

## Review Essay\*

# Psychedelic Futures and Altered States in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean

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The origins of the ancient Greek Eleusinian Mysteries are lost to time. We know that from the classical period onward, on a specified day in the third month of the Attic calendar (roughly September or October), initiates would walk the fourteen miles from Athens to the town of Eleusis along the “Sacred Road” to celebrate the Greater Mysteries: a commemoration of Persephone’s return from Hades’ underworld, a reunion with her grieving mother Demeter, and thereby a celebration of life’s cyclical dance with death. The initiates would approach the Greater Mysteries having already celebrated the Lesser Mysteries in February a year and a half earlier. These Lesser Mysteries were a commemoration of Persephone’s

\* R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hofmann, Carl A. P. Ruck, *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries* (30th Anniversary Ed.; Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2008), 192 pp., \$18.95 pb., ISBN: 9781556437526; Yulia Ustinova, *Divine Mania: Alteration of Consciousness in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 412 pp., \$190.00 hb., ISBN: 1138298115; Brian C. Muraresku, *The Immortality Key: The Secret History of the Religion with No Name* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2020), 480 pp., \$21.00 hb., ISBN: 1250207142; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination: Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 400 pp., \$135.00 hb., ISBN: 1009123068.

I have benefited enormously from comments and edits from a great number of readers, including Robert Forte, Brian Muraresku, Carl A. P. Ruck, and the members of Harvard’s “Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean” colloquium. I delivered an earlier version of this paper as a keynote lecture entitled “The Call of the Ancient: Psychedelic Pasts and Futures” at a conference, “Archives of the Impossible,” at Rice University, 11–13 May 2023.

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abduction by Hades and held at another site just outside of Athens. Those who had undertaken this prior “initiation” or μύησις were called “initiates” or μύσται (singular μύστης). They would have spent the time between the first and second phases of the Mysteries immersed in myths and practices associated with both. Only then would the μύσται approach the Greater Mysteries, called the “vision” or ἐποπτεία, which would render them “visionaries” or ἐπόπται (singular ἐπόπτης). But what did these initiates *see*, such that they earned this title?

Upon reaching Eleusis, the initiates stood watch at an all-night vigil in a sanctuary and were given a special drink, the κικεών, culminating in a secret ritual and an ineffable vision. Of what we are not sure, because the initiatory ritual and accompanying vision were mysteries after all: initiates were strictly forbidden from divulging (ἀπόρρητος) the secrets of Eleusis, and some speculate that what they beheld was, in any case, beyond description, ineffable (ἄρρητος). From scattered remarks and reports over the centuries, scholars have surmised that at the height of the ritual a high priest (ιεροφάντης) would invoke the presence of the goddesses Demeter and Persephone by brandishing certain sacred objects (τὰ ἱερά) usually hidden in the recesses of the sanctuary, including an ear of grain; that Persephone would be revealed to have given birth to an infant son (perhaps identified with Dionysus); and that as a climax, complete with a deafening gong and pyrotechnics, the underworld would open and one or both goddesses would appear to the assembled.

Not surprisingly, scholars have wondered what might have been in that drink, the κικεών. If the initiatory vision was the result of an elaborate sound and light show orchestrated by the priests in the inner sanctum to induce a kind of ritual ecstasy, might the κικεών have been a psychoactive sacrament that helped induce that ecstatic vision? Walter Burkert floated the idea in 1977, in his monumental study, *Greek Religion*: “It may rather be asked, even without the prospect of a certain answer, whether at the basis of the mysteries [of Demeter and Dionysus] there were prehistoric drug rituals, some festival of immortality which, through the expansion of consciousness, seemed to guarantee some psychedelic Beyond.”<sup>1</sup>

The following year, 1978, three authors working independently of Burkert took up the psychedelic hypothesis in *The Road to Eleusis*.<sup>2</sup> Two of them will come as no surprise. The first was R. Gordon Wasson, the amateur ethnomycologist whose 1957 article in *Life* magazine, “Seeking the Magic Mushroom,” told of

<sup>1</sup> Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical* (trans. John Raffan; Oxford: Blackwell, 1985) 277, originally published as *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche* (Stuttgart; Berlin; Köln; Mainz: Kohlhammer, 1977). Burkert acknowledges that Karl Kérenyi had already floated the idea that the κικεών ingredient pennyroyal (*glechon*) may have been mildly hallucinogenic. See Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* (trans. Ralph Manheim; Bollingen Series 634; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967) 96, 179f.

<sup>2</sup> Carl A. P. Ruck had already published two relevant articles: “Euripides’ Mother: Vegetables and the Phallos in Aristophanes,” *Arion* 2 (1975) 13–57 and “On the Sacred Names of Iamos and Ion: Ethnobotanical Referents in the Hero’s Parentage,” *The Classical Journal* 71 (1976) 235–52.

his experiences ingesting psychoactive mushrooms with the Mazatec people of Mexico, led by the shaman María Sabina. His article opened the floodgates to a torrent of Western seekers looking to expand their consciousness; the sad story of the effect of that influx on the Mazatec people, and on María Sabina in particular, is well known. The second author was Albert Hofmann, the Swiss chemist who first synthesized lysergic acid diethylamide or LSD in 1938, and who in re-synthesizing it in 1943 inadvertently absorbed some into his system and so famously discovered its hallucinogenic effects. It was Hofmann who analyzed the samples of “magic mushrooms” Wasson brought back from Mexico, and identified their active compounds, psilocybin and psilocin. Later, Wasson asked Hofmann whether the ancient Greeks might have had the capability of isolating a psychoactive agent from ergot, the fungal parasite that grows on rye and other cereals such as barley and wheat and also on certain wild grasses. Hofmann was confident that indeed it was possible because ergot grew on the wheat, barley, or wild grasses on the plains next to Eleusis (and throughout the Mediterranean), and the relevant alkaloids from ergot were water soluble and thereby easily isolated. He also argued that the psychoactive agent from ergot was pharmacologically similar to LSD. After all, the Greater Mysteries were an agrarian holiday, celebrating the return of Persephone to her mother Demeter, goddess of the harvest. So, perhaps the secret of the *κυκεών* lay in the psychoactive ergot that grew on the Greeks’ cereals and grasses, which they had learned to isolate and mix into their ritual potion.

The third member of their team was the classicist Carl A. P. Ruck, professor at Boston University. He claimed that what the initiates saw in the initiation hall or *teleisterion* was nothing less than “a mystical vision” induced by a “hallucinogen.”<sup>3</sup> A poem from the seventh-century BCE, the “Homeric Hymn to Demeter,” tells the famous myth of Persephone’s abduction and return, and the establishment of the Eleusinian Mysteries by Demeter. The hymn also tells of the first potion’s ingredients: barley, water, and mint. Sadly, the manuscript breaks off at that point with a gap of over twenty lines, so we don’t know what else was revealed about the potion’s constitution, use, or effects. Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck suggest that the barley in the *κυκεών* contained ergot, which in turn had “soluble hallucinogenic alkaloids.”<sup>4</sup> As Ruck put it, “clearly ergot of barley is the likely psychotropic ingredient in the Eleusinian potion.”<sup>5</sup>

According to Ruck, the Eleusinian priests were masters of what Timothy Leary called “set and setting,” carefully curating initiates’ interior states and exterior environment so that they would have a vivid vision of Persephone’s return from Hades—a psychedelic trip that would forever reorient their lives, and so their deaths. Ruck went further, however, and thanked Wasson and Hofmann because “those of us who have experienced the superior hallucinogens may now join the

<sup>3</sup> Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck, *The Road to Eleusis*, 47.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

fellowship of the ancient initiates in a lasting bond of friendship, a friendship born of a shared experience of a reality deeper far than we had known before.”<sup>6</sup> Now an initiate himself, like Wasson and Hofmann, Ruck broke the ancient injunction, and spoke the unspeakable secrets of Eleusis.

The book was largely met with silence, at least among classicists. A short review in the 1979 issue of *Classical World* concluded that the evidence was insufficient, and thus that acceptance of the book’s thesis “depends on one’s view of its plausibility, or on faith.”<sup>7</sup> By “faith,” the reviewer clearly means “experience,” because he then quotes Ruck’s admission of his own psychedelic experiences. The review was short, but hardly savage. The reaction at his home institution was less kind: John Silber, legendary president of Boston University, removed Ruck as the Acting Chair of Classics and he was barred from teaching graduate seminars. He had tenure, so he kept his job, but he was marginalized. Until recently, many classicists would politely pass over his hypothesis with silence, or a brief, dismissive mention. Ruck responded by doubling down on the psychedelic hypothesis and widening his ambit to include other Greek mystery religions, the psychedelic origins of religion itself, the possibility of a psychedelic Eucharist in early Christianity, and the lasting but hidden influence of all of these on medieval and early modern Europe.<sup>8</sup>

In a series of lectures in 1982, in the wake of *The Road to Eleusis*, Walter Burkert returned briefly to the theme, and issued a more critical answer to his own, earlier question about “drug rituals” inducing “some psychedelic Beyond.” He concedes that the κκεάων could well have contained ergot, but he wonders about the practicalities of dosing: how could the priests have prepared the potion with enough of the water-soluble alkaloids to induce visions in thousands of participants on a single night? And how could they have avoided administering too much, which would result in poisoning—so-called “ergotism” or “St. Antony’s Fire,” from which Europe suffered periodic outbreaks as late as the nineteenth century? Burkert also insists that “the use of drugs, as our time has been doomed to see, does not create a sense of community but rather leads to isolation.” He cites Carlos Castaneda and his shamanic guide Don Juan as contemporary evidence of this: drugs may have served to cement their student-teacher bond, he argues, but it isolated the pair from others, and was hardly a model for “the communal experience of ancient mysteries.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>7</sup> Michael H. Jameson, review of *The Road to Eleusis* in *The Classical World*, by R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hofmann, Carl A. P. Ruck, *The Classical World* 73 (1979) 197–98.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, R. Gordon Wasson, Stella Kramrisch, Jonathan Ott, and Carl A. P. Ruck, *Persephone’s Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Carl A. P. Ruck, Blaise D. Staples, and Clark Heinrich, *The Apples of Apollo: Pagan and Christian Mysteries of the Eucharist* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2001); Carl A. P. Ruck, Mark A. Hoffman, and José Alfredo González Celdrán, *Mushrooms, Myth, and Mithras: the Drug Cult That Civilized Europe* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2011); Carl A. P. Ruck and Mark A. Hoffman, *The Effluents of Deity: Alchemy and Psychoactive Sacraments in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 109.

These arguments of Burkert's against the psychedelic hypothesis are not particularly strong, as has been pointed out by Charles Stein in his book *Persephone Unveiled*.<sup>10</sup> After all, the hypothesis is that the *κυκεών* was a cocktail perfected over many centuries, with meticulous attention to dosing—which would be minute compared to that which results in ergot poisoning. Why is it *prima facie* impossible that the priests could have prepared and distributed an appropriately-dosed cocktail for hundreds or even thousands of initiates? And the claim that drug use induces isolation rather than community is a blanket statement that is easily falsified.

In the end, Burkert denies not only “the drug hypothesis,” but also that Eleusis offered its initiates any “ecstasy in the full sense” or “mysticism in the true sense.”<sup>11</sup> It is not clear what he means by the qualification in either case: what counts as *full* ecstasy, or *true* mysticism? He cites a remarkable passage from the Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus (412–485 CE), successor or *diadochus* of the Platonic Academy in Athens. Proclus knew the daughter of Nestorius, the last hierophant of Eleusis, the sanctuaries of which were first closed in 392 CE and then destroyed in 396 CE, in both cases by Christian emperors—the latter around fifteen years before Proclus was even born. So, when Proclus writes the following of the mysteries' rites, he presumably does so on the authority of her testimony, a living link to a lost ritual: “They cause sympathy of the souls with the ritual in a way that is unintelligible to us, and divine, so that some of the initiands are stricken with panic, being filled with divine awe; others assimilate themselves to the holy symbols, leave their own identity, become at home with the gods, and experience divine possession.”<sup>12</sup> What a fascinating passage, and one that deserves its own commentary. But for our purposes, it is important to appreciate why Burkert is citing Proclus here. It seems that the very diversity of reactions among the initiates that Proclus reports is what undercuts, for Burkert, the claim that this is *full* ecstasy or *true* mysticism. If this is right, then he seems to presume that ecstatic mysticism yields a single or uniform experience. That's simply not true—but that would require another review article to establish. More relevant for our purposes is the fact that Burkert seems also to cite this diversity of reactions precisely to undercut the psychedelic hypothesis. If this is right, then he seems to presume that a drug would have a consistent effect. Here is where Stein is enormously helpful: “I can't think of a better exposition of the use of psychoactive substances than the heterogeneity of response that Proclus and Burkert himself document, ranging from blind panic before the overwhelming nature of the phenomena, to the shattering of constructs

<sup>10</sup> Charles Stein, *Persephone Unveiled: Seeing the Goddess & Freeing Your Soul* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2006) 112–17.

<sup>11</sup> Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 113.

<sup>12</sup> *In Remp.* II 108.17–30 (cited in Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 113–14, 171 n. 161: συμπαθείας εἰσὶν αἵται ταῖς ψυχᾶς περὶ τὰ δρώμενα τρόπον ἄγνωστον καὶ θείον· ὡς τοὺς μὲν τῶν τελουμένων καταπλήττεσθαι δειμάτων θείων πλήρεις γιγνομένους, τοὺς δὲ συνδιατίθεσθαι τοῖς ἱεροῖς συμβόλοις καὶ ἐαυτῶν ἐκστάντας ὄλους ἐνιδρῦσθαι τοῖς θεοῖς καὶ ἐνθεάζειν.

of reality and the sympathetic assimilation of news ones.”<sup>13</sup> As Timothy Leary and every other psychonaut before and since has known, set and setting do matter. Neither mystical practice nor the use of psychedelics (ritually or recreationally) yields a single, defining experience.<sup>14</sup>

Stein defends the plausibility of the Wasson-Hofmann-Ruck hypothesis: while he does not “insist that the means of effecting release from identity at Eleusis was the ingestion of an entheogen,” he does take their claims “with utter seriousness.”<sup>15</sup> Despite his defense of the plausibility of the hypothesis, Stein is also helpful in tempering its claims. At times it seems as if Wasson, Hoffman, and Ruck are convinced that psychedelics were the only, or at least the preeminent, technique for inducing mystical ecstasy. That is no more true than Burkert’s blanket statements about the isolating effects of drug use, or the uniformity of truly ecstatic and mystical experience. Stein reminds us that the Greater Mysteries involved a year and a half of preparation and training, and during the week of the celebrations themselves, extensive trekking, fasting, dancing, and hence physical exhaustion; but also identification with mythic figures (gods and heroes). All of this might have “created somatic states that welcomed rather than resisted the combination of ingredients that was the [κρυκεών].”<sup>16</sup> Why put psychedelics on a pedestal, where they might easily be knocked off? Why not instead acknowledge them as one among many practices of transcending our imprisoning identities, give them their rightful place as part of the foundation of the ecstatic edifice?

Of the three authors of *The Road to Eleusis*, only Ruck is still alive today. Wasson died in 1986, and Hofmann in 2008. Despite his rough going at Boston University, Ruck does not regret his decision to pursue the psychedelic hypothesis, nor does he hold any great grudge against the many skeptics and critics. In a preface to the twentieth anniversary edition in 1998, entitled “Hindsight,” Ruck writes, “So in hindsight, despite the trouble it has caused, I would say, the work was worth the doing. And we are grateful that a way has been found to do it again in this republication, for those of you who have loved and stood by this over the years, and for the sake of the next generation who may pause to consider without bias its message.”<sup>17</sup> We have Robert Forte to thank for publishing both the twentieth and thirtieth anniversary editions, in 1998 and 2008, respectively. After the publication of the twentieth anniversary edition, Forte arranged to have Georg Luck of Johns Hopkins University review it, which he did very favorably.<sup>18</sup> In his own preface to the 2008 edition, Forte looks forward to a time when “psychedelic drug policy

<sup>13</sup> Stein, *Persephone Unveiled*, 116.

<sup>14</sup> See Rachael Petersen, “A Theological Reckoning with ‘Bad Trips,’” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Autumn/Winter 2022, <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/a-theological-reckoning-with-bad-trips/>.

<sup>15</sup> Stein, *Persephone Unveiled*, 105.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>17</sup> Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck, *The Road to Eleusis*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Georg Luck, review of *The Road to Eleusis*, in *American Journal of Philology* 122 (2001) 135–38, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ajp.2001.0010>.

in the United States” is “reasonable,” and reminds us that “some of the formative minds of Western civilization . . . thought these entheogen-inspired Eleusinian Mysteries were the greatest experience of their lives.” Following Hofmann, he also looks forward to a day when “we would see Eleusis-type centers where we could legally explore these entheogen-inspired unitive states.”<sup>19</sup> Many believe that today, as the wave of the psychedelic “renaissance” crests (or perhaps crashes), we stand on the cusp of a more reasonable psychedelic drug policy in the United States. And one doesn’t have to look hard to find centers of the sort Forte anticipates—at home and abroad, legal and otherwise. Forte’s final words, miming God’s inaugural act of creation, are “Let there be Light.”

Ruck has lived to see his hypothesis revived and defended in this “next generation,” namely with Brian Muraresku’s *The Immortality Key: The Secret History of the Religion with No Name*.<sup>20</sup> Ruck appears throughout the pages of this book, which reads like a popular detective story, mixed with learned non-fiction inspired by Dan Brown. Muraresku is a lawyer by trade, and not a scholar, but is very learned: a BA in classics from Brown University furnished him with facility in Greek and Latin, as well as fluency in several European languages that afford him access to obscure research (e.g. in Catalan) and allow him to charm gatekeepers at relevant archaeological sites and archives, including in the Vatican. Following in Ruck’s footsteps, Muraresku suggests that the psychedelic sacrament at Eleusis is just the tip of the iceberg, and that behind the different competing religions of the ancient Mediterranean there was an even more ancient and pervasive Indo-European religion of ecstasy, a barely visible “religion with no name” sustained by women whose names have largely been forgotten, along with their ancient knowledge of plant medicine; a religion at times celebrated if also guarded, such as at Eleusis; and a religion at times persecuted, especially by institutional Christianity, such as its closure of Eleusis in the late fourth century by a new generation of Christian emperors. Like toadstools, though, this religion with no name seems to pop up through the sediment of ancient history, rearing its head, or hood, only briefly before returning to the earth from which it arose.

But Christianity has a more complicated place in Muraresku’s secret history than this would suggest. He suspects that at least some early Christians were experimenting with a psychedelic Eucharist, and that with the rise of imperial orthodoxy centered in Rome, it was driven underground—perhaps literally, as in the case of the Roman catacombs. With one eye on the past, Muraresku fixes another on the present, or really the future. Surfing what has been called the “second wave” of psychedelic research in the sciences (as led by the trials at Johns Hopkins

<sup>19</sup> Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck, *The Road to Eleusis*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Muraresku, *The Immortality Key: The Secret History of the Religion with No Name* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2020), all quotations are from the 2020 ebook edition.

University and New York University), he wonders, like many others, whether the extraordinary therapeutic outcomes associated with these trials harken a new age of the religion with no name. Some psychedelics have already been cleared for legal therapeutic use, and others will likely follow. But if many find that psychedelics reliably induce extraordinary experiences of the divine—mystical, ecstatic states that are truly soul (*psyche-*) revealing (*-delic*)—then perhaps we stand on the threshold of a “new Reformation,” a “popular outbreak of mysticism.”<sup>21</sup> And if what Christians have been receiving for centuries is in fact a “placebo Eucharist,” and when (not *if*, but *when*, for Muraresku) it can be shown that a psychedelic sacrament was the more ancient, perhaps even the original, then “the religion with no name is back”<sup>122</sup> When they discover that “smoking gun,”<sup>223</sup> “proving beyond any reasonable doubt that the original Eucharist was, in fact, psychedelic,” the two Catholic boys Muraresku and Ruck have vowed to book a flight to Rome to trip in the City of the Dead underneath St. Peter’s Basilica, “as it was in the beginning.” And they are going “to insist that the Pope join us.”<sup>24</sup>

How did we get here? From the possibility of an ergotized potion at Eleusis to calls for a new psychedelic Reformation? Let’s step back and assess the evidence, in two stages: first, for the “pagan” mystery religions of the ancient Mediterranean; second, for early Christianity, what Muraresku prefers to call “primitive” or “paleo” Christianity. But before we proceed to the evidence, a note about terminology is in order. In the last breakout bestseller in psychedelics before this one, *How To Change Your Mind*, Michael Pollan takes a rather strict, even minimal definition of what counts as a psychedelic, including psilocybin, LSD, mescaline, DMT, and peyote (and not cannabis). Pollan cleaves to the term “psychedelic,” rather than “hallucinogen,” “entheogen,” or “plant medicine” —the last two of which have contemporary advocates.<sup>25</sup> Muraresku—appropriately in his case I think—takes a more maximal approach. Although he speaks most often of “psychedelics,” he includes in his purview any substance that results in alterations of perception, mood, consciousness, or cognition. I can’t discern any meaningful difference in this book between “psychedelic,” “psychoactive,” and “psychotropic.”

If there were hard evidence of psychedelics in the Eleusinian mysteries, how would we know it? After all, food and drink are ephemeral—they decompose

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 24, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 213, 356.

<sup>23</sup> Muraresku uses the phrase “smoking gun” throughout his book, in reference to evidence for ritual psychedelics. It is usually tempered with a conditional or hypothetical modifier, “could,” as in “[such-and-such] could be the smoking gun” (ibid., 111, 348); also “potential” (143); sometimes it is Ruck who is convinced that we have the smoking gun, and Muraresku is half a skeptical step aside (154); Muraresku will even admit that the “smoking gun is elusive” (237), so much so that he gave up on it for a time (295). But the final mention is not *if*, but *when* (362).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 362.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Pollan, *How To Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (New York: Penguin, 2018) 18–19.



quickly, so traditional archaeology can hardly dig them up, dust them off, and put them in a museum for display. Enter archaeological chemistry, or “archaeo-chemistry” for short. In the last several decades, new technologies allow researchers to recover organic residue that has survived in excavated vessels (i.e., ancient cups), or has been absorbed into their porous surfaces, and then to analyze their chemical composition.<sup>26</sup> With these tools in hand, you would think that the psychedelic hypothesis could be easily confirmed with a single trip to Eleusis. But sadly, all the excavated vessels from Eleusis have been thoroughly cleaned, scoured of any organic residue that might answer the question—apparently a standard practice before the advent of archaeo-chemistry. Fine, you might say, then let’s dig up some more intact vessels and test them. Again, sadly, this path is also blocked, since any further digging is prohibited at Eleusis. You can almost hear the exasperated sigh from Muraresku when he realizes this—thwarted again!

He is rescued from despair by news from Catalonia. In 575 BCE, Greek colonists from the city of Phocaea established a port city north of Barcelona called Emporion. These same colonists established more familiar sister cities: Massalia (Marseilles) around 600 BCE and Elea (Velia in southern Italy) around 530 BCE. They pressed inland in the fifth century BCE, and established a farmstead at Mas Castellar de Pontós, where together with the local indigenous population, they farmed and worshipped. Abundant evidence has emerged from the archaeological site, overseen for decades by Enriqueta Pons, pointing to a suggestive connection with the Eleusinian mysteries. The results of Pons’ work were long overlooked, at least in part because she wrote exclusively in Catalan. Muraresku, fluent in Spanish, happened across her work, and committed to reading her 635-page tome at the Library of Congress. It seems as if these Greek colonists were familiar with the myths and rituals associated with Eleusis and incorporated them into whatever cult they practiced as part of their Hellenized farmstead. Inside a domestic chapel for this agrarian cult, Pons found the remains of a human jawbone, and a small ritual chalice, both of which tested positive for ergot—the very ingredient thought to be in the *κυκεών* potion at Eleusis. Did the Phocaeen colonists wrest the secret of Eleusis from its priesthood and presume to practice their own mysteries in Catalonia? If so, their free adaptation of the mysteries would mark a betrayal of the initiates’ oath of silence. But they didn’t do it alone: they were working and worshipping with indigenous locals. And here is where the evidence, albeit somewhat circumstantial, doubles: independent of Mas Castellar de Pontós, archaeo-chemists have discovered ample evidence of an even more ancient psychedelic beer in and around northeastern Spain (as early as the third millennium BCE). The locals’ beer was spiked with variations of nightshade, not ergot. The picture that emerges, then, is that of a psychedelic collaborative: an ancient, indigenous tradition of drinking psychedelic

<sup>26</sup> The technologies include Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC), and gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS). Muraresku, *The Immortality Key*, 101.

beer to enable journeys to other worlds or the afterlife is coupled with a foreign cult, brought from the East, also centered on life's dance with death, but which involves a different ritual potion. Who knows exactly what happened in that domestic chapel, but it seems that the locals, long accustomed to their own psychedelia, readily embraced the latest import from the East. These two finds, then, are together the closest thing we have to a smoking gun. Muraresku writes, "to the best of my knowledge and until proven otherwise, [these two] represent the first scientific data for the ritual use of psychedelic drugs from classical antiquity."<sup>27</sup> Does this confirm the psychedelic hypothesis regarding Eleusis? Not exactly, or rather, not directly. But maybe indirectly: some Phocaeen colonists with connections to Eleusis were found to have used an ergot-infused beer in "an open-access sanctuary," and to have found receptive indigenous partners.<sup>28</sup> Not exactly confirmation of what happened at Eleusis, but on my reading, the balance of evidence is tilting slightly in favor of the psychedelic hypothesis.

■

The second half of Muraresku's book is devoted to early Christianity. Leaning on the good work of Arthur Darby Nock, and more recently of Dennis MacDonald, Muraresku suggests that the author of the Gospel of John deliberately paints Jesus and his Eucharist in the colors of Dionysus, suggesting at the very least that the evangelist hoped to market Christianity to a non-Christian audience by suggesting that Jesus was equivalent to Dionysus, and his sacrament of wine equivalent to Dionysian intoxication. But Muraresku goes further still, suggesting that "the original Eucharist" was psychedelic. To speak of "the original Eucharist" is to invite the reader to imagine that Jesus himself was administering a psychedelic sacrament at the Last Supper. But closer reading reveals that what Muraresku means by "the original Eucharist" is not whatever Jesus might have offered his apostles, or even what his apostles did in memory of him, but rather what certain early, Greek-speaking Christian communities were administering. Not exactly "original," then, but rather a few generations later. Still controversial of course—so what evidence can he provide?

In short, nothing yet. But readers wouldn't know that from reading the introduction, or really until the very end of the book. That's because Muraresku opts to keep readers in suspense, teasing them with the promise that some evidence will soon be revealed, that some psychedelic bomb will soon drop. It does not drop. If there is some indirect "hard" evidence in the case of Eleusis, then in the case of early Christianity, there is simply none, yet. The closest is the evidence unearthed outside of Pompeii, a house preserved for two millennia under the ash of Mount Vesuvius's eruption in AD 79. That date is suggestive to Muraresku because that is the time that Christianity was establishing a beachhead in Rome. But what was

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

discovered, as far as I can tell, is an ancient pharmacy, with material evidence of a strange potion, a drug or *pharmakon*—a combination of psychoactive plants, including opium, cannabis, and nightshade, along with the remains of reptiles and amphibians, all steeped in wine. The archaeologist of that site says, “for me, the Villa Vesuvio was a small farm that was specifically designed for the production of drugs.”<sup>29</sup> That seems very believable; but there’s nothing to suggest that the pharmacy or drug farm was serving Christians, or even that the potions produced were for ritual use. So what exactly is this evidence of? It seems only to establish that in the same decades when Christians were evangelizing Rome and southern Italy, there was a potion maker active near Pompeii. I suspect there are many more potion-makers to be found, but I don’t understand how that provides any significant link to paleo-Christian practice.

If there were significant numbers of early Christians using a psychedelic sacrament, I would expect that the representatives of orthodox, institutional Christianity would rail against it. In other words, we would have ample indirect evidence. Certainly, these early Churchmen used whatever they could against the forms of Christian practice they disapproved of, especially those they labeled “Gnostic.” Muraresku mentions that two early Churchmen, experts in heresies by the name of Irenaeus of Lyons and Hippolytus of Rome, accuse one Gnostic teacher named Marcus, student of the famous theologian Valentinus, of pharmacological devilry. But what they charge him with specifically is not a psychedelic Eucharist, but rather the use of a love potion. True, both heresy hunters show an interest in this love potion, but even if they’re telling the truth, a love potion isn’t a Eucharist. Love potions and love charms were very common in the ancient world. So, again, if there were an early psychedelic sacrament that was suppressed, I would expect that the suppressors would talk about it, as they do about all the other alleged errors they document. Why don’t they?

I suspect that it is not always the evidence that is driving this inquiry, but rather Muraresku’s call for a new psychedelic “Reformation.” He argues that the “primary motivation of the entire Reformation” was “the rediscovery of Christianity’s true origins, and its real meaning.”<sup>30</sup> We know that the Reformers’ portrait of early Christianity was in no small part a fiction—they painted early Christians in their own image so as to see themselves reflected in that history as the earliest faithful. I fear that Muraresku is doing much the same again in his call for a “new Reformation” and his quest for “the original sacrament of Western civilization.” He forwards his own version of “the pagan continuity hypothesis” with these two questions: “1) Before the rise of Christianity, did the Ancient Greeks consume a secret psychedelic sacrament during their most famous and well-attended religious rituals? 2) Did the Ancient Greeks pass a version of their sacrament along to the earliest, Greek-speaking Christians, for whom the original Holy Communion or

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

Eucharist was, in fact, a psychedelic Eucharist?” He writes, “If the answer to both questions is ‘yes,’ then the new Reformation is as well grounded and historically oriented as Martin Luther’s Reformation, and it becomes an immediate reality for the tens of millions of SBNRs and religiously disillusioned.”<sup>31</sup>

Let’s take his two questions in turn. As for the first, we have already discussed how the answer is a “maybe” — I am being persuaded by the indirect evidence that the *κυκεών* at Eleusis might have included some psychoactive ingredient, which was part of a wider orchestrated ritual that induced visions. As for the second question, regarding the Christian Eucharist, Muraresku claims to explore “an early, secret form of Christianity that has been scrubbed from the record.”<sup>32</sup> As far as I can tell, there is simply no evidence, direct or indirect, circumstantial or otherwise, that an early, secret form of Christianity was using a psychedelic Eucharist. And even if evidence of a psychedelic Eucharist within the first centuries of Christianity were to surface, that wouldn’t tell us that the “original” Eucharist was psychedelic, or that it was ever the norm rather than the exception, any more than the discovery of texts from the second or third centuries tells us about who the historical Jesus really was or what was the “original” faith of early Christians. At present the answer to the second question is simply “no,” or at best a “not yet.” So, on my best read, the answer to these two questions are: “maybe” and “no.”

Muraresku’s answers to these same questions are harder to discern. In the introduction, he is careful to frame his answers as a conditional, “*If* the answer to both questions is ‘yes.’”<sup>33</sup> But then he writes, “I present every piece of evidence that, taken together, finally convinced me of the psychedelic reality behind Western civilization’s original religion . . . the religion that started it all. . . . The religion with no name.”<sup>34</sup> That would seem to suggest to readers that evidence will be forthcoming that allows us to answer both questions in the affirmative. But by the end of the book, readers who have stuck with it through all the twists and turns, surprises and disappointments, revelations and concealments, will learn that Muraresku must admit that the answer to both questions is *not* “yes,” but, as I have already stated, “maybe” and “no” (or “not yet”). And so the strategy of the book becomes clear only by the very end: to tantalize the readers and to intrigue them with promises, and rather grand hypotheses about “the secret history of the religion with no name” (nearly always couched with a conditional “if” or subjunctive “could”), until the very end, when it is clear that such promises and hypotheses do not have evidence to support them. Some readers might react with excitement and enthusiasm: “Great, what’s next? Where should we look for the evidence we don’t yet have?” Other readers might have preferred to know the state of the evidence at the outset.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

Nevertheless, I do find myself agreeing with Muraresku when he says that this book is “proof of concept” —that is, proof that there *is* something in the ancient record. Some of it is already out, and more will follow, if we learn how to look for it. I am not remotely scandalized by the notion that ancient rituals employed what we’re calling “psychedelics.” I would not be surprised to find evidence for it among the Eleusinian mysteries, or even in early Christianity. But we don’t yet have that evidence, and so it feels as if Muraresku is letting a narrative, rather than evidence, drive the inquiry. The narrative is clear: psychedelic ritual was the ancient religion with no name; a nameless lineage of women with expertise in plant medicine and ritual ecstasy, suppressed by institutions of male privilege jealous of their own power, preeminently the Church; a religion that would not die despite severe and brutal persecution; a faith shared if not by Jesus then at least his early followers, and other mystery religions of the ancient Mediterranean. But even if we were to find evidence of a psychedelic Eucharist, would that establish that it was the norm, or the *original* form of the sacrament? We’d have to amass a lot of evidence to make that case; we might have to find the Holy Grail, literally. And given the silence of the hostile witnesses, the very Churchmen you’d expect to rail against this practice, even if we were to find evidence of a psychedelic Eucharist, wouldn’t it more likely have been something at the margins of Christianity?

So, in the end, it seems to me that in calling for a new Reformation, Muraresku has repeated the Reformers’ error of retro-projecting their present—16<sup>th</sup> century German piety, for example—onto the past of early Christianity. Muraresku is retro-projecting his present, our present—the 21<sup>st</sup> century American psychedelic renaissance—onto that same past. This psychedelic past—which is really just a projection of the present—underwrites a psychedelic future, a new Reformation. He cites Aldous Huxley in support of this view: in *The Doors of Perception*, Huxley calls not for a reformation *per se*, but a “revival of religion,” “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 . . . religion will be transformed into . . . an everyday mysticism.”<sup>35</sup> Muraresku issues a call to “join the revolution that just might rescue a dying faith and a civilization on the edge of extinction.”<sup>36</sup> Muraresku’s reboot of this revolution is explicitly targeting the growing ranks of the “un-churched,” the SBNRs (Spiritual But Not Religious), and hoping to mobilize their disaffection with institutionalized religion, their longing for an enchanted world, and their despair in the face of political and environmental collapse. Judging by the book’s remarkable sales, this revolutionary call has found an audience. Every revolution needs a past to underwrite its vision of the future—certainly Marx’s did—and this revolution is no exception.

<sup>35</sup> Aldous Huxley, “Drugs That Shape Men’s Minds,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 18 October 1958, cited in Muraresku, *The Immortality Key*, 24–25.

<sup>36</sup> Muraresku, *The Immortality Key*, 27.

Rather than a “Reformation,” I would like to propose a different psychedelic past, and one which may offer a better psychedelic future, what I am calling “transcendence and transformation” —which is also the name of an initiative we have launched at Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions. Two years ago, I spoke at a conference at Harvard on interdisciplinary psychedelic research.<sup>37</sup> I told the audience that if you had told me five years ago that I would be speaking at a conference on interdisciplinary psychedelic research, I would have told you that you needed to lower your dose.

The truth is: I’m not interested in psychedelics *per se*. I think psychedelics are most interesting and most significant as one among many different means and modes of exploring transcendence and transformation. To put that another way, I am interested in the transcendence of our normal states of being, perception, consciousness, and embodiment, and the ways that transcendence affords the transformation of the individual, group, and society. I am interested in psychedelics as *one among many* practices of transcendence and transformation. And I do not believe they are necessarily the golden road, but rather one path, or rather a set of paths—for psychedelics are not a highway, but a web of paths each with its own individual qualities and character, and paths that may lead to different destinations. I prefer to think of psychedelics as one among many ecstatic practices, or what in other contexts might be called “spiritual exercises” —that is, practices that usher us outside our accustomed states of being and understanding, and invite us into new relationships with ourselves, our fellow humans, and our more-than-human or other-than-human neighbors, including the earth’s plant, fungal, and animal life, but also those elusive entities we call spirits, angels, demons, and gods—visible and invisible, real and imagined, malevolent and benign; practices that allow us to experience differently the relationship between identity and difference, mind and matter, body and spirit, what is animate and what we allege is inert—in other words, big problems.

I want to enlist the help of two scholars in sharpening how we think about psychedelics in the ancient world, Yulia Ustinova from Ben Gurion University of the Negev and Wouter Hanegraaff from the University of Amsterdam. The explicit category they both use to speak of psychedelics in the ancient world is “altered states,” what I describe as the transcendence of our normal states of being, perception, consciousness, and embodiment. Following Ustinova and Hanegraaff, I think “altered states” is a better framework for thinking about psychedelics in the ancient world, better in no small part because it takes psychedelics off the pedestal they are often put on, and places them where they should be, namely part of a

<sup>37</sup> “Explorations in Interdisciplinary Psychedelic Research,” Harvard Divinity School, 1 April 2023, <https://cswr.hds.harvard.edu/news/video-explorations-interdisciplinary-psychedelic-research-conference-2023>.

broad array of practices that help occasion altered states, that help us transcend and transform.

Ustinova works in classical antiquity, and Hanegraaff in late antiquity, and in this regard they nicely bookend the ancient Mediterranean world. Ustinova's interest in altered states has been a mainstay in her work. Her first book, published in 2009, was entitled *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth* and looks closely at how Greeks went underground in search of altered states of consciousness.<sup>38</sup> Her new book, *Divine Mania: Alteration of Consciousness in Ancient Greece*, published in 2017, widens the inquiry and looks at all manner of techniques for altering one's consciousness.

In his dialogue the *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates offer a taxonomy of *mania*, or madness. On the one hand, Socrates says, madness is a human disease; on the other hand, madness can be divine, in which the gods "release [you] from the customary habits." There are four kinds of divine madness: 1) prophecy, inspired by Apollo; 2) initiatory madness, inspired by Dionysus; 3) poetic madness, inspired by the Muses; and 4) love madness, inspired by Aphrodite and Eros. Ustinova marshals extensive evidence to suggest that Socrates is actually espousing a view widely shared by his contemporaries: that while there is a concern about the pathology of madness, there is also deep interest in exploring altered states of consciousness, that wisdom and truth are not accessible to our accustomed ways of experiencing the world.<sup>39</sup>

Ustinova tells us how the ancient Greeks distinguished between forms of *mania* in which the divine possesses you as if from outside—so-called *katôché*—from forms in which the divine seems to emerge from within you and blossom into altered states. Hence the adjective *entheos* (engodded), the noun *enthousiasmos* (engoddedness), or *epipnoia* (inspiration). You may hear the resonance here with the modern neologism, "entheogen," which means something that brings about the state of "engoddedness."<sup>40</sup>

She introduces the idea, borrowed from neurophenomenology, that some cultures are more amenable to altered states than others. A so-called "polyphasic" culture tends to value "altered states of consciousness experienced principally in ritual contexts"—such cultures tend to be pre-industrial. Ancient Greece was one such polyphasic culture, over against ancient Rome, at least Republican Rome, which was "monophasic"—that is, it tended to "marginalize these experiences as unorthodox or even criminalise them, and alteration of consciousness in such societies is limited to the secular sphere."<sup>41</sup> Republican Rome was certainly pre-industrial, and yet it was, on Ustinova's view, committed to the suppression of altered states, at least until the Imperial period when it opened itself up to the influence of ecstatic movements

<sup>38</sup> Yulia Ustinova, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> Ustinova, *Divine Mania*, 1–2.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

from Greece and further East. I leave it to the reader to discern whether and how you feel that we are inhabiting a monophasic or polyphasic culture, or whether that distinction even maps onto the contemporary psychedelic scene, renaissance, reformation, revolution, or revival—or indeed, none of the above.

Ustinova is obviously in dialogue with the contemporary brain sciences—cognitive neuroscience, including neurophenomenology and neurotheology. She follows what is sometimes called “5E” cognitive science, which insists that whatever we are calling consciousness is: embedded, embrained, embodied, encultured, and extended. The alteration of consciousness follows suit—which is to say that alterations can be occasioned by techniques that target the brain, other parts of the body, or even the social body, the body politic. And although consciousness is encultured, “the ability to experience alteration of consciousness is . . . a part of human biological potential” —in other words, a universal—and the methods for altering it are “*similar* cross-culturally.” Methods generally fall into one of two modes: “excessive stimulation,” or its opposite, “deprivation.” And the alteration of consciousness falls into three main types: physiological, pharmacological, and pathological.<sup>42</sup>

If we remove the pathological, which is an alteration of consciousness that most cultures, including Ancient Greece, did not generally value, we are left with physiological and pharmacological alterations of consciousness. And while Ustinova does admit that there is evidence for what she calls “psychotropic substances,” they are simply one of many techniques, and they hardly take center stage. Even when such substances *are* actors on the stage, they are often accompanied by other actors, that is to say, *other* modes and methods—such as music, movement, and the play of light and darkness, such as we saw in Eleusis. Ustinova published her book before Muraresku’s, so about Eleusis and the κκεών she states that “so far, there is no unequivocal evidence for the use of mind-altering substances other than wine in mystery initiations.”<sup>43</sup> To be honest, that claim still stands, because even the evidence Muraresku unearths and marshals for his case is indirect, and therefore equivocal for the matter of the mysteries. But to be fair to him, much of his book is also devoted to arguing—persuasively, I might add—that ancient beer and wine were much more powerfully psychoactive than their contemporary descendants.

Rather than focus on what *we* think of as psychedelics, such as ergot in the κκεών potion, Ustinova asks: what might have inspired ancient oracles, such as at Delphi or Didyma? I mean “inspired” quite literally, because the question is about the natural gases or vapors—*pneuma*—the oracles were said to have breathed in as part of their prophetic practice. Some argue that the concentration of these gases is not, and perhaps was not, high enough to induce the trance-like states associated with the oracle’s prophecies. But Ustinova argues that such an approach is limited. She writes:

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 22, 25.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 134.



The concentration of the intoxicating gas needed to alter the consciousness of a highly hypnotizable individual, firmly believing in the sacredness of the rite, and after a day of fasting, is much lower than that needed to induce such changes in the consciousness of an average person. . . . Moreover, the gas could serve as a trigger, a driving factor that put into action the Pythia's autosuggestion, and in this case even a low concentration would have been sufficient. It is noteworthy that in various cultural practices around the globe, patterned dissociative identity can be precipitated by a combination of consciousness-altering substances with one or several other methods, or even be induced without any psychotropic substances. The Greeks seem to have been aware of the psychoactive qualities of *pneuma*, although they did not rely on it alone.<sup>44</sup>

The same seems to be the case at Didyma, where the oracles inhaled vapors from a sacred spring, or indeed in the cave of Acharaca, where the inhalation of natural gases was part of the practice of dream incubation. The point of all this is to underscore that psychoactive or psychotropic substances, whether ingested or inhaled, were only one among many methods, a catalyst combined with other techniques for altering states—a “trigger,” one “factor” among many, part of a careful “combination.”

Equally important to any cocktail of ecstatic techniques was the susceptibility or sensitivity of the individual. In the case of oracles, it is very likely that they were selected for their sensitivity, and that their sensitivity was cultivated, both over a lifetime of practice *and* in the short term as they prepared to issue their prophecies. This is again captured in the phrase “set and setting”—the encultured mindset of an oracle and her audience, cultivated over a lifetime, paired with a profound setting and a range of practices intended to induce altered states.

Ustinova's study of altered states in ancient Greece pairs well with Wouter Hanegraaff's latest book, *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination: Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity*. With this book we move from ancient Greece to late ancient Egypt, although an Egypt deeply Hellenized after centuries of rule by Greeks, and thereafter Romans. Hermetic spirituality belongs to the Roman period, that is, the first several centuries of the common era, but it is a spirituality that emerged from centuries of Greco-Egyptian hybridity. Like Ustinova's, Hanegraaff's subtitle speaks of altered states. He explains:

The subtitle of this book refers to the unquestionable fact that human consciousness is not stable and reliable but fluid and susceptible to alteration, so that what we hold to be “true” must depend very much on how and where we are able (or unable) to direct our attention. Alterations of consciousness result in altered states of knowledge.

Hermetic practitioners believed that the horizon of human consciousness could not just be expanded but could be transcended altogether, resulting in those states of absolute knowledge and direct insight to which they referred as *gnosis*.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>45</sup> Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, 3.

His book explores in great detail how Hermeticists sought to access that absolute knowledge of *gnosis* through various means, including but not limited to psychoactive agents, hallucinogens, and herbs. Like the ancient oracles Ustinova describes, Hanegraaff focuses our attention on what was often *inhaled* in such rituals, specifically the smoke of *kuphi* incense. *Kuphi* was used in temples all over Egypt, and its “narcotic properties induc[ed] a state of sleep-like reverie and relaxation in which the subject’s imagination would be greatly empowered.” The power of *kuphi* was known not only among temple priests, but among philosophers as well: Plutarch said of *kuphi* that “it brightens the imaginative faculty susceptible to dreams like a mirror.”<sup>46</sup> The illumination of the imagination was of course its own altered state, and here too we see psychoactive inhalants playing a part—but not surprisingly paired with breathing techniques.

More famous than the smoke of *kuphi*, perhaps, is the psychedelic eye ointment described in the fourth century Greek magical papyrus text erroneously called the “Mithras Liturgy.”<sup>47</sup> The text is an invocation to enable an initiate to ascend to a vision of the god Helios Mithras, who would then bestow immortality on the initiate. Part of the invocation involves an eye ointment—whose ingredients include rose oil, myrrh, water lilies, kentritis, and other components not yet identified—which helped occasion the vision of the god. Hanegraaff shows how the portion of the text having to do with this obvious psychedelic agent has been relatively ignored by scholars, presumably due to their prejudice against “drugs” and especially the connection of religion to drugs. “But,” he insists, “the references are there in our sources, and much more abundantly than is often thought. The information is obviously important for understanding how these rituals may have worked and why practitioners could be so impressed by their efficacy. If our own *hinterland* of cultural biases makes it hard for us to consider this dimension seriously, then the burden is on us to do something about it.”<sup>48</sup>

But just as Hanegraaff calls for scholars to overcome their cultural biases, so too he cautions us against thinking that these psychoactive substances took central stage in occasioning altered states of knowledge, especially *gnosis*. He writes:

If I have called some special attention to the role of psychoactive substances in this context, it is because the relative neglect of that dimension needs to be corrected while the underlying mechanisms of discursive marginalization must be properly understood. The implication is not that psychoactives are in any way central to the spiritual culture under discussion or to Hermeticism more specifically. Rather, they should be seen as part of a much broader, far more diverse and complex repertoire of techniques and procedures that were available to spiritual practitioners in late antiquity.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>47</sup> See Hans Dieter Betz, *The “Mithras Liturgy”* (Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity 19; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

<sup>48</sup> Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, 44–45.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 47.

I hope the reasons for my appeal to Ustinova and Hanegraaff are clear by now. First, they both look at the ancient Mediterranean world through the lens of altered states and explore various movements—both mainstream and esoteric—that work with altered states for the pursuit of wisdom, truth, and knowledge. Second, they are both open to the use of psychoactive substances, or psychedelics, in that pursuit, and in fact they go out of their way to highlight the relevant evidence and critique scholarly biases that have marginalized that evidence. Third—and this is crucial—they both refuse the temptation to indulge in “psychedelic exceptionalism,” the notion that somehow what we’re calling psychedelics are the exceptional or exemplary technique for altering one’s consciousness. There are traditions of transcendence and transformation, traditions of working with altered states, that have nothing to do with psychedelics. And even in those traditions that do, the ingestion or inhalation of psychoactive substances is often a catalyst in a much more complicated alchemical reaction, one factor in a much more complex equation.

■

In conclusion, I want to circle back and suggest why I think a psychedelic past centered around transcendence and transformation can help us discern a better psychedelic future. First, I must concede that to speak of transcendence in the contemporary academy is transgressive. And to understand why, we should linger for a moment over that Latin preposition “trans” —as in *transcendence*, *transformation*, and now *transgression*. *Trans* means, at its most basic level, “across” or “beyond” and it implies movement: movement from one place to another, from one state to another, across something like a threshold, a line, or a boundary—whatever differentiates here from there, this from that, one from another. Many contemporaries are wary of transcendence because they think it implies a particular kind of movement, namely an *escape*, an escape from the thorny realities of our here and now, to some fanciful refuge—disembodied, unencumbered by the weight of history and its horrors, or its beauties. They regard transcendence as escapist. And they are certainly right that transcendence has been marshalled to justify the flight from our bodies and their demands on us, from other people and our responsibilities to them, from the earth and how we have grossly mistreated it. It appears to them as a metaphysical version of billionaires launching themselves into space in their rockets, leaving us and this wounded world behind—changing their location but not changing themselves one atom or inch.

This is decidedly not what I invoke when I speak of transcendence. I am committed to the *trans* in transcendence and transformation—movement across and beyond, to explore ourselves and others, and to embark on an adventure, *into* this world and into *others*. For when we worry that transcendence might be an escape from our here and now, I want to ask whether we should be confident that we know our here and now. Perhaps the first thing to be transcended is that very confidence, in hopes that we might discover other ways of being here and now.

Rather than a flight *from* the body, for example, might transcendence be a flight *into* the body, or at least other modes of embodiment we are not accustomed to perceive. I am convinced that we are, individually and collectively, much more than we typically take ourselves to be, and that the urgent task is, first, a kind of *immanent* transcendence, crossing the most proximate thresholds of our accustomed states.

What can psychedelics and the ancient Mediterranean world, reframed around transcendence and transformation, or altered states, offer the future? In today's world, fueled in part by the psychedelic renaissance, there's a growing enthusiasm for altered states—everyone is asking, to quote Michael Pollan, *how to change your mind*. But fewer are asking: Why? To what end? Which alterations of consciousness are good, and for whom, and when? What do such altered states afford us? What do I learn about myself or my world by being altered? What should I seek to transcend, and why? How should I seek to transform, and why? And just as importantly, what should I *not* seek to transcend, or how should I *not* seek to transform, and why?

I worry that in today's world, altered states are all too often seen as ends unto themselves, a menu of extraordinary experiences we collect and compare, and in pursuit of which we all too often compete. In the ancient world, there were often frameworks for the pursuit and interpretation of altered states—mythologies and metaphysics, along with communities of practice to sustain them. The oracular traditions knew what sort of altered states they were pursuing, and why. Followers of Dionysus and initiates at Eleusis knew what sort of ecstasy or what sort of vision they were after, and why. Hermeticists believed that their spirituality offered access to altered states of knowledge, and they offered an account of why those altered states were necessary. I worry that in today's pursuit of altered states, we are sorely lacking in such frameworks—lacking in both communities of discernment that are crucial for any pursuit of transcendence and transformation, and in mythologies and metaphysics to ground those pursuits.

We cannot pretend that we can simply revive ancient traditions—long interrupted—and take wholly on board their mythologies and metaphysics. I think we will need to find our own, perhaps in dialogue with theirs. But the first step is recognizing that such mythologies and metaphysics are necessary. As we seek to imagine a psychedelic future in pursuit of transcendence and transformation, I would invite us to ask ourselves how the ancient archives can best serve us today, and tomorrow. How can we find in their dusty halls unlikely resources for our present, and our future?