarily "mind-revealing" substances. They reveal the hidden potential of the narrowed individual mind by opening it to an increased influx of "Mind at Large".

⁴ For his filter theory Huxley refers to the philosopher Charlie D. Broad who in turn refers to Henri Bergson. An earlier version of this theory has been developed by Frederic Myers and elaborated by William James. In recent times, the philosopher of religion and pluralist theologian John Hick represents a filter theory of religious and psychedelic experience very similar to Huxley's. (cf. Partridge 2005: 91, Kripal 2014: 379–383)

In addition to the biological filter, Huxley describes two kinds of socio-cultural filters (the way in which the three relate remaining somewhat obscure): 1. language and 2. patterns of perception produced within social institutions, religions and the economic system. The data of physiologically reduced awareness are further selected by "those symbol-systems and implicit philosophies that we call languages" (Huxley 1994: 12) Language expresses and petrifies the reduced awareness. Mystics as well as artists and visionaries "refuse to be enslaved to the culture-conditioned habits of feeling, thought and action" (Huxley 1999: 252). They know better than the rest of the world that "to be *fully* human, the individual must learn to decondition himself, must be able to cut holes in the fence for verbalized symbols that hems him in" (ibid. 253, Huxley's emphasis). As we will see below, Arthur J. Deikman (1929–2013) some years later introduced "deconditioning" as a key concept within meditation research and the study of mysticism. Huxley's skeptical attitude towards any kind of symbol systems and his preference of direct, intuitive perception fosters the anti-intellectualism of PM that was further supported by the anti-literary rhetoric of influential writers like Daisetz Suzuki (1870–1966) or the *brahmo samaj* type theory of intuitive experience as an immediate source of spiritual knowledge that was taught in the Vedanta Societies (see Anantanand 1994).

One of the main topics of Huxley's late utopian novel *Island* is the description of a third filter: patterns of perception, thought, emotional life and behavior imposed by what the counter-culture of the 60s would call "the establishment" or "the system": an alliance of domesticated people and restrictive social rules, greed-driven economics, aggressive military, stupid consumerism and narrow-minded religious traditions. These are the forces that in Huxley's novel finally destroy the ideal society of the island Pala together with its ritual use of psychedelics.⁵ With the critical analysis of the way in which this third filter spoils human experience the psychedelic agenda of deconditioning links up mysticism with social criticism, adding a political dimension to the psychedelic experiences that ecstatically transcend the borders of the socially hegemonic view of reality. The titles of Leary's and Laing's cult books *Politics of Ecstasy* and *Politics of Experience* indicate this context that to a certain extent made psychedelic mysticism compatible with New Left thought. The tensions between leftist political activism and the mystical aspirations of the psychedelic revolution that arose time and again were, as we saw, partially anticipated by Huxley's reflections on the relationship of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* with respect to psychedelic experiences.

⁵ The insights of Huxley's *Island* later motivated Timothy Leary and his group to experiment with new forms of communal living in order to find a congenial social setting for psychedelic mysticism (cf. Stevens: 1988: 185).

4 FILTER THEORIES AFTER HUXLEY

Filter theory became a fundamental concept of the psychedelic theory of mysticism. Even if not everyone shared Huxley's metaphysics of a time and space transcending "Mind at Large", it was common to think of mystical experience as a liberation from the filters that restrict the capacities of the human mind and that psychedelic substances on a physiological level open the doors to a deeper and more comprehensive perception of the universe and ultimate reality. Several variations of this model emerged that differed with respect to the conceptualization of the filters and to the interpretation of the mystical experience itself. Here, I can only mention three important examples.

How to change behavior, psychologist Timothy Leary's "first full-length article after his famous virginal experience with Mexican mushrooms in Guernavaca in August of 1960" (Penner 2014: 18) and thus his first major work on psychedelics, is based on a lecture delivered at the International Congress of Applied Psychology in Copenhagen in 1961, that he attended together with Aldous Huxley, whom he had met a few months earlier.⁶ In this article Leary elaborates Huxley's filter theory. According to Leary, most of human life is determined by learned cultural sequences of behavior. Influenced by transactional analysis, he calls these sequences games. Leary explicitly connects his game concept to Huxley's filter theory. "All learned games of life can be seen as programs which select, censor, alert and thus drastically limit the available cortical response (Mr. Aldous Huxley's reducing valves)" (Leary 2014: 29). With his analysis of the different factors that characterize a game, a way opens to a broadened and refined analysis of socio-cultural filters and of how they work in daily life, each game with its own roles, rules, goals, rituals, jargon and values.

The nationality game. It is treason not to play. The racial game. The religious game. And that most treacherous and tragic game of all, the game of individuality, the ego game. The Timothy Leary game. Ridiculous how we confuse this game, overplay it. Our own mystics and the Eastern philosophers have been warning us about this danger since centuries. (Leary 2014: 24)

Leary underlines that he doesn't aim at ridiculing all cultural achievements by calling them games. "The science game, the healing game, the knowledge game

6 The lecture was first published in the proceedings of the conference in 1962. It was republished in the first popular anthology on LSD, *LSD: The Consciousness-Expanding Drug* edited by David Salomon in 1964. Here it is quoted from the edition of Leary's early writings by Penner 2014. Leary had enthusiastically read Huxley's *Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell* in autumn 1960. Soon after they met, he invited Huxley to participate in his Harvard Psilocybin Project that had just gotten underway. Huxley agreed.

are magnificent human structures. [...] But they are great only as long as they are seen as game".⁷ He combines his approach with an orientalist view of the mystical East versus the stubborn, rationalistic Western society that is not able to see through its games. Whereas Eastern people would be well aware of the games of Western science, culture and religion that are in general dominated by "little ego games", the Westerners have difficulties seeing the artificiality of them. "How can we learn the lesson?" Leary asks. And, not surprisingly, his answer is: through psychedelic mystic experience.

The process of getting beyond the game structure, beyond the subject-object commitments, the dualities – this process is called the mystic experience. The visionary experience is the nongame, the metagame experience. (Ibid. 27)

The use of consciousness-expanding drugs would be the most effective way to transcend the game structure of Western culture and thus be able to see and appreciate the games as games (ibid. 28). Whereas in Huxley's writings the peak of psychedelic experience is an encounter with God in the sense of a transcendent and at the same time immanent ultimate reality in Leary's case this is different. In *Psychedelic Experience* he and his collaborators interpret psychedelic ecstasy as realization of "the Void" or "the Clear Light" mentioned in the Tibetan *Bardo Thödol*. For them, the experience of this Void is the awareness of the vibrant unformed matter out of which the cosmos evolved. (cf. Leary & Metzner & Alpert 1964: 36, footnote).

In a contribution on *Experimental Meditation* (1963) and especially in his 1966 article *Deautomatization and the Mystic experience* (cf. Deikman 1980), psychiatrist and proponent of the Human Potential movement Arthur J. Deikman (1929–2013) develops a theory that very much resembles Huxley's and Leary's filter theories and translates them into a program of empirical meditation research.⁸ Psychedelics were not Deikman's central research topic. From the very beginning, his approach to the study of mysticism was the empirical investigation of the effects of meditation (cf. Deikman 1963). Timothy Leary, who had heard about his meditation research, invited him to his community in Millbrook, and

7 Leary 2014: 25. Nevertheless, Leary radicalised his game talk in the course of the 60s. He then urgently appealed to his young audience to leave the illusionary game existence completely (including superficial bubbles like university studies, labour, family) and to tune into the ecstatic life of the psychedelic counterculture.

8 Huxley's late article *Culture and the Individual* (Huxley 1999: 247–256), first published in 1963, is very much akin to Deikman's approach. In it Huxley advocates psychedelics and the training of "mental silence and pure receptivity" as means to "decondition" oneself from "verbalized conceptual thinking". He also calls for empirical investigations. "Experiment can give us the answer, for the dream is pragmatic; the utopian hypotheses can be tested empirically". (Huxley 1999: 256)

after meeting Leary he decided to take part in a research program on LSD in Menlo-Park (cf. Futcher 2006). He gained practical experience with psychedelics, studied and sampled psychedelic phenomena.

Deikman describes daily life consciousness as dominated by attentional, perceptive and cognitive automatisms that select and interpret and thereby organize human experience. They efficiently serve the goal of achieving biological survival as an organism and psychological survival in the sense of the conservation of certain boundaries defining the self. On the other hand, they constrict human thinking and erect defenses against the unknown and the transcendence of the conventional self. The “receptive perceptual mode” of mystic experience is by contrast a state of consciousness that is able to bring about a deautomatization.

Under special conditions of dysfunction, such as in acute psychosis or in LSD states, or under special goal conditions such as exist in religious mystics, the pragmatic systems of automatic selection are set aside or break down, in favor of alternate modes of consciousness [...] whose very inefficiency may permit the experience of aspects of the real world formerly excluded or ignored. (Deikman 2014: 249)

Deikman was surely one of the most clear-minded, sober and yet personally involved researchers of altered states of consciousness in those days. In 1967, the year of the summer of love craze and of psychedelia definitely gaining the status of a global pop-cultural phenomenon, he published a unique statement on *The overestimation of mystical experience* (cf. *ibid.* 279–284), unique because hardly any researcher of mysticism would have thought that it was possible to overestimate the relevance of this phenomenon that was widely accepted as the heart of all religion and source of deepest insights. In this contribution he sums up the achievements of Walter N. Pahnke’s (1931–1971) research with respect to effects of psychedelic substances and mystical experience (for Pahnke see below). He then asserts that for him the religious relevance of psychedelic drugs lies in their capacity to produce mystical experiences “even among persons with no particular expectations of that sort and in quite non-theological settings” (*ibid.* 280). In the light of the psychedelic popularization of mystical experience Deikman considers the overestimation of mystical experience by Pahnke and other investigators to be a serious problem. Already in his earlier works he was cautious about the claim that altered states of consciousness are capable of opening the doors to higher knowledge about the real world. Of course, he supported the filter theory and the concept of mind expansion especially with regard to sensory perception in meditation and psychedelic experience. But he saw that the deautomatization process is not a pure opening but also produces deceptive perceptual modes like sensory translation (the perception of psychic activities as sensations of light, color, sound, movement etc.) and reality transfer (transfer of the quality of realness from objects to thoughts and feelings). Now he discloses that further research on meditation and the clarification of his own mystic motivation in personal psychoanalysis

led him to enhanced respect for the normal functioning of the human mind as well as to enhanced respect for the human capacity and motivation for self-deception (cf. *ibid.* 281). In a downright satirical manner he discusses several possible answers to the question “Do psychedelic drugs have any usefulness for religions?” and rejects all of them. Deikman’s conclusion: one should not strive for mystical experiences as an aim, either by taking drugs or by meditation.

The forging of human love and human work is the labor of life. In the forging of that life, in its human passion and fallibility, mystical experiences will be found. They will appear – mysterious, joyous and sweet – unsought for and unexpected. (*Ibid.* 284)

Like Deikman, Ronald D. Laing (1927–1989) was a psychiatrist and, moreover, one of the most influential and controversial representatives of this profession in the last century. His first experience with LSD in 1960 deeply impressed him and soon after he started to use it for therapeutic purposes. “Laing remained a staunch advocate of the personal and professional use of LSD to his death, his writings making considerable impact on the Sixties and Seventies counter-culture” (Roberts 2012: 39). In 1964 he met Timothy Leary and became friends with him. In his published writings he almost never directly refers to psychedelics or the masterminds of PM. Nevertheless, the core of his thought springs from the psychedelic matrix and enriches it with new elements from advanced psychiatric theory, C. G. Jung (1875–1961), existentialism, and the gloomy vision of the capitalistic world developed by New Left thinkers like Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979).

Similar to Leary, he deeply distrusted normality and portrayed it as a state of deep alienation and hidden madness.

The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one’s mind, is the condition of the normal man. Society highly values the normal man. It educates children to lose themselves and to become absurd, and thus be normal. (Laing 1990: 24)

He saw normality, especially in modern societies, as built upon the devastation of experience by means of what in Psychoanalysis is known as defense mechanisms. “What we call ‘normal’ is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action on experience” (*ibid.* 23–24). It was one of Laing’s theoretical innovations to conceive of these defenses not only as intrapersonal but as interpersonal, or as he puts it, “transpersonal”. He understands them as ways in which persons exercise control and power over one another’s experience. “These ‘defences’ are action on oneself. But ‘defences’ are not only intrapersonal, they are *transpersonal*. I act not only on myself, I can act upon you. And you act not only on yourself, you act upon me. In each case, on *experience*” (*ibid.* 31, Laing’s emphasis). Laing’s transpersonal defences fulfil the same function as Huxley’s filter and Leary’s games. They weave the net of Maya that conceals reality. Laing introduced interpersonal perception and behavior into

the psychedelic filter theory and thus overcame the simplistic mechanic imagery of “valves” and “filters” and the neglect of interpersonal dynamics within the game theories of Leary and others.

For Laing, the alienation within modern societies has a religious dimension. It comprises a deep estrangement from the “inner world” with its demons and angels and the mysterious ground of being that Laing – probably following Leary – calls “the Void”: “The outer divorced from any illumination from the inner is in a state of darkness. We are in a stage of darkness. The stage of outer darkness is a state of sin – i. e. alienation or estrangement from the *inner light*” (ibid. 116–117, Laing’s emphasis). The intake of psychedelic substances as well as certain psychotic states reopen the inner world and (especially with the help of experienced guides) can lead to a mystic death and rebirth.

True sanity entails in one way or another the dissolution of the normal ego, that false self completely adjusted to our alienated social reality: the emergence of the ‘inner’ archetypal mediators of divine power, and through this death a rebirth, and the eventual re-establishment of a new kind of ego-functioning, the ego now being the servant of the divine, no longer its betrayer. (Ibid. 119)

Not only terms like “ego death” and “the Void”, Laing’s whole concept of the journey into the inner world is reminiscent of the model of psychedelic sessions described in the manual *Psychedelic Experience* written by Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner (*1936) and Richard Alpert (*1931) and published in 1964.

5 ZAEHNER’S ANTITHESIS

Robert C. Zaehner’s (1913–1974) *Mysticism. Sacred and Profane* (1957) is one of the most widely read comparative studies of mysticism. Furthermore, and this is crucial for our topic: it is a book written against Huxley’s psychedelic perennialism. In the introductory chapter Zaehner emphasizes:

It should be said at the outset that this book owes its genesis to Mr. Aldous Huxley. Had *The Doors of Perception* never been published, it is extremely doubtful whether the present author would have been rash enough to enter the field of comparative mysticism. (Zaehner 1967: ix)

For Zaehner, Huxley’s psychedelic mysticism implies two major challenges, a social and a theological one. It is a social danger insofar as in Zaehner’s eyes Huxley wants everyone’s life to be dominated by the kind of altered states of mind that he described in *The Doors of Perception*. Therefore, he asks the question: How could a society consisting exclusively of ecstatic mystics be run? (cf. Zaehner 1967: 13). After what has already been said about Huxley’s worldview, this objection is pointless because Huxley himself addressed the limits of his first

mescaline experience. If one looks at the amount of drop-outs following a trivialized form of psychedelic mysticism during the hippie era, his concern is not so far-fetched.

His theological problem is at the same time a moral one. The identification of drug-induced experiences and “the ecstasies of persons of heroic sanctity” (ibid. 19) gained after long and intense religious practice is a danger for any religion that wants to be taken seriously. Writing from a Catholic point of view, he especially sees that Huxley challenges the Catholic concept of the grace of *visio beatifica* as meditated through the sacraments of the Church and as a “reward for earnest striving after good” (see ibid. 13) i. e. presupposing moral discipline. Again, Huxley clearly saw the problem. He wanted to integrate psychedelic mysticism in a religious worldview and lifestyle and limited the use of psychedelics to special occasions and rituals. On the other hand the psychedelic culture of the 60s with its mix of hedonism, unrestrained drug consumerism and boastful mystical phrases demonstrates what might have worried Zaehner.

He developed his theory of mysticism mainly to tackle the second problem. As usual with antitheses, his position is in several ways dependent on Huxley and has a lot in common with his view. For Zaehner and Huxley mysticism transcends sense perception, discursive thought and the multiplicity of the world as it is usually known. Both think that mystic experiences, as close to madness as they might sometimes be, reveal reality. And both advocate a perennialist position supposing that identical mystic experiences are common to all cultures, religious traditions and periods of history.

What Zaehner criticizes is the claim that these experiences are always and everywhere of one and the same kind. He distinguishes between three different universal types. Furthermore, whereas for Huxley mysticism is anthropologically based upon the principal desire of human beings to transcend themselves, Zaehner differentiates between two primary instincts that alternately dominate the different types of mysticism: self-preservation (concerned with maintaining individual life) and sexual instinct in the widest sense (concerned with merging into a greater whole). “The equivalent of both instincts can be found in the varieties of mystical experience and mystical theory” (ibid. 142). For him, the common denominator of all three types is the experience of unity. “Mysticism is the realization of unity” (ibid. 144). An emphatic state of unity that transcends daily life is the transhistorical structure common to all forms of mysticism. They differ with respect to what or whom the mystic becomes united with. One could call his position a plural core perennialism. Moreover, Zaehner constructs the relationship between the three as a mystic ladder from lower to higher forms of unity and thus as a model of the mystical path. The types describe “the normal progress of the mystic from ordinary ego-consciousness to ‘deification’” (ibid. 150).

Table 1: The three types of mysticism according to Robert C. Zaehner

Type of mysticism	Union with	Dominant instinct	Developmental stage and related experiences
Nature Mysticism	Nature	Sexual instinct (urge to merge into a larger whole)	Experience of All-oneness through merging of the ego with the collective unconscious (cosmic mind/life force) Highest stage: integration of consciousness and unconscious, nature mysticism controlled by the intellect, emergence of the self, beginning of isolation mysticism
Isolation Mysticism	one's own immortal Self (soul)	Self-preservation (urge to maintain individual life)	Total detachment from all worldly things and desires, loss of ego, transcendence of time and space, highest bliss reachable in isolation from God
Theistic Mysticism	God	Sexual instinct	Loving communion with God, annihilation of the self, deification by the descent of the Holy Spirit

The differentiation between three basic types of mysticism allows Zaehner to acknowledge that Huxley's psychedelic mysticism is based on a real mystic experience. Although not completely illusory it is yet far from reaching the highest possible unity that he identifies as loving union with a personal and transcendent God in Christianity and other religions. For our topic Zaehner's lowest level is most important because he classifies the psychedelic experience described in *Doors of Perception* as nature mysticism. Zaehner constructs this type as an experience of a deeper and more intimate unity in Nature than is normally perceptible, accompanied by "a glimpse of the workings of nature as a whole" (ibid. 99). The reports of nature mystics would describe a rapport between the mystics and a kind of "cosmic consciousness" that precedes individual consciousness, and might be called unconscious because normal consciousness (especially in the West) is disconnected from it (see ibid. 125). It is a kind of mind that is more than mere consciousness but something in-between mind and matter as it also functions as life force, energy, libido or *élan vital* that keeps the whole universe in being and animates it. This life force has the power to produce a sympathetic reaction in the human mind (see ibid. 48). Zaehner identifies it with C. G. Jung's collective unconscious, James' "subliminal and transmarginal region" and Huxley's "Mind at Large" (see ibid. 43). Additionally, he sees significant convergences with the South Asian concepts of *prāṇa* (ibid. 44), *kuṇḍalinī* (ibid. 97) or *buddhi* in Samkhya philosophy (ibid. 108). At one point Zaehner leaves open the question if such an entity really exists (ibid. 108), but his whole argument seems to work on the basis that it actually does and that its existence explains the phenomena of natural mysticism.

The difference between madness and nature mysticism "is only one of degree, not of kind". (ibid. 89) The experience of union with the cosmic life force is "if not identical with the 'manic' state, in manic-depressive psychosis, then at least it is its second cousin" (ibid. 106). He explains it with Jung as an uprush from the collective unconscious in which reason is temporarily submerged and "irrational forces from the unconscious take charge" (ibid. 106). With regard to Huxley the case for Zaehner is pretty clear. He "refuses to face the fact that what he calls religion is simply another word for the manic-depressive psychosis" (ibid. 88).

The immersion into collective unconscious in the sense of the hidden world soul nevertheless can also be a first step toward healing and the higher forms of mysticism. But to develop this positive capacity more effort is needed than a single dose of mescaline, as Zaehner emphasizes. Commenting on a passage in James' *Varieties* where James sums up his experiences with nitrous oxide as reconciliation of opposites, he states:

Now, this is very strange; for if Jung is right, and a complete personality round what he calls the 'self' is the *summum bonum* that psychology has to offer, then, it would appear, such a state can be attained, at least momentarily, by the use of drugs. This does indeed seem to be true; but it must be

remembered that the integration of the personality which many of Jung's patients have achieved [...] is a radical reorganization of the psyche, which produces permanent results. The same result can be achieved in more violent form by the taking of drugs, or indeed in mania, but such states are only temporary, and for that reason can only in the long run lead to further disorder. (Ibid. 110)

Psychedelic mysticism is thus a distorted form of nature mysticism that is not able to use its evolutionary potential and proceed on the ladder that leads to union with God and the deification of the soul.

6 PAHNKE'S GOOD FRIDAY EXPERIMENT AND THE INFLUENCE OF WALTER T. STACE

Timothy Leary's infamous Harvard Psilocybin Project (1960–1962) was the most prominent interface between the emerging psychedelic movement and academia. From the very beginning tensions arose between the challenge of performing high-quality research on the one hand and the countercultural agenda and personal advocacy of psychedelics by its leading members on the other. As is well known, the whole project came to an end when Harvard University fired both Leary and Richard Alpert.

The most thorough subproject within the Harvard Psilocybin Project was the so-called Good Friday (or: Marsh Chapel) Experiment designed by Harvard Divinity school graduate Walter N. Pahnke (a minister and physician) and his related dissertation on *Drugs and Mysticism* (Pahnke 1963) – both seminal contributions to the empirical study of mysticism and the relationship between mysticism and psychedelic experiences. Pahnke's work is one of the most famous and controversial studies in the psychology of religion and especially in the empirical study of mystic experiences. Later it came to influence mysticism scales and questionnaires (see Hood et al. 1996: 256–257).

As far as I know, he was the first researcher who operationalized criteria developed by the academic study of mysticism for empirical research. Earlier works on psychedelic mysticism already included Huxley-style reports about (self-) experiments (e.g., Watts 1962) but on a low methodological level far below the standards of academic empirical research. Psycho-pharmacological research on the effects of the intake of psychedelics already had, of course, a longer tradition, beginning with Kurt Beringer's (1893–1949) famous 1920s study on mescaline (Beringer 1927) and the experiments of Humphry Osmond, John Smythies (1922–2019) and Abram Hoffer (1917–2009) in the late 1940s and early 1950s (cf. Dyck 2008) to the LSD experiments of the CIA, the US and British army in the late 1950s (also a period of intense research on the use of psychedelics in psychother-

apy) and leading on to Karl Leuner's (1919–1996) psychiatric research (Leuner 1962).

Pahnke primarily used Walter T. Stace's (1886–1967) *Mysticism and Philosophy* (1961) as theoretical background. Stace's work was an important milestone for moderate common-core perennialism with regard to the level of methodology and philosophical argumentation. Pahnke adopted four central points from Stace:

1. In line with the moderate perennialist approach Stace assumes that

there are certain fundamental characteristics of the experience itself which are universal and are not restricted to any particular religion or culture, although particular cultural, historical and religious conditions may influence both the understanding and the description of the essential mystical experience. (Stace 1961: 27)

2. In order to extract the common core of all mystical experiences, he (and with him Pahnke) distinguishes between primary experience and interpretation. He points out that in this respect sense perception and mystical experience are equal.

It is probably impossible in both cases to isolate 'pure experience'. Yet, although we may never be able to find sense experience completely free of interpretation, it can hardly be doubted that a sensation is one thing and its conceptual interpretation another thing. That is to say, that they are distinguishable though not completely separable. (Ibid. 31)

3. Pahnke also takes the "principle of causal indifference" from Stace (cf. Pahnke 1963: 22). Stace formulated this maxim in response to Zaehner and others who thought that psychedelic experiences per se do not deserve to be considered as full-fledged mysticism. He argued that investigators of mysticism should take seriously any eligible phenomenon regardless of its cause. The principle of causal indifference, he says,

is introduced here because it is sometimes asserted that mystical experiences can be induced by drugs, such as mescaline, lysergic acid, etc. On the other hand, those who have achieved mystical states as a result of long and arduous spiritual exercises, fasting and prayer, or great moral efforts, possibly spread over many years, are inclined to deny that a drug can induce a 'genuine' mystical experience, or at least to look askance at such practices and such a claim. Our principle says that *if* the phenomenological descriptions of the two experiences are indistinguishable, so far as can be ascertained, then it cannot be denied that if one is a genuine mystical experience the other is also. (Stace 1961: 29–30)

4. Consistently, he included the report of a mescaline experience as a duly qualified example of extrovertive mysticism in his study (cf. *ibid.* 71–77). Of

course, his plea to integrate psychedelic experiences in mysticism research was a most welcome support for Pahnke's project.

5. Pahnke uses a slightly modified and expanded version of Stace's list of universal characteristics of mystic experience as a tool for evaluating empirical data from the psilocybin experiences. Both conceive the most basic quality of all mystical experience very much like Zaehner as a "perception of, and union with a Unity or One" (Stace 1961: 62). Following Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), Stace differentiates between two basic forms of mysticism. Extrovertive mysticism perceives the One through the physical senses as being present within all things. Introvertive mysticism is the realization of a unitary consciousness without any empirical content, the experience of "a void and empty unity" (ibid. 110). Both forms differ substantially but they are not mutually exclusive and may be experienced by the same person in different situations. Stace's extrovertive mysticism is comparable to Zaehner's nature mysticism while his introvertive mysticism resembles Zaehner's isolation- and theistic mysticism. But unlike Zaehner, he does not restrict extrovertive mysticism to a profane experience of the unity of nature but understands it as a perception of the same ultimate reality that is experienced in introvertive mysticism (cf. ibid. 62). "The mystics themselves take it for granted that the One which is disclosed in the introvertive experience is identical with the One which is disclosed in the extrovertive experience" (ibid. 133). Only the mode, not the content of experience differs. Both types of mysticism share several characteristics: "sense of objectivity or reality", "blessedness, peace, etc.", "feeling of the holy, sacred, or divine", "paradoxality" and "ineffability". Like Zaehner, Stace constructs a hierarchy between the basic forms of mysticism. The extrovertive type is of a lower level, "that is to say, it is an incomplete kind of experience which finds its completion and fulfilment in the introvertive kind of experience" (ibid. 132). One could call this a pluralizing common core perennialism, situated somewhere between Huxley and Zaehner. The common core of all mysticism can be experienced in at least two substantially different hierarchically structured levels.

Whether both forms of mysticism refer to the same kind of Unity and one of them is more complete than the other was not relevant for Pahnke's project design and research goals. He does not comment on these questions and simply treats introvertive and extrovertive mysticism as equally relevant modes of mystic experience.

Table 2: Characteristics of mystical experience according to Pahnke *Drugs and Mysticism* (1963) compared with Stace *Mysticism and Philosophy* (1961)

Characteristics of mystical experience according to Pahnke compared with Stace	
Pahnke	Relation to Stace
1. Unity a. external b. internal	Identical with Stace 1.a.: Unifying Vision (extrovertive mysticism) and Stace 1.b.: Unitary Consciousness (introvertive mysticism)
2. Transcendence of Time and Space	Identical with Stace 2.b: introvertive mysticism
3. Deeply felt positive mood	Similar to Stace 4.
4. Sense of Sacredness	Identical with Stace 5
5. Objectivity and Reality	Identical with Stace 3
6. Paradoxality	Identical with Stace 6.
7. Alleged Ineffability	Identical with Stace 7
8. Transiency	New
9. Persisting positive Changes in Attitude and/or Behavior	New

So much for Pahnke's theoretical framework. On Good Friday, 1962, in a double-blind study with 20 volunteers he administered psilocybin to ten theology students (experimental group) and nicotinic acid to ten others (placebo group). Each group had two assigned leaders, one of whom had been given psilocybin. During the experiment the participants stayed in a small prayer chapel and connected rooms

where they could listen to a broadcast of the Good Friday service upstairs in the main sanctuary of Boston University's Marsh Chapel. Immediately after the experiment the participants described their experiments on a tape recorder. During the days following the experiment each one completed a 147-item questionnaire and wrote a description of his experience. Part of the original experiment was a sixth-month follow-up comprising the completion of a follow-up questionnaire and an interview. Eventually, sixteen subjects participated in it.

Pahnke sums up the results of the experiments:

With the exception of sense of sacredness the combined scores of all items in every category were significantly higher for the experimentals than for the controls [...] The conclusion from these data is that the persons who received psilocybin experienced to a greater extent than did the controls the phenomena described by our typology of mysticism. (Pahnke 1963: 220)

All of those persons who received psilocybin experienced at least some phenomena that were indistinguishable from certain criteria from Pahnke's mysticism scale. "Not all categories were experienced in the most complete way possible, although there was evidence that each category had been experienced to some degree" (ibid. 234). Thus, the experiment strongly suggested that under the described conditions psilocybin can induce mystical states of consciousness. Nine out of ten members of the experimental group thought that their experience was significant and worth being repeated. "The tenth experimental subject had what he termed an interesting 'psychological' and 'aesthetic' experience for the first three-fourth of his experience, but then became frightened by loss of control and spent the remaining time in a terrifying fight to overcome the drug effects" (ibid. 231).

Persisting positive changes are an important mark of authentic mystic experience for Pahnke. "Positive effects of the mystical experience in the life and personality of the experiencer is the criterion of whether or not to call the experience truly mystical by many commentators and also by mystics themselves" (ibid. 77). Therefore, he added this criterion to his list of characteristics of mystical experience and integrated the follow up into his experiment. The evaluation of the follow up confirmed the hypothesis that the persons who received psilocybin had real mystical experiences.

After six months the changes with the highest scores were all positive, and the experimental subjects attributed these changes to the drug experiences. These data have indicated that although the psilocybin experience was quite unique and different from the 'ordinary' reality of their everyday lives, the subjects felt that this experience enabled them to appreciate more deeply the meaning of their lives, to gain more depth and authenticity in ordinary living, and to rethink their philosophies of life and values. The

data did not suggest that any 'ultimate' reality experienced was so wonderful that 'ordinary' reality was no longer important or meaningful. Each person who received psilocybin was motivated to integrate constructively what he had learned from his experience into his life-situation in his own way. (Ibid. 238)

Pahnke emphasizes that the intake of the psychedelic substance alone is not sufficient and positive experiences are in no way automatic.

A meaningful religious atmosphere has been shown to be one setting in which positive drug experiences can occur. The religious context in our experiment appeared to give the psilocybin subjects a useful framework within which to derive meaning and integration from their experience both at the time and later. (Ibid. 241)

Earlier, Ron Hubbard and others who experimented with the therapeutic use of psychedelics had already started to create that kind of atmosphere by using sacral music and art within the sessions. In *The Psychedelic Experience*, the first book that Leary and his collaborators published after Leary and Alpert had left Harvard, the psychedelic session was deliberately shaped as a ritual of mystic death and rebirth.

In 1991 Rick Doblin published a long-term follow-up study and methodological critique of Pahnke's experiment (see Doblin 1991). More than two decades after the experiment, Doblin managed to identify and locate 19 of the 20 original participants. Sixteen of them he interviewed, and he re-administered the original follow-up questionnaire to those who participated in the first follow-up.

Each of the psilocybin subjects had vivid memories of portions of their Good Friday experience. For most this was their life's only psychedelic experience [...] The 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. (Doblin 1991: 23)

Methodologically, Doblin's main critical points are that some of the questions of Pahnke's questionnaires were formulated too vaguely and that the double blind was broken as soon as the effects of psilocybin deepened. He found out that Pahnke failed to report that a tranquilizer had been administered to a person who had received psilocybin and that he downplayed the psychological difficulties that most of the psilocybin subjects experienced. It was due to these omissions that scholarly reports and newspaper articles about the experiment belittled the frightening effects of psilocybin and thus fostered its unmindful use. According to Doblin, despite these flaws Pahnke's study has to be taken seriously and the long-term follow up strengthened Pahnke's claim that under conducive circumstances psychedelics may occasion experiences that are equal to non-drug mystical expe-

riences with regard to their content and long-term effects. In 2005 Roland R. Griffiths followed Doblin's call for additional studies and published an improved version of the Good Friday experiment that again affirmed Pahnke's results (cf. Griffiths 2006).

7 THE SYNOPSIS AND SWANSONG OF AN ERA: FRITS STAAL'S *EXPLORING MYSTICISM* (1975)

Frits Staal (1930–2012) was a Dutch philosopher and indologist. In the 1960s he taught at the University of Amsterdam and from 1968 to 1990 he was professor for philosophy and South-Asian languages at the University of California, Berkeley. This inevitably brought him into contact with the political and psychedelic campus cultures of the 60s and 70s. Staal shares the psychedelic pathos of breaking through into unknown territories of inner space: "We are beginning to explore a domain of the mind that appears to be as vast, varied, and intricate as many of the areas of physics" (Staal 1975: 150). Furthermore, he identifies himself with the anti-dogmatic and anti-institutional attitude of the counterculture. In a typical manner he portrays the mystics as people who distance themselves from the society they are living in. "Most mystics are drop-outs. Social reformers therefore tend to look upon mysticism as a form of egoism and escapism" (ibid. 98). For the constructive social implications that mysticism nevertheless can have, he refers to the social dynamics of late 1960s counterculture. "Social reformers, anarchists, and mystics can meet in anti-establishment enterprises which, in contemporary society, resemble the uneasy alliances between social activists and hippies on university campuses" (ibid.). The opposite side of the religious spectrum represented in *Exploring Mysticism* consists of the hegemonic religions that are criticized for their conservatism that neglects the mystic dimension.

It is not surprising that the religious use of drugs has not met with the approval of religious establishments. Institutionalized religions are not so much concerned with the religious or mystical experience of individuals, as with society, ethics, morality, and the continuation of the *status quo*. (Ibid. 165)

In between hegemonic institutionalized religion and the individualistic mystic dropouts Staal places another social form of religion: mystical religion. It focuses on methods to attain and cultivate mystic experiences and is not so much interested in complex interpretations that introduce a lot of cultural presuppositions and historical contexts. The student of mysticism needs the training offered within the schools of mystic religion that in Staal's view resemble modern research institutions. "Yoga, with its amplification of methods and poverty of superstructure, provides excellent laboratories and testing grounds" (ibid. 180). Although gener-

ally striving to overcome Orientalist stereotypes he constructs an opposition between Western dogmatic religion (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, ibid. 20) and Far-Eastern mystical religion (Buddhism, Hinduism, cf. ibid. 139) or the drug-using form of shamanism that he found in Castaneda's works. Furthermore, he downplays the fact that the so-called mystics are usually embedded within institutionalized religions and their historical contexts.

On the other hand, he is, of course, not a naïve adherent of a countercultural worldview and criticizes a hippie-like anti-scientific exoticism.

Those who have had enough of science and rationality, and also of the Christian establishment, look at exotic repositories of the irrational; the Oriental religions and cults seem to meet such a description very well. Only if we look closely do we find something different. (Ibid. 31)

For him South Asian mystic religions are not irrational but quite rational explorations of mystic experience that foreshadow a holistic scientific psychology that eventually may replace the traditional religions.

The religions of India provide the materials which one day may show that religion can be studied as a branch of psychology – a psychology, of course, which is an integrated science of the mind, the soul, and the spirit, not just a discipline that confines itself to experimentation with a small selection of mental phenomena. (Ibid. 194)

In 1975, when he published his work on mysticism research, PM had already passed its peak. All around the world psychedelics had become illegal. New religious movements were spreading within the counterculture. Staal reflects these trends and defends the psychedelic research agenda and psychedelic culture in general.⁹

Many young people, after experimenting with drugs, experiment with meditation, and those who find meditation more 'satisfying' adopt a guru or join a movement. Of those others who prefer drugs we do not hear in the same context. But the fact that there are converts from drugs who are rehabilitated by meditational practices is in due course exploited by the proponents and missionaries of the various cults in their efforts to appear useful and respectable in the eyes of the establishment. (Ibid. 97)

As Staal rightly points out, insider reports about this kind of conversions have nothing to do with a scientific evaluation of the relation between drug effects and meditation experiences. Only further research, he claims, would be able to clarify this. With regard to earlier psychedelic studies he appreciates Gordon Wasson for

⁹ Staal advocates the legalization of psychedelics for research issues as well as for private use (cf. Staal 1975: 188).

having highlighted the importance of psychedelics in the history of religion and Huxley for having drawn attention to the similarities between mysticism and drug experiences (cf. *ibid.* 156).¹⁰ Staal finds Huxley's speculations often reasonable and suggestive. He wishes that the experts would take him more seriously as Zaehner did (cf. *ibid.* 186). Similar to Deikman he neither follows Huxley's theory of Mind at Large nor the opposite stance that totally denies the possibility that psychedelics may enable deeper insights into reality.

It is not improbable that the truth lies somewhere in-between, and that drugs in some respect widen, and in others narrow, the mind. This could mean that at the same time that they give access to certain features or areas of reality, while obscuring others.¹¹ (*Ibid.* 186–187)

Staal accuses Leary and Alpert for having ceased to be rational explorers and having become preachers instead. "What Leary and Alpert might be criticized for is not that they experimented with drugs, but that they did not provide critical evaluations of their discoveries. They seemed to have lost their rational mind, and founded instead a religious sect" (*ibid.* 188). In contrast to the euphoric psychedelic masterminds he presents himself as a modest kind of researcher who is aware of the limitations of our knowledge concerning the meaning of mystic experiences and the relations between drug-induced experiences and states of mind brought about by meditation and other religious exercises (cf. *ibid.* 167). Thus, Staal reformulates some of the basic convictions of the psychedelic movement concerning these topics as mere hypotheses and suggests a certain method to check them. According to him at the present time the academic research of mysticism is not even developed enough to provide a valid definition of mysticism. He uses the term intuitively where it seems appropriate (cf. *ibid.* 9). A closer analysis of his book of course reveals a certain concept of mysticism at work within Staal's intuitive usage.

Mysticism is primarily something like "entering a mental state or like gaining access to a domain of the brain" (*ibid.* 169). It deals with states of consciousness differing from the ordinary waking state but probably historically and psychologically more basic than what we call normal daily life consciousness (cf. *ibid.* 57). These altered states of mind possibly possess "connections with other areas of

¹⁰ He erroneously assumes that Huxley was the first contemporary author who pointed to their relatedness (cf. *ibid.* 161).

¹¹ Huxley's reflections on negative psychedelic experiences and schizophrenia already point in this direction. He explains bad trips as well as psychosis as miscarried mystic experience based on a clash between "man's egotism and the divine purity, man's self-aggravated separateness and the infinity of God" (cf. Huxley 1994: 37). His distinction between contemplation at its height and in its fullness also indicates that psychedelic experience not only reveals but also conceals reality.

reality, about which little intelligible and reliable information is at present available" (*ibid.* 195).

For Staal, the differentiation between the diverse world of appearances and an underlying reality is a universal mark of mysticism. "All mystics assert that there is something real which lies beyond the appearances and which is not something experienced under normal circumstances" (*ibid.* 54). Again, the topos of the experience of a Unity as foundation of the phenomenal world functions as an essential characteristic of mysticism.

For Staal the mystic states of mind need not have anything to do with the realm of the divine, but at least "tend to lead to religious beliefs or the belief in Gods" (*ibid.* 198). In line with the psychologization of religion that one can observe throughout his book he sympathizes with Hindu interpretations of Gods as mental forces (cf. *ibid.* 194) and assumes "that devotion to a deity may be regarded as another inducement producing a mystical state" (*ibid.* 195). In any case mystic experiences seem to manifest a property of the mind that is "independent of previous conditioning of any kind" (*ibid.* 180). Staal shares the concept of an unconditioned state of mind beyond cultural and historical influences with the authors addressed in this article and other perennialists like e. g., Ninian Smart (1927–2001) (cf. Smart 1983). Consistently, he thinks that an ahistorical structural approach to the phenomena of mysticism is most appropriate.

Not only do the mystics claim that their experiences are timeless and inexpressible, but we know for certain that mystical experiences in very similar forms are found throughout history and all over the world, and that many mystics are careless about language and not interested in texts. Whatever it is, mysticism is mainly concerned with something quite different from whatever can be learned from the study of texts and history. (*Ibid.* 74–75)

He criticizes an "armchair approach" (cf. *ibid.* 156) towards mysticism and opts for investigations that are theoretical as well as experimental. The student of mysticism should "among other things, engage in meditation and experiment with drugs just as any investigator of vision would freely use an innate ability to see together with any available technical improvements" (*ibid.* xxi). The turn from texts and history towards practices of mind-expansion, first-hand experiences and the universal mental structure that manifests itself within them results in a study agenda centered around intensive training at the hands of experts available within schools of mystical religion. Staal refers to two most promising examples for this kind of research: on the psychedelic side Carlos Castaneda (1925–1998) and with respect to meditation research Deikman ("the one promising kind of experimental psychological work with which I am familiar", cf. *ibid.* 117–118).¹²

¹² With regard to Deikman's and Castaneda's methodologies, Staal also addresses some points of criticism (cf. Staal 1975: 119–120 and 131). His appreciation of Castaneda is not

In line with Stace's distinction between experience and interpretation he keeps apart mystic experiences and superstructures (cf. *ibid.* 169–170). He concedes that experiences do not take place in a vacuum and are always approached in terms of preconceived notions, interpretations and evaluations (cf. *ibid.* 31, 157). Considering the present state of research it would be impossible to determine the impact of these frameworks on the underlying experiences.

But it would be safe to assume that "the experiences themselves are to some extent independent from their interpretations and evaluations" (*ibid.* 158). There is at least "the possibility that the differences are largely cultural or 'superstructural'" (*ibid.* 158). The study of mysticism should therefore direct attention "away from the superstructures and back to the experiences themselves" (*ibid.* 189). Staal assumes that there might be a small number of different types, but of course he is very critical about Zaehner's biased way of constructing and evaluating those types (for Staal's criticism of Zaehner see *ibid.* 67–69, 155 (footnote), 184–185).

Innovatively, Staal relates the debate about the value of psychedelic experiences compared to mystic experiences gained in the course of longstanding religious practice to the controversies about "easy ways" and "no-effort doctrines" in the history of Christianity, Buddhism and Hindu religions. As we saw, it was Zaehner who first argued that if the intake of drugs would lead to full-fledged mystical experience the moral aspirations of religious people would be radically questioned. For Staal this criticism reflects "the age-old criticisms of religious movements that stress easy methods such as (pure) faith" (*ibid.* 187). For him to connect morals and mystic experience is at least partially a strategy to make ethical actions look more palatable.

By extrapolation they are claimed to contribute to the highest realization of the religious life, which is often regarded as a mystical vision. But the mere ingestion of a drug can hardly be considered meritorious, so how could it lead to such an exalted state? That would seem unfair, to say the least. Hence the moralists' distinction between 'easy' and 'difficult' ways. (*Ibid.* 165)

Staal assumes that the easy and the difficult ways may well result in the same mystical state of mind and the same corresponding brain states. But even if this holds true, they would be connected to different past experiences, expectations, and confirmations of existing beliefs. Their specific context would be different.

surprising as he wrote *Exploring Mysticism* shortly before Richard de Mille's seminal critical study *Castaneda's Journey* (1976) was published. Up to de Mille's book the academic world and especially cultural anthropology was celebrating Castaneda's books "as illustrative of a new paradigm" (Fikes: 1993: 49). In the preface to the second printing of *Exploring Mysticism* Staal admits that the attention he paid to Castaneda was "the most glaring error" that he committed in this book. (cf. Staal 1975: xxiv)

Therefore, different methods "may as well result in different experiences, and yet incorporate an identical mystical experience" (*ibid.* 170). Diverse approaches add various factors to the same basic experience. Furthermore, Staal supposes that the doctrines of "no effort" may indicate that the competing methods and paths of mystical religion only help to reach a point which is quite independent of them and transcends all conditioning of the mind by certain methods and theoretical frameworks (cf. *ibid.* 180).

Staal's *Exploring Mysticism* not only summarizes the achievements and open questions concerning the perennialist conceptualization of mysticism and psychedelic mysticism in particular. In two respects it also marks the end of an era. In the years after the publication of Staal's book, the decreasing popularity of PM and the legal situation brought on a stagnation of academic psychedelic studies. Not only psychological and medical research suffered, academic mysticism discourse also lost its psychedelic branch. The second change referred to methodological concerns. Although perennialist and contextualist approaches coexisted from the very beginning of twentieth century scholarly investigation of mysticism, it holds true that until the late 1970s perennialism was the hegemonic model. Now, a major paradigm shift towards contextualism took place.¹³

Within the twenty years between Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* and Staal's *Exploring Mysticism* a fruitful interplay between psychedelia and mysticism research led to enhanced and more sophisticated forms of perennialist theory. Although the contextualist perspective is not necessarily connected to a narrowing of the scope of mysticism research, the paradigm shift had this negative side effect. Now, rather untraditional forms like psychedelic spirituality or modern atheistic mysticism played hardly a role at all. The focus was on mysticism within large and old religious traditions and the conservative character of mysticism (see Katz 1983). Mystics were no longer seen as hippie-like dropouts but as orthodox believers. It seems that within contextualism, tradition as such has been given the role of warranting a genuine relation to transcendence beyond mere subjectivism. In a more recent contribution of Steven T. Katz (*1944) one can read:

'Mysticism' and 'mystical experience' are not to be equated with certain psychedelic or drug-induced experiences. The latter are the consequence

13 Usually, Steven T. Katz' *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (1978) is considered to have kicked-off the contextualist turn. In his programmatic contribution to this volume Katz laconically states: "There is no *philosophia perennis*, Huxley and many others notwithstanding" (Katz 1978: 24, emphasis by Katz). With regard to the more sophisticated perennialist approaches after Huxley he says: "Yet even the positions of R. C. Zaehner, W. T. Stace, and N. Smart are unsatisfactory because they try to provide various cross-cultural phenomenological accounts of mystical experience that are phenomenologically as well as philosophically suspect" (*ibid.* 25).

of transformations in one's subjective awareness of oneself and the world. Such experiences do not necessarily bring one into contact with God or Ultimate Reality. However, there are religious traditions in which drugs are used as part of a larger process aimed at inducing not only altered states of consciousness but also contact with, experience of, transcendent realities or Reality. (Katz 2013: 3–4)

With this statement, Katz introduces an at once normative and quite speculative element to contextualism by claiming to know what is and what is not capable of mediating the experience of ultimate reality. He argues that drugs only induce subjective states of consciousness without giving any reason for this assertion. Again without any rational argument he adds the bold statement that religious traditions alone provide the means to bring one into real contact with the sphere of transcendence (without and sometimes even with the help of psychoactive substances). This is in a way not so far from Staal who underlined the importance of schools (and that always implies traditions) of mystical religion. But it cannot be overlooked that the whole focus shifted from experience-centered research to the one-sided preference of old textual traditions and institutionalized religions.

I am not sure if mysticism as a scientific category will have a revival as PM did during the last decades, although I do not see any rational objections. But if this happens, it is to be hoped that the still unanswered questions concerning psychedelic mysticism will once again inspire academic research and fuel the discussions between perennialist and contextualist approaches.

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