

Mushrooms, Myth & Mithras



THE DRUG CULT THAT CIVILIZED EUROPE



Carl A. P. Ruck, Mark A. Hoffman,
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The First Supper: Entheogens and the Origin of Religion

Our greatest blessings come to us by way of madness, provided madness is given us by way of divine gift.

—Socrates, *Phaedrus*

Various traditions recall the events of a “First Supper.” In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the story unfolds in a garden called Eden. In that version of the myth, a serpent persuades humans to eat the fruit of a sacred Tree of Knowledge, thus bringing man and God together. In the patriarchal reformation of Judaism, with its morbid dread of the power of the goddess, the story of the First Supper was revised. But even there, the jealous god observes that the food made humans more like Himself, endowed with knowledge of good and evil and the wisdom of the angels.

Such substances are now termed *entheogens*. Combining the ancient Greek adjective *entheos* (“inspired, animated with deity”) and the verbal root in *genesis* (“becoming”), it

signifies “something that causes the divine to reside within one.” When used in rituals, entheogens can be seen as sacramental substances whose ingestion provides a communion and shared existence between the human and the divine. In the context of ceremony and ritual, the individual becomes “at one with God.”

Prior to the recent revival of interest in psychoactive plants and compounds, the need for a new word for these botanical mediators led psychiatrist Humphry Osmond to coin the term *psychedelic*, “to fathom Hell or soar angelic,” as he described it in a letter to Aldous Huxley. Within just a few years, however, conservative backlash against the 1960s counterculture had contaminated the word with the perception of criminality, recklessness, and abuse. The term was derived from the Greek words *psyche*, for the “human mind, soul or spirit,” and *delos*, “clear, manifest.” In fact, early experimentation with such substances in the modern West suggested similarity with psychotic states, as implied in the coinage of *psychomimetic* and *psychotropic*.

An entheogen is any substance that, when ingested, catalyzes or generates an altered state of consciousness that is deemed to have spiritual significance. Symbolic surrogates, lacking the appropriate chemistry of psychoactive plants and compounds, may induce a similar experience through cultural indoctrination and suggestion or personal subjectivity, and could also be termed entheogens. Like shamanism itself, entheogenic spirituality is dependent upon and defined by the states of consciousness experienced. In many cultures, accessing such states is considered culturally essential to the perpetuation of a society’s underlying natural and spiritual interconnection with the cosmos. Altered states of consciousness are very often considered in-

dispensable to such core shamanic practices as diagnosis of ailments, curing, soul retrieval, and communication with deceased ancestors.

In myth, transformations of consciousness are an integral element in the basic story of the hero or heroine who encounters pathways of communication between the human and an otherwise invisible realm, and such experiences are viewed as part of the ongoing renewal of the community's spiritual well-being. These transformations even underlie the semishamanic philosophies of *Gnosis* in the ancient Classical world. Among other peoples, they ensure perpetual contact with the wisdom and benevolence of the spiritual worlds.

Generally speaking, however, the study of entheogens is a comparatively recent phenomenon, as is their recognition as a formative influence on the shaping of both shamanic and so-called developed cultures. It is now widely accepted among specialists that entheogens and the ethnopharmacology of their plant sources represent one of the most direct, powerful, reliable, and indeed ancient means of inducing "authentic" shamanic states of consciousness. Entheogens may, in fact, be the most reliable way of inducing a profound and sustained alteration of consciousness commonly associated with ecstatic, shamanic states. Hence they are at the heart of such dependable and repeatable ceremonies as initiation rituals and other religious Mysteries.

When entheogens are taken in the context of a society's sacred shamanic ceremonies, the culture's mythopoeitic traditions are often relived and reinfused with profound immediacy and power, heightening their spiritual sense of connection.

Entheogenic epiphany is commonly described as a state

in which people experience their individual distinctions dissolve in a mystical, consubstantial communion with a force of profound sacred meaning. This ecstatic experience is interpreted as a pure and primal consciousness and sometimes described as the direct contact with the unobscured root of being. Since shamanic spirituality is inherently practical, it ascribes the highest importance to the regular access to such transcendental states; this point of contact ensures the undisturbed continuation of natural cycles and helps perpetually maintain a society's underlying sense of centeredness, equilibrium, and balance. From a shamanic perspective, ecstatic contact also protects against the potential dangers of unappeased or neglected gods or spirits. The entheogenic experience, though entirely strange, dissimilar, and inexplicable in mundane language, is often described as feeling more real and vibrant than ordinary consciousness.

Some of the plants used for shamanic rituals have yielded important medicines, for shamans are traditional healers, often called "wise ones." Other substances open up pathways to otherwise unseen worlds, with the spirit of the plant as guide to repair the invisible imbalance that is the cause of disease and plague. The word *medicine* has cognates in all the Indo-European languages and is related to *meditate* and *middle*, implying the doctor's original role as an entranced mediator.

Most probably derived from the Middle Dutch term *droge vate* ("dry vat"), the plants and substances employed were eventually called "drogues" in Middle English because they were usually dry when found in the apothecaries, which were also shops for poisons. The word was applied to narcotics and opiates toward the end of the nineteenth century. This has given "drug" an unfortunate pejorative connota-

tion that dominant religious groups often use to describe substances used by other spiritual communities. Similarly pejorative is the reference to entheogenic experience as “hallucinatory,” which once meant “dreamlike wandering,” but it has come to imply delusion and disconnection from reality rather than a heightened access to it.

Fossils show that approximately 1.5 million years ago, a sudden and scientifically baffling development in the proto-human neocortex emerged. It has been speculated that the explosion in brain size, the prerequisite for the evolution of modern humans, occurred when our hominid ancestors began to intentionally and regularly consume consciousness-altering foods. Such an important adaptive aid would have been well suited to our “trickster” disposition for creative thinking. Thus, in keeping with the myths of old, we suggest that perhaps our species did indeed first become truly human when we first ate of those sacred Eucharistic foods—initially by individuals, and then ritualistically in groups, in what can be seen as First Suppers.

Early humanity has left compelling testimonies of its entheogenic traditions in the archaeological record. In the Shanidar cave in Iraq, there is evidence that approximately 60,000 years ago Neanderthal culture had specialized knowledge of medicinal plants and incorporated them in the burial of an apparent shaman leader.

Today shamanism is recognized as the primal and universal belief system reaching back to deepest antiquity, a practice that survives intact in many cultures around the world. Its influence on the historical emergence of Western civilization, however, has been all but ignored. Historians of Europe’s debt to the Greco-Roman tradition have been largely blind to it in their own backyard, apart from admit-

ting, for instance, that the Druids may have been shamans and that shamanism was the likely archaic, animistic religion of Paleolithic "Old Europe." Even less of a shamanic provenance is ascribed to the Classical tradition, that great fountainhead of Western civilization.

Nevertheless, there were shamans in ancient Greece and Rome, and ongoing research continues to ascribe central entheogenic elements to the most historically important and influential ancient religious rites. At first it was assumed that shamanic techniques were a foreign importation imitated by those peoples along the shores of the Black Sea in the regions of Scythia and Thrace who, in turn, would have adopted the practices from their neighbors, the Tungus people of Siberia. It was there among the Siberian tribes that shamanism was first recognized and described by Western scholarship as a priestly practice.

As early as the sixth century BCE, various Greeks are described as having magically traveled to the mythological lands of the Hyperboreans, who dwelled beyond the North Wind. Using innovative means such as the toxins of their arrows or by metamorphosis into birds, they made the journey in order to visit the god Apollo while their bodies appeared lifeless. Upon returning, these Greek priestesses and priests were believed to have the ability to banish plagues and predict earthquakes. One of these travelers is credited as the founder of Apollo's great sanctuary at Delphi. Here the god's entranced prophet was consulted even by the leaders of nations, her unquestionable validity being such that Socrates devoted his life to fathoming the meaning of her famous ironic declaration that he who knew only that he knew nothing was the wisest man in Athens. What else could one call this world-renowned priestess but a shaman? Nor was

she alone; the experiences and beliefs of many important philosophers (as well as other very influential Greeks and Romans) qualify them as shamans. For example, the great mathematician Pythagoras, who lived in southern Italy, established a religious community devoted to dietary and spiritual practices, including the descent into caves that would induce the vision of the underlying mathematical relationships upon which this world of appearances is based.

We have an eyewitness to the shamanism of Pythagoras's contemporary Empedocles, as well as his entheogenic claims. Empedocles declared that he knew of all the drugs and could teach them to his initiates, for he had drunk fire from an "immortal potion" and could now calm or summon storms at his will and lead the souls of the deceased back up from Hades, the realm of the afterlife.

Such shamanic prowess is also described among the Gnostic Orphic religious communities, who claimed that their founder had a unique dietary regime and a special ecstatic "smoke" (probably referring to the inhalation of sacred incense). Orpheus, a priest of the Hyperborean Apollo, could summon beasts and was apparently considered an incarnation of his god since, upon death, he was compounded into an inebriating potion by his ecstatic female devotees while his disembodied head continued to prophesy. His devotees believed that the body (*soma*) was a tomb (*sema*), that this life was a deathlike incarnation of the soul that would be liberated upon death (as it is temporarily during ecstatic trances), judged and recycled through an astrological-planetary curriculum before reincarnating for a series of further trials on Earth. This process continues until the soul finally achieves "perfection," a condition described as a kind of a celestial actualization.

This basic shamanic idea of a detachable soul limited to Orphic doctrine underlies the literature of the Classical Age, where the soul is considered most alert and free in sleep, dreams, and trances, where it can acquire some of the knowledge it will attain upon the final liberation of death. This redemptive theology is consistent with the metaphysics of Empedocles and many other ancient models, including that of Roman Mithraism considered in the present work.

Parmenides gave an account of his soul's journey to the gateway between night and day, where he met a goddess who imparted her teaching of the Gnostic Vision. He was said to have produced the laws of his city after a vision quest in a cave. He and Pythagoras were not alone in achieving visionary knowledge.

Plato explicitly claims that his dialogues are just the preparation for a vision of the Ideal or archetype of reality that only comes after an extended regime of spiritual practices, for which he employed the famous metaphor of the Cave and a Mystery initiation. Plato, like Aristotle after him, was initiated into the venerable entheogenic Mysteries of Eleusis, the experience of which certainly colored his model of a visionary community, and the resulting revelation is thought to have deeply influenced his Doctrine of Forms.

Thus entheogenic shamanism is also at the heart of what we have come to call Greek philosophy. Sophists and philosophers were probably all shaman priests, at least in the common mind; a sophist, after all, is nothing other than a *sabio* or *sabia*. It was from such a "wise-woman," the famous Diotima, who was also adept at banishing plagues, that Socrates learned the metaphysical nature of love that he expounds in the *Symposium*. Aristophanes parodied Socrates as a sophist-shaman, first in *Clouds*, where his community of

disciples was shown digging up special roots in a profanation of a Mystery initiation and hallucinating on clouds of cannabis smoke. And later, after the actual scandal of the Profanations, when certain prominent Athenians were discovered to have used the Eleusinian potion for recreational purposes at their drinking parties, he was shown in *Birds* again profaning the Mystery in a shamanic rite of necromancy as he summoned up spirits of the dead through the medium of an entranced companion.

As is clear from the monastic communities of “wisemen” like Pythagoras, Plato, and the Orphics, shamanism came to be practiced as a group experience. The great Eleusinian Mystery was of this type, a shamanic initiation in which participants journeyed the other world in order to experience personally the opened pathway between the realms. The psychoactive agent for the mixed potion or *kykeon* was derived from ergot, a fungus that grows on grains. The Mystery was enacted for nearly two millennia and most of the greatest personages of the Greco-Roman world were initiated. Cicero testified that it was the paramount contribution of Athens to the civilized world. The Eleusinian ceremony was only the best known of similar Mysteries, like that of the Kabeiroi, enacted at various other sites.

Such communal shamanism was also the basis of the maenadism of the female devotees of Dionysus. Periodically the women of the city deserted their homes for a mountain revel where they enacted herbalist rituals and induced a rapture that has become the touchstone example of ecstasy. The men induced something similar in the drinking parties or *symposia*, where the wine was fortified with consciousness-altering additives.

Dionysus’s most enduring gift was his patronage of the

theater. Drama began as a shamanic experience, with an entranced narrator evoking the spirit of a deceased ancestor from his tomb to impersonate his story. As it developed in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE in Athens, it became a communal experience of shamanic possession spreading from the actors outward to the surrounding audience. To place them in the properly receptive mind, a special vinous potion was offered throughout the several days of performances. The great playwrights themselves appear to have composed their dramas in a state of shamanic trance and possession.

The Indian and Persian Soma rites, moreover, persisted among the early Indo-European immigrants to Mesopotamia and were assimilated by Semitic and other peoples, elements being incorporated into ancient Judaism and the Egyptian Mysteries.

By the Hellenistic period, similar and derivativeentheogenic rituals were well established among spiritual communities like the Therapeutai, a mystical Jewish group with such pronounced similarities to Christianity that they were once thought to be the earliest documented monastic community of the sect. From the shores of the Dead Sea, the Essene brotherhood is another group that influenced early Christian practice, being exposed to the trade routes with the Orient that facilitated the mingling of ideas between the great civilizations of Eurasia. The Persian Magi were visitors to many ancient cities, performing their shamanic rites from the Athenian marketplace to ancient Judea and beyond. Moreover, port cities like the Peiraeus of Athens and Roman Ostia had multiethnic populaces with sanctuaries of their foreign rites.

Journeying in the opposite direction, the shaman Apollonius of Tyana, a contemporary of Jesus and also declared a god, was actually initiated into a Soma rite by Brahmans in India. The Christian version of the rite was suppressed by the dominant Church or reserved for its elite, but it persisted at least as late as the seventeenth century in various Gnostic sects, notably among the followers of Mani in the East, condemned as heretical although even in Europe Manichaeism and occult Mysteries like alchemy persisted or were repeatedly reintroduced by travelers from the Holy Lands of the Middle East.

Thus, as we can see even from this cursory treatment, many of the most significant developments of Western culture were inspired by a central spiritual, ecstatic impetus that most often, if not always, included access to altered states through the use of entheogens. As Plato eloquently documented, “Our greatest blessings come to us by way of madness, provided madness is given us by way of divine gift.”

It is in this vein that we now consider the lasting significance of the entheogenic Mithraic tradition as it existed—and persisted—throughout Eurasia, how the Roman Army adapted and brought the older Vedic and Persian traditions with them into Europe, as well as the “civilizing” influence it has had even into the modern epoch.

Preface

Also Sprach Zarathustra

When Zarathustra was thirty years old, he left his home and the lake of his home, and went into the mountains. There he enjoyed his spirit and his solitude, and for ten years did not weary of it. But at last his heart changed—and, rising one morning with the rosy dawn, he went before the sun, and spake thus unto it:

Thou great star! What would be thy happiness if thou hadst not those for whom thou shinest! For ten years hast thou climbed hither unto my cave: thou wouldst have wearied of thy light and of the journey, had it not been for me, mine eagle and my serpent.

Lo! I am weary of my wisdom, like the bee that hath gathered too much honey; I need hands outstretched to take it. I would fain bestow and distribute, until the wise have once more become joyous in their folly, and the poor happy in their riches.

Therefore must I descend into the deep: as thou doest in the evenings, when thou goest behind the sea, and givest light also to the nether-world, thou exuberant star!

Bless the cup that is about to overflow, that the water may flow golden out of it, and carry everywhere the reflection of thy bliss! Lo! This cup is again going to empty itself, and Zarathustra is again going to be a man.

Thus began Zarathustra's down-going.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, Zarathustra's

Prologue, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

Richard Strauss's symphonic poem, Opus 30, 1896, was inspired by Nietzsche's lyric parable of the quasi-mythical Persian prophet known to the Greeks as Zoroaster, a possible contemporary of Moses and the heretical pharaoh Akhenaten. The music's ecstatic "Dawn Fanfare" was used in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

That is all that most people know about a religion that arose in what is now Iran some 3,000 to 3,500 years ago. Zarathustra's belief in a single solar god, Ahura Mazda, became the religion of Persia until the Arabic Muslims invaded in 650 CE, and the Zoroastrians, for the most part, fled. Today they are reduced to some 200,000 adherents, mostly located in India, although a few have established themselves in Australia, the United States, and elsewhere. Reluctant to proselytize in general and specifically forbidden in their former homeland and most Muslim countries, they maintain a low profile in the modern world. Zoroastrians worship the Sun and the purifying power of fire, with little awareness, at least in public, of their own ancient traditions. In

India, mostly in Bombay, they are known as Parsis (or Farsis), which simply means Persians; in their former Iranian homeland, they are called Gabars, which means “infidels.” Zoroastrianism also survived in medieval alchemical symbolism, and its traditions even fused with Islam in the mystical Muslim theology of the Sufis.

Zarathustra may have invented monotheism, or he was, at least, probably its earliest proponent. Although often dated to the seventh century BCE, estimates sometimes place him almost a millennium earlier, foreshadowing Judaism and the solar cult of the Egyptian pharaoh Akenaten, a tradition that continued into Christianity and Islam. Akenaten reduced the other deities to aspects of the One God, reforming a still older religion of opposed forces of light and darkness, goodness and evil.

In the reformed religion, Mithras, who was originally one of the four great deities, became an intermediary with the One God, much like Christ with the Father. The original religion was very much older; it was the religion of the Magi, shaman sorcerers, that the Persians brought home with them from the steppes of Central Asia. It was closely related to the religion of the Aryan invaders of India. Thus the earliest texts of Zoroastrianism and those of Hinduism show an extraordinary similarity of language and ideas.

Its sacred text is the *Vendidad*. The oldest part of it is a collection of hymns called the *Gathas*, some supposedly written by Zarathustra himself. Over the course of millennia, other texts were added. The entire scripture is called the *Avesta*, to which commentaries known as the *Zand* were added, so that the entire sacred text is called the *Zand Avesta*. The various texts were transmitted orally and were probably codified and finally preserved in the palace library of the Persian Darius

and the Achaemenid dynasty (648–330 BCE). The Persian *Avesta* is comparable to the Sanskrit *Rig Veda*, a sacred text of Hinduism that originated roughly at the same time and was preserved orally until it was finally recorded in writing in Late Antiquity or the early Middle Ages.

The reformed theology was not so much a battle between good and evil as an evocation of the higher potential within man (what Nietzsche termed the *Übermensch* or Superior Man) by a battle fought by conflicting interests within each individual's soul, although Nietzsche's interpretation was directed toward the liberation of man from all forms of theological hypocrisy.

The earlier belief in a cosmic struggle, however, never died out. The basic dualism of the universe surfaced in the medieval Albigensian Cathar Christian heresy in Provence and the Pyrénées, as well as the Bogamils of Bulgaria and Bosnia, the latter probably influenced directly by Persian sources. Even earlier dualism was involved in the numerous Gnostic sects of Christianity, among them Manichaeism, which derived from one of Zoroastrianism's last prophets, Mani, who saw himself as a follower of Christ and, typical of the syncretism of the ancient world, combined ideas from Buddhism and other central Asian religions.

A version of the Persian religion became popular in the Roman Empire from the first century BCE, centered upon Mithras, who is almost indistinguishable from the Greek hero Perseus. (The former slaughtered a bull, while the latter is known for decapitating the Gorgon Medusa.) Mithraism became one of the dominant religions of the Roman Empire. Although derived from the Zoroastrianism of the Achaemenid monarchs, it had assimilated many additional elements as it passed through the Middle East, including

certain astrological metaphors and incorporating the latest discoveries in astronomy. It also absorbed the symbolism of the agricultural fertility cults of Mesopotamia, although its most ancient cultural roots pertained to nomadic hunter peoples of the Asiatic steppes. Nevertheless, even before its advent to the West, many prominent guests of the Persian elite were apparently offered an opportunity to be initiated into something that seems very similar to the Greco-Roman version, and even in its Persian original, it was a brotherhood of warriors cemented by a visionary Eucharist.

Mithraism initiated its members through seven stages of transcendence, culminating with an ecstatic vision in which one journeyed into a sacred realm where one experienced the entire pattern of the Universe, an experience that was expressed in the prevalent Roman philosophical system known as Stoicism.

Mithraism was a fierce competitor with Christianity, as was the more ancient Mystery religion of Eleusis. With the conversion of the Roman Empire under Constantine and the subsequent persecutions by Theodosius, the sanctuaries where the secret Mithras rituals were practiced were demolished. The Church fathers were well aware of the similarities between the two religions, and they desperately argued that Satan must have had advanced knowledge of the coming of Christ and preemptively mocked the Christian rites. Indeed, as the earlier of these popular Roman religions, Mithraism had a wide and formative influence upon the fledging Christian cult. Despite the loss of Imperial patronage, the fall of the Roman Empire, and the best efforts of the Church Triumphant to relegate it to oblivion, Mithraic traditions survived and even thrived in the esoteric undercurrents of Western civilization, and they do so to this day.

It is essential for our understanding of the Classical heritage of ancient Greece and the spread of Greco-Roman culture to Europe to come to terms with the fact that Western civilization was profoundly influenced by a secret spiritual practice that revolved around the use of entheogenic plants and mushrooms to usher transcendent states of consciousness.