

## **Entheogenic Mysticism: A Jamesian Assessment<sup>1</sup>**

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In my anthropology of religion course “Magic, Myth, and Religion,” I devote a substantial amount of time to a discussion of the centrality of non-ordinary states of consciousness in the religious life of many cultures. During this section of the course, I focus on how individuals in numerous cultures use fasting, dancing, drumming, chanting, breathing exercises, and so on, as ways to facilitate contact with various spiritual realities. In this section of the course, I also discuss the ways in which sacred (i.e., consciousness altering) plants are ritually ingested by individuals in several cultures, especially in the Americas, in an attempt to open themselves to spiritual dimensions of existence. My students are typically quite fascinated, for instance, to learn about the Huichol people’s annual peyote pilgrimage, or the role that ayahuasca plays within the context of the Santo Daime tradition (a Brazilian syncretistic new religious movement), or the centrality of the San Pedro cactus in coastal Peruvian curanderismo. However, after my students have been exposed to numerous detailed accounts of the visionary/mystical experiences that practitioners in these traditions have had after ingesting these sacred substances, almost inevitably some student will ask a question that goes something like the following: “Aren’t all of these so called visionary/mystical experiences merely hallucinations caused by taking drugs?”

As a professor, I think that it is crucial to address this question. After all, at least on the face of it, it is understandable why students would raise such questions. Given the taken-for-granted “scientific” (i.e., materialistic and positivistic) perspective that most of my students have internalized, it is easy to see how they would interpret the dramatic epiphanies produced by ingesting different species of sacred plants as simply delusory hallucinations, as nothing more than the result of the malfunctioning neuro-chemical activity within the brains of those who have

taken these psychoactive substances. Given this set of presuppositions, it can be very difficult for my students to comprehend why we should take seriously the claims made by those within these religious traditions who advocate the ritual use of entheogens (i.e., substances that “generate god or spirit within”).

Having internalized the message that all drugs are psychologically and physiologically harmful, socially destructive, and addictive (with the significant exception of socially approved versions of drugs, such as alcohol, Prozac, nicotine, and caffeine) it can be tough for my students to swallow (so to speak) that within many cultures in the Americas, mind-altering substances, such as peyote, psilocybin mushrooms, and ayahuasca, are seen as gifts from the gods, are valued as powerful medicines for the body and the mind, are taken in order to nurture harmonious relationships with others, and are deeply revered as the source of not only their music and art, but also their most fundamental religious beliefs and practices. It can be hard for my students to imagine that people within these cultures would claim, repeatedly, fervently, that rejection of this visionary knowledge is, quite simply, a form of insanity. It can take quite a lot of persuasive evidence on my part for them to begin to accept even the possibility that entheogenic substances are non-addictive, that there is no evidence that they are psychologically or physiologically harmful if used within structured ritual contexts, and that they have been safely consumed by human beings for possibly tens of thousands of years.

My guess is that many of you in this audience might well sympathize with my students’ reluctance to take entheogenic mystical and visionary experiences as seriously as those that are catalyzed by non-entheogenic “spiritual technologies,” such as meditation, drumming, dancing, fasting, prayer, and so on. It is just so easy to think that the alterations of consciousness that are associated with the ingestion of peyote, psilocybin, and ayahuasca are merely hallucinations.

As I often point out to my students, however, this negative assessment of the experiences of those who take entheogens within a religious context is rooted in a taken-for-granted understanding of the relationship between the brain and consciousness. As the American philosopher and psychologist William James points out in an essay published in 1898 (“Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine”), the standard materialistic understanding of the relationship between the brain and consciousness assumes that the brain itself produces the “stuff” of consciousness in much the same way that steam is produced by a kettle, or light is produced by an electric circuit. From this perspective, which James calls the “productive” theory of consciousness, consciousness is created by the various complex chemical interactions that take place inside the brain.<sup>ii</sup>

If we assume that the neurochemical activity of the brain *produces* our states of consciousness, then it makes sense to also assume that if a people eat psilocybin mushrooms or peyote buttons, or drink ayahuasca, that the so-called mystical experiences or religious visions that they describe are nothing more than the hallucinatory byproducts of cerebral malfunctions caused by the chemical activity of these substances. However, what many of us may not realize is that, from the perspective of the productive theory of consciousness, *every* mystical or religious experience is hallucinatory, they too are nothing more than mental aberrations caused by the misfirings of neurons in the brain. From the perspective of the productive theory of consciousness, the only real world is the world that is perceived through the senses. By definition, therefore, if you are having extra-sensory perceptions, then there is simply something wrong with your cerebral circuitry. From the perspective of the productive theory of consciousness, the exalted mystical experiences of Teresa of Avila, for instance, have exactly the

same status as the peyote visions of the headman in a Native American Church: *both* are hallucinations generated by pathological activity of the brain.

In James' essay, however, he points out that there is an alternative way to understand the relationship between the brain and consciousness (and therefore, an alternative way to understand the genesis of mystical and religious experiences). It is also possible, James writes, that consciousness pre-exists the brain, and that the role of the brain is to mold that pre-existent consciousness into various forms. Seen from this perspective, the brain's task would be to receive and transmit limited forms of this consciousness in much the same way as, to use an anachronistic example, a radio receives portions of pre-existing radio waves and then transmits them through the air as sound waves. James refers to this relationship between the brain and a pre-existing larger consciousness as the "transmissive function," and points out that this transmissive function is operative "in the case of a colored glass, a prism, or a refracting lens," when "the energy of light, no matter how produced, is by the glass shifted and limited in color, and by the lens or prism determined to a certain path and shape." <sup>iii</sup>

James insists that it is just as logical and scientific to postulate that the brain receives, limits, directs, and shapes pre-existent states of awareness as it is to postulate that the brain produces different states of consciousness. *Both* theories take for granted that there is a relationship between the brain and consciousness. According to both theories, an alteration in the neurochemical interactions of the brain corresponds to an alteration in consciousness. What is not so self evident, however, is that the neurochemical interactions of the brain *cause* the corresponding alterations of consciousness. What is just as likely, at least from a philosophical perspective, is that alterations in the brain chemistry "open the door" to levels of consciousness that were previously inaccessible. (Another option is that alterations within the pre-existing field

of consciousness are what cause the shifts in the neurochemical activity of the brain. This way of understanding the relationship between consciousness and the brain is how many cultures would, at least tacitly, explain states of mediumship where culturally endorsed spiritual beings are said to speak and act in-and-through the willing body of a religious practitioner. This option is also, more prosaically, what many of us tacitly assume takes place when we believe that our intentions, thoughts and feelings, i.e., our states of consciousness, direct the activity of our physical body.)

James emphasizes that “the theory of production is . . . not a jot more simple or credible in itself than any other conceivable theory. It is only a little more popular.”<sup>iv</sup> Indeed, James claims that, in some ways, the transmissive function has certain theoretical advantages over its more popular competitor. If the transmissive theory of consciousness is accepted, then consciousness “does not have to be generated *de novo* in a vast number of places. It exists already, behind the scenes,” intimately connected with this world.<sup>v</sup>

James points out another apparent advantage of the transmissive theory of consciousness over the productive theory: the transmissive theory is able to account coherently for a wide variety of phenomena that the productive theory has difficulty explaining. Such phenomena as “religious conversions, providential leadings in answer to prayer, instantaneous healings, premonitions, apparitions at time of death, clairvoyant visions or impressions, and the whole range of mediumistic capacities” are all more easily understood with the transmissive theory of consciousness.<sup>vi</sup> This is so, as James notes, because the productive theory of consciousness is intimately linked with sense perceptions, but in the case of many of these less orthodox phenomena, “it is often hard to see where the sense-organs can come in.”<sup>vii</sup> For instance, as James mentions, a medium might have knowledge of the personal life of his or her client that would be

impossible to obtain from the senses, or a person might see a vision of someone who, hundreds of miles away, was at that very moment dying. James points out that it is difficult to see how the productive theory of consciousness can explain how these types of knowledge were produced within a single brain. But if the transmissive theory is accepted, the answer is apparent: “they don't have to be 'produced,' – they exist ready-made in the transcendental world,” so that in “cases of conversion, providential leadings, sudden mental healings, etc. it seems to the subjects themselves . . . as if a power from without, quite different from the ordinary action of the senses or of the sense-led mind, came into their life, as if [their life] suddenly opened into that greater life in which it has its source.”<sup>viii</sup>

James believes that psychologists and philosophers choose between the transmissive theory and the productive theory of consciousness based on what type of world they are willing or able to accept (i.e., based on their metaphysical assumptions). If these thinkers are limited to a purely materialistic or naturalistic perspective, then the productive function of the brain will be all that they will acknowledge as valid. If, however, these thinkers assume that “the whole universe of material things . . . [is] a surface-veil of phenomena, hiding and keeping back the world of genuine realities,” if they believe that life is similar to Percy Shelly's words in his poem “Adonais,” in which “Life, like a dome of many-colored glass, Stains the white radiance of eternity,” then they will acknowledge that the transmissive function of the brain is a legitimate possibility.<sup>ix</sup> Utilizing Shelly's metaphor, James theorizes that our brains might indeed be places in this “dome” where the “beams” of consciousness could most easily enter into our realm of experience. In that case, as the “white radiance” of that larger pre-existing consciousness enters our brains, then a type of refracting and “staining and distortion” would naturally occur, shaping

that greater consciousness into the personal, imperfect, and unique forms that consciousness takes inside “our finite individualities here below.”<sup>x</sup>

Drawing upon the work of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, Aldous Huxley offers a strikingly similar explanation of the relationship between consciousness and the brain in his 1954 book *The Doors of Perception*. Huxley points out that according to Bergson, each of us is, under the surface of our normal everyday awareness, connected to, and potentially aware of, the entire universe. We are normally, however, cut off from this “Mind at Large” because our brain screens or filters out the vast majority of what we are potentially able to perceive in order to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this almost infinite amount of information. Our brains, therefore, act in essence as biological reducing valves. Seen from this perspective, the primary function of our brain is not so much to *produce* consciousness as it is to limit the torrential flow of information that is pouring into us, moment by moment, to the bare minimum we need to survive.

Drawing upon his own experiences taking mescaline (the active chemical component of peyote and San Pedro), Huxley postulates that perhaps the ingestion of sacred substances (or conversely, various spiritual disciplines) “impair the efficiency of the cerebral reducing valve,” resulting in an influx of extrasensory knowledge as well as perceptions of a world of visionary beauty.<sup>xi</sup> He theorizes that perhaps entheogens (as well as, at least implicitly, “spiritual technologies,” such as chanting, fasting, meditation, contemplation, ecstatic dance, and so on) allow us to tap into “previously untapped levels of our own mind . . . and previously unrecognized dimensions or levels of reality”; seen in this way, these sacred substances do not “distort reality,” but rather, “disclose dimensions or levels of existence that are otherwise screened by the rational ego.”<sup>xii</sup>

While many, if not most, academics and scientists might scoff at the alternative understanding of the relationship between the brain and consciousness that is proposed by James, Bergson, and Huxley, there have been a handful of current theorists who have taken this non-mainstream perspective quite seriously. For instance, George Wald, a Nobel Prize winning physiologist from Harvard points out:

There is no way of knowing whether the brain contains consciousness in the sense that it is producing it or whether it is simply a reception and transmission mechanism which, as Bergson has argued, has the function of selection and realization of conscious images and not the production of such images. As a neuroscientist, one can only intervene in the brain and record whether the intervention in particular parts of the brain results in the evocation or abolishment of conscious experience.<sup>xiii</sup>

As Wald notes, simply because there is a correspondence between brain activity and states of consciousness does not indicate that those states were produced by the brain, or somehow localized within it. Suppose, for example, that we compare the brain to a television set. There is, apparently, a one-to-one relationship between the electrical and mechanical activity of the television set and the programs that are appearing on the screen. But no one ever claims that the program that is appearing on the screen has been *produced* by the television. Instead, a television set receives, limits, directs, and shapes pre-existing electro-magnetic signals of various frequencies into the programs that we watch on the screen. Similarly, as Wald notes, if we “pull a transistor out of [our] T.V. set and it no longer works,” we would not (or at least should not)



“conclude that the transistor is the source of the program,” anymore than we are forced to conclude that the brain is what produces consciousness simply because when a person’s brain has been damaged by a severe organic illness or trauma, her or his cognitive abilities are severely impaired.<sup>xiv</sup>

Seen from this perspective, we can theorize that entheogens are simply a way to “change the channel” of the “television” of the brain so that it can receive information from other (and in this case, “spiritual”) dimensions of reality. If we are willing to accept this alternate way of understanding the relationship between the activity of the brain and changes in our states of consciousness (at least as a philosophical possibility), then the mystical experiences that take place after ingesting various entheogens can be understood as potentially valid visionary/mystical experiences, and not necessarily as delusive psychopathological hallucinations.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James cautions that it is crucial that we question our frequent tendency to assume that any insight that arises in conjunction with a powerful alteration of our physiology is invalid. As he points out, we would never dismiss the validity of a scientific insight simply because it arose during a fever. Similarly, we should not dismiss the insights of a mystic or visionary simply because their body’s chemistry has shifted in certain respects. In much the same way, therefore, given the assumption that the visions or insights that arise in conjunction with drinking ayahuasca, or eating peyote are said to arise from superconscious dimensions of reality, it is quite possible that they may in actuality be *more* truthful and beneficial to our well being than the perceptions and beliefs that emerge from our normal waking state of consciousness. They should not be prematurely dismissed simply because of a bias in favor of the state of consciousness that our culture assumes to be normative.

Similarly, as scholars of religion, we might need to question the assumption that the mystical experiences that take place within more well-known mystical traditions such as, Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist forms of mysticism, are inherently superior to the mystical insights that are obtained via the ingestion of entheogens. But why should we make this assumption? What are the criteria by which we assess whether mystical experiences (whether entheogenically-inspired or not) are valid and/or valuable? Once again, James's perspective offers us a way to begin to answer some of these important questions.

In the *Varieties*, James offers the three-fold proto-pragmatic criteria of "immediate luminosity," "philosophical reasonableness," and "moral helpfulness" to assess the validity and value of religious/mystical experiences. "Immediate luminosity" is the criterion that encourages us to take seriously the experiential component of a religious state of mind – its immediate force, its raw voltage, its direct, tangible feeling. "Philosophical reasonableness" is the criterion that we can use to assess whether a religious state of mind can be shown to be reasonable and logical by virtue of its place within an articulate and defensible philosophical system of beliefs. Finally, "moral helpfulness" is demonstrated when and if a religious state of mind can be shown to initiate, on the whole and over the long run, positive consequences for the individual and/or the community. These criteria are not mutually exclusive, but rather interact with, and depend upon, each other. Furthermore, this evaluative procedure is not a matter of precisely weighing the percentage of each criterion's importance, but instead, is a holistic, cumulative process. As James emphasizes, the final test for assessing a state of mind is not the individual "score" of each of these criteria, but rather it is their cumulative weight, the way they work as a whole and on the whole.<sup>xv</sup>

What I would like to do during the remainder of the time that we have together is to apply these three criteria to a specific test case to see whether they might help us to begin the difficult, yet important, task of determining whether the mystical experiences found in an entheogenic tradition are as inspiring, trustworthy, and transformative as those found in other, more well known, mystical traditions.

For the purposes of our discussion, I have chosen to focus on the Santo Daime tradition. After giving a brief overview of the history and major beliefs and practices of this Brazilian entheogenically-based religious movement, I will examine several mystical narratives arising from within the tradition to illustrate the extent to which these entheogenically-inspired experiences match up with the power, immediacy, and luminosity of mystical experiences found in other non-entheogenic traditions (i.e., I will attempt to assess their immediate luminosity, James' first criterion). I will then briefly describe some of the central (albeit often implicit) philosophical understandings that undergird the religious teachings of the Santo Daime tradition, in order to explore whether their depth, complexity, and coherence equals that of other mystical traditions (i.e., I will attempt to assess their philosophical reasonableness, James' second criterion). And finally, I will offer various accounts of the personal and social transformative effects of taking ayahuasca within the ritual context of the Santo Daime tradition, as a way to investigate the extent to which this entheogenic tradition can be at least as personally and socially transformative as other more well known mystical traditions (i.e., I will attempt to assess their moral helpfulness, James' third criterion).

The Santo Daime religious movement began late in the second decade of the twentieth century. Raimundo Irineu Serra, a seven foot tall black man working as a border guard deep in the Amazonian rainforest at the border between Brazil and Peru became interested in the use of ayahuasca in the tribal ceremonies of the people of the area. Ayahuasca is a tea created from

boiling together in water a vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and the leaves from a bush (*Psychotria viridis*). Neither the vine nor the leaf, separately, is psychoactive. It is only when they are combined (especially in a ritualistic context) that an entheogen is produced.

Irineu Serra, after drinking ayahuasca, had a powerful experience in which he claimed that the Spirit of the Moon revealed herself to him as the Rainha da Floresta, the Queen of the Forest. Later identified as the Virgin Mary, this sacred Being told Irineu that he had a special mission on earth: to establish a new religious movement called the Santo (Holy) Daime. (It can be said, therefore, that the entire tradition of the Santo Daime itself arose from an entheogenically inspired experience.)

Within this new context the sacramental tea was also given a new name, i.e., the “Daime,” a word that comes from the Portuguese verb “dar”: to give. It is linked to invocations that are frequently present during Santo Daime rituals: *dai-me amor*, *dai-me luz*, *dai-me forza* (“give me love, give me light, give me strength”). Within the Santo Daime tradition, the Daime is understood to be a sacrament that embodies the consciousness of a vastly intelligent and compassionate divine Being, a Being that, for Santo Daime practitioners, is equated with both Christ and the Holy Spirit, a Being who, in the words of one of the leaders of the movement, “incarnates in order to provide teaching, comfort, healing, and spiritual evolution to those” who take it within themselves as a liquid form of communion, a Being who opens a “gateway to other dimensions where other Beings reside.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Mestre Irineu (“Master Irineu”) as he was eventually called by his followers, gradually became well known as a powerful healer, visionary and spiritual teacher. In 1940, he established the first Santo Daime center in the town of Rio Branco, Brazil. Over time, complex and highly structured rituals developed that centered on taking the Daime as a sacrament and thus the shape

of the Santo Daime tradition as we know it today began to emerge – a religion that although rooted in Christianity, also incorporates within itself elements of native South American spirituality, as well as aspects of African religiosity and Spiritism.

With the death of Mestre Irineu in 1971, the group split into several different branches. The most well known “line” of the Santo Daime tradition is that which centered around the charismatic leadership of Sebastiao Mota de Melo, later known as Padrinho Sebastiao.

Sebastiao Mota de Melo was born in 1920 and grew up in the middle of the Amazon rainforest. He made his living as a rubber tapper and builder of dugout canoes, but spiritually, he became known from a relatively early age as a powerful visionary and mediumistic healer of the impoverished people of that area. At the age of 38, following the guidance of one of the beings that he frequently incorporated in his mediumistic sessions, Padrinho Sebastiao traveled with his family in 1958 to Rio Branco. He had been suffering for several years from a fatal liver disease, and in hopes of a cure, he approached Mestre Irineu.

After taking the Daime, Padrinho Sebastiao had a series of powerful visionary experiences. In one of these experiences, he watched, from outside his body, as two resplendently beautiful beings took out his skeleton and abdominal organs from his body, without any pain, all the while vibrating his body, rocking it from side by side. These beings then used a hook that “opened, separated, and extracted” from his abdominal organs “three nail-sized insects” which the beings of light claimed were responsible for Padrinho Sebastiao’s illness.<sup>xvii</sup> In Sebastiao’s account of this experience, he reports the following: “[the being] who had been seated next to my prostrate body, which was still stretched out on the floor, came very close to me and said, ‘Here it is! What was killing you were these three insects, but now you will not die from them any more.’ Then they closed my body. . . . I healed, like a child.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Padrinho Sebastiao was completely cured after this experience and, not surprisingly, he decided to become one of Mestre Irineu's followers. They quickly became very close, and with permission from Mestre Irineu, Padrinho Sebastiao set up a Santo Daime center of his own outside of Rio Branco. After Mestre Irineu's death, the community that had grown around Padrinho Sebastiao continued to flourish. But in the late 1970's he began to receive inner guidance to leave this location. Therefore, in 1980, Padrinho Sebastiao, his family, and about 100 followers left the Rio Branco area, with almost no material resources, and relocated deep in the rainforest at a site called Rio do Ouro. After three years of hard work, building houses, clearing and cultivating land, enduring sickness and hardship, a private landowner turned up, claiming his right to the land. Not wanting any trouble and trusting his inner guidance, the Santo Daime members left Rio do Ouro, and during the years of 1983-84, about 300 members settled in what came to be known as Céu do Mapiá (Heaven of Mapiá), located even deeper within the rainforest, on the banks of the Mapia river.

Soon afterwards, affiliated Santo Daime centers were set up in major Brazilian cities. These centers attracted many new members, but they also drew attention to the movement. A commission of army officials, university teachers, psychiatrists, psychologists, doctors and others was appointed to study the use of the Daime and visited Céu do Mapia in 1984. A similar commission had already visited the Rio do Ouro community in 1982. Both of these commissions wrote a report to the authorities that concluded that no negative psychological or social effects were linked to the ritual use of ayahuasca. Nonetheless, the Brazilian government decided to ban the use of ayahuasca in 1985. Due to the uproar that this decision created, another commission was put together in 1986. Eventually, after a careful investigation, the commission once again made a positive assessment of the Santo Daime tradition (as well as other traditions that used

ayahuasca in ritual contexts), and the ban against ayahuasca was legally removed in Brazil in 1986.

After the death of Padrinho Sebastiao in 1990, one of his sons, Alfredo Mota de Melo, now called Padrinho Alfredo, took over the leadership of the movement. With his blessings, Santo Daime centers were started all around the world, particularly in Europe, Japan, and the United States.

What participants in all of these centers share is the desire to meet regularly in order to drink Daime collectively as a sacrament. During all of the rituals (or “works,” as they are called) of the Santo Daime, participants gather together (men on one side, women on the other) around a central altar table and then sing (often for hours, with great reverence and devotion) collections of simple, yet hauntingly beautiful hymns that were originally “given” from the spiritual world to the more advanced members of the movement. According to the Santo Daime practitioners, praying and praising God together musically, with great purity and focus, accompanied by the rhythmic shaking of maracás, generates a powerful current of transformative spiritual energy and creates an uplifting, harmonious environment that is conducive to profound inner communion with the spiritual world and with the numerous beings that are said to exist there.

The powerful visionary/mystical experiences that individuals have during the Santo Daime works are called “miracaos.” Like classical mystical experiences, these miracaos are said to be exceedingly difficult to describe, at least with any degree of adequacy, but many of the experiences that *are* shared manage to be quite evocative. For instance, one Santo Daime practitioner describes his experiences in the following way:

“During my years of taking the Holy Daime, perhaps what stands out the most is feeling this incredibly powerful divine force working within me, with so much compassion and wisdom,

clearing my body, mind, and energy field of anything that stands in the way of how this Light and Love wants to express itself in and through me.”

He goes on to note: “Another way in which I frequently experience the Daime working within me is that I will feel that I have been lifted, almost bodily, into another dimension of reality, one that is always present but that is normally hidden from my sight. From within this higher vibratory level of existence, I’ll frequently see wave after wave of divine beauty with my eyes closed, visions that effortlessly flower within me as radiant, living, blossoming, geometric patterns of color, as profoundly significant manifestations of God’s abundant, joyous, and exuberant creativity. And if my eyes are open, I’ll look around me, and while I’m not physically seeing anything different, nonetheless somehow everything is brighter, absolutely perfect, transfigured, just shimmering with God’s presence and Light.”

Continuing, this practitioner adds: “I also remember one time, at the height of one of these moments, when we were all singing hymns together in the salao [the room where the works take place] and I was filled with so much ecstasy. I knew then, with this awestruck certainty, that all of us in that room were Christ, fully Christ, manifesting himself within us, as us. I could see that we were absolutely filled with divine glory, and that it was pouring through us. We were all singing together with such love, as this golden, radiantly beautiful Light shone within us and around us, Light that was offered as a gift to the entire world. One of my Daime brothers looked at me, just at that moment, and his eyes were really bright. I knew, somehow, that he was sharing this experience with me. He reached over, gave me this wonderful hug and said: ‘Remember this, don’t forget this.’ And I never have.”<sup>xix</sup>

Another Santo Daime practitioner shared what she experienced the first time that she took the Daime: “I have to begin by saying what did *not* happen—since so many of my feared



expectations, even about how I would *physically* be able to handle the Santo Daime, did not manifest. I was prepared perhaps to regurgitate it right back up—to vomit the murky brown, intensely bitter, distinctive-tasting drink. I was prepared perhaps to undergo one continuous state of nausea and/or emotional turmoil throughout my whole time under the influence of Daime and to end up flat on my back throughout the whole experience—or perhaps to be so completely freaked out that I’d simply want to flee the scene altogether. What I was *not* prepared for, right after taking my initial, partial shot glass of Santo Daime, was the sweetness of the experience—the way in which I so easily surrendered to the slow, thick, woozy feeling of the Daime’s take-over of my physical being—the way that I so easily yielded to the pull of the Daime, the way that I was taken down the rabbit hole of an inner world that seemed both foreign and familiar to me, both intricately detailed and vast, both intensely personal and universal.”

Continuing her account of her first experience with the Santo Daime, this woman goes on to say: “One of my defining and ongoing experiences of Santo Daime during that first encounter was the way in which I became essentially pinned in my seat, held bolt upright and extremely still—again as though not of my own volition, but due to the force of the current that was flowing within me. I was able to sit for hours at a time, literally held in place, serenely cross-legged in the blissful posture of a yogini in samadhi. As this seeming physical paralysis would take over, I was also made to understand (in the subtle ways that the Daime was always guiding and instructing me) that this bodily stillness was essential for my inner learning and deepening—that this was how the Daime needed to do her work within me. I would be sitting so deeply indrawn and completely at peace, while simultaneously I would be aware of the lively, even at times riotous, momentum of the singing and rattling that was filling the room. At times there would be a cacophony of other things also happening. For instance, I would be wrenchingly aware of this or that person (or several people) loudly weeping, undergoing some deeply personal, emotional

clearing. Or I would be aware of this or that person physically purging into one of the buckets that were set just outside of the open door.”

She added: “Although I have experienced in meditation before the sensation of being glued upright and still in my seat, as though it would take a great force of personal will to move even so much as a finger (even if I had wanted to!), I have never experienced such a sustained and internally directed period of time with such deep inner rapture and peace. It was as though I was the center around which everything was spiraling—the spiritual core at the heart of the world of matter, the prism of Light in and through which the unfolding, divine play of Consciousness itself was arising and subsiding, manifesting and dissolving the world of form and illusion. Time after time, any fear or question about what was happening to me that would momentarily surface was profoundly met and resolved. I came to understand at a level beyond mere mental comprehension that only what is *not* real can ever die, that only what is illusion—the egoic structure, defended being, belief in limitation, suffering based on ignorance and darkness, and so on—can ever die. Amazing insights about the unified nature of Consciousness and matter as well as specific directives about my personal life mission spontaneously arose: everything was happening in such harmony and perfection.”<sup>xx</sup>

These two accounts seem to match up well with many, if not most, of the classical narratives of mystical experiences that can be found within more well-known mystical traditions. I would therefore suggest that in terms of James’s three criteria, these experiences clearly manifest the deeply felt, undeniably powerful impact of the criterion of “immediate luminosity.”

What is not perhaps quite as clear, at least at this moment, is whether these experiences live up to the other two criteria. However, if we look carefully at the Santo Daime tradition, it is possible to see the “philosophical reasonableness” of this religious movement manifesting itself

in and through its rich and multifaceted, albeit primarily implicit, set of religious teachings. Within the Santo Daime tradition, some of the most profound teachings are said to arise directly within each individual in-and-through the miracaos. Teachings within the Santo Daime tradition also take more public and concrete form within the revealed hymns that serve as the musical heart of the movement, as well as via spontaneous talks given by advanced practitioners during the context of the ritual works.

It is, of course, impossible within the very limited time that we have available today for me to give anything more than a brief glimpse of the range and depth of these teachings, but perhaps this task can be made easier by drawing upon some terse, yet eloquent, reflections on the central tenets of the tradition that have been written by a handful of the more experienced and articulate members within the movement. For instance, in the preface to *Forest of Visions*, one of the two books written about the Santo Daime tradition in the English language, Jonathan Goldman, an Oregon-based long time practitioner of the movement, shares some of his insights into the metaphysical assumptions that undergird the Santo Daime religious tradition.

According to Goldman, it is understood within the Santo Daime community that Jesus Christ “implanted a conscious seed in this world by his life and death. This was his mission: to initiate the vast change in human consciousness that is now beginning to come to fruition.”<sup>xxi</sup> With Jesus’ death, this “living matrix of consciousness,” this “organizing principle of humanity’s awakening” realized the distortions that would inevitably come to the teachings of the Christ and therefore chose to enter the rain forest, embodying itself in the jagube vine and the rainha leaf. However, as Goldman goes on to say, this superconscious being “through the Holy Daime . . . is [currently] calling to Itself, one by one, the many souls who are ready to rapidly awaken the seed that Jesus planted, the Christ Consciousness in themselves.”<sup>xxii</sup>

According to Goldman, this “direct experience of God” is the “birthright of all humans.”<sup>xxiii</sup> He goes on to suggest: “The Daime Path is laid out for each of us who is drawn to it, to walk and evolve as we go, at an accelerated, but distinctly individual, pace.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Goldman argues that the Daime is a type of spiritual “‘short cut,’ a very intense, demanding path to which people whose souls are ready to take a huge evolutionary leap are drawn, people who require a very deep cleansing and healing to take this leap, and who have the motivation to find the courage to follow their soul’s urging.”<sup>xxv</sup> Goldman claims:

The Holy Daime Path is an authentic mystery school. There are levels of knowledge, stages of initiation that one passes through in one’s program of rapid evolution. . . . The job of the initiate is to show up, drink Daime, work on the earth to live the teachings . . . love God, love the earth, love all beings in God’s creation, including yourself, love and respect your brothers and sisters, accept the truth of your own divinity and of your own faults, learn to embody forgiveness and mercy, and gain the hard won humility that comes from meeting a Divine force head on.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Padrinho Alex Polari, another elder within the Santo Daime tradition, writes in *Forest of Visions*: “The Holy Daime is not for everyone. The rituals of the Daime are not meant to be an ‘experience,’ but rather to provide a chance to interact intimately with a Divine Being of unimaginable intelligence, compassion, clarity, and spiritual power.”<sup>xxvii</sup> He goes on to say: “The drink per se is the vehicle, the sacrament. Its ingestion reorganizes our organic, neurochemical, and energetic foundation, adjusting us to spiritual reality and its multiple meanings.”<sup>xxviii</sup> According to Polari: “Those who learn to work and receive this light consciousness synchronize

themselves to higher plains of pure cosmic effervescence that penetrates the astral plane of our planet. As we drink from [this] spring of immortality, we operate through the patterned matrix made by all the . . . beings of the universe.”<sup>xxix</sup>

I think that while this exceedingly terse depiction of some of the central philosophical understandings of the Santo Daime tradition may leave some of you wanting to know more (and perhaps others of you glad that you do not), it is perhaps safe to say that this religious tradition possesses an intriguing, multi-layered, complex, and coherent set of beliefs and that, therefore, we can also ascertain that it fulfills “philosophical reasonableness,” the second of James’s criteria.

As for the third and final of James’s criteria, i.e., “moral helpfulness,” I would like to suggest that one of the most important reasons why individuals become members of the Santo Daime tradition and continue to engage in this difficult and demanding path of inner purification is not primarily due to the depth of the religious understandings within this path, or even because of the profound mystical and visionary experiences that frequently occur, but perhaps primarily, and crucially, because of the physical, moral, emotional, mental, and spiritual transformations that they perceive within themselves and within others as a result of drinking the Daime.

The Daime is understood to be much more than a drink that opens up the spiritual world. It is also seen as an all purpose healing elixir. Most people report feeling physically and psychically recharged after drinking the Daime, and the purging of parasites and toxins is an integral part of the healing process that it catalyzes. Similarly, contrary to the fear that the Daime is itself an addictive substance, there are countless accounts of the Daime’s ability to overcome an individual’s addiction to drugs and alcoholism. In *Morality as Practice*, the doctoral dissertation of Titti Kristina Schmidt, a Swedish anthropologist who spent fifteen months in Céu

do Mapiá, there is an account of a man named Ernesto who was a drug addict before becoming a Santo Daime practitioner. In *Morality as Practice*, Ernesto describes the following difficult transition that he went through as he combated his drug addiction with the help of the Daime: “When I drank the Daime for the first time it was like hell. I went through a very tough period and didn’t have any good experiences at all. The only thing I got was high fever, boils and wounds all over my body.”<sup>xxx</sup> According to Ernesto, his limpeza, or cleaning, took several months. As he points out:

I was so intoxicated by the drugs so the Daime had to work hard. . . . Eventually I started to feel better. I thought that I had recovered. So I stopped drinking the Daime and went back to drugs again. But this time it was really hell! Other drugs, which had earlier been a relief to me, did not work any more. After a couple [of] weeks I felt myself more or less forced back to the Daime. Then I started the whole procedure of ‘cleansing’ all over again. After some time my health improved and in due course I understood the power and the beauty of the Daime. Since then I have never touched any drugs.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Practitioners of the Santo Daime tradition believe that the Daime can heal a wide range of severe illnesses. As Schmidt points out: “Céu do Mapiá has today a national reputation as a healing community. The villagers claim that they can treat a whole range of well-known diseases, for example, skin problems, respiratory diseases, contagious infections, hepatitis, diabetes, leprosy, malaria, worms, dysentery, digestive problems, anaemia, fevers, influenza, mental disorders” and so on.<sup>xxxii</sup> According to Schmidt, “the community has also gained

recognition outside Brazil, attracting people who hope to be cured from terminal diseases such as cancer and HIV/AIDS.”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

People who come to the Santo Daime hoping to be cured of their illnesses often tell dramatic stories of their healing encounter with the Daime. Schmidt shares one such story in her account of Barbara, a woman diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor:

When Barbara started to drink the Daime she had what many members call a ‘spiritual surgery’ . . . Under the influence of the Daime brew, she witnessed her own operation done by a group of doctors in spiritual form. After the operation, the spirits told her to rest and eat only certain prescribed food. Later when Barbara recovered, she returned to the hospital in Sao Paulo and asked them to [t]ake a new x-ray. To the surprise of the doctors, the tumor was gone. What amazed them even more was that Barbara (who has no Western medical training) could explain the whole operation, which corresponded to an ordinary brain surgery. She could even describe the instruments used by the spiritual doctors, instruments that, according to Barbara, the doctors in Sao Paulo confirmed were similar to the ones used during ordinary brain surgeries.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Dramatic physical cures are not the only transformative effects that can be attributed to the Santo Daime. There are also numerous positive social and ecological changes that have been catalyzed by practitioners of the Santo Daime movement. For instance, Céu do Mapiá is regularly visited by many Brazilian authorities who see it as a model community to be emulated

by other villages in the Amazon rainforest. Individuals within Céu do Mapiá have consciously attempted to create an eco-village where there is a strong focus not only on protecting the ecosystem in the two National Forests that surround Céu do Mapiá (National Forests that were created in large part due to the concerted initiative of leading members of the Santo Daime movement in the late 1980's), but also on learning how to be self-sufficient by developing sustainable, ecologically aware interactions with forest resources. Schmidt points out that in 2002, "there were more than 40 ongoing projects within the village, aiming at, among other things, forest preservation, environmental education, and the production of alternative forest medicine and food."<sup>xxxv</sup> Céu do Mapiá has also become a place for those living in the region to go for medical help and/or to find work. The village offers free medical care to the local population, and runs two hospitals: one that offers Western oriented medicine, and another that is based on alternative healing modalities.

Once again, even within the limitations of this extremely cursory investigation of the transformative effects of Santo Daime religious tradition, it seems valid to say that James's third criteria, "moral helpfulness," can be rapidly crossed off of our list as well. There is abundant evidence that the Santo Daime not only has the capacity to promote physical and psychological well being, but also fosters harmonious social interactions and promotes a love and respect for the natural world that is manifest in numerous concrete and ongoing environmental initiatives.

Taking all of this information into consideration, I would like to suggest that, based on James's three criteria for assessing the value and validity of mystico-religious experiences, we can, and perhaps should, conclude that this entheogenic mystical tradition is at least as worthy of our respect as any of the other more well known mystical traditions. Perhaps these entheogenic substances truly are what they are said to be: profound, sacred, God-given gifts that can



powerfully assist us in our quest to know the true nature of ourselves, as well as the all-too-often hidden beauty of the world around us.

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<sup>i</sup> Presented at the national conference of the American Academy of Religion in November, 2008.

<sup>ii</sup>James, William. *Essays in Religion and Morality*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 84.

<sup>iii</sup>*Ibid.* , p. 86.

<sup>iv</sup>*Ibid*, p. 89.

<sup>v</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup>*Ibid*, p. 92.

<sup>vii</sup>*Ibid*, p. 93.

<sup>viii</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>ix</sup>*Ibid*, p. 86.

<sup>x</sup>*Ibid*, p. 87.

<sup>xi</sup> Fuller, Robert C. *Stairways to Heaven: Drugs in American Religious History*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), p. 73.

<sup>xii</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>xiii</sup>Papanicolaou, Andrew and Pete A. Y. Gunter, eds. *Bergson and Modern Thought: Towards a Unified Science*. (New York: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1987), p. 349-50.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid, p. 350. Wald's television metaphor echoes a way of understanding the relationship between the brain and states of consciousness that was extensively discussed and developed in the Europe and America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, not only by William James and Henri Bergson, but also by such thinkers as, F. C. S. Schiller and F. W. H. Myers. Edward and Emily Kelly call this perspective the "filter" or "transmission" theory. For a thorough and insightful discussion of this perspective, see Kelly, Edward F. and Emily William Kelly, *Irreducible Mind* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), pp. 28-9, and 606-638. In Barnard, G. William. *Exploring Unseen Worlds* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 163-170, I discuss James's elaboration of this theoretical outlook.

<sup>xv</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 24.

<sup>xvi</sup> Polari de Alverga, Alex. *Forest of Visions: Ayahuasca, Amazonian Spirituality, and the Santo Daime Tradition*. (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 1999), p. xxii –xxiii.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid, p. 75.

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xix</sup> Written communication, 2008. Many Santo Daime practitioners claim that it is possible at times to have a joint "revelation" or visionary spiritual experience during a Daime work. Schmidt shares one of her own experiences that she believes possibly illustrates this phenomenon: "During a ritual when I was lying in the healing room feeling awful after having drunk the Daime I was overwhelmed by questions about the Daime and the spiritual world. Suddenly I spotted an old . . . medium standing in the doorway. She looked straight at me. I looked back and, being under the effect of Daime, I started to question her and she answered all my questions patiently, none of us uttering a single word." Schmidt wondered about this incident for several days, not sure if the answers that she received from the woman (which she remembered clearly afterwards) were only part of her imagination. A week later she went to the old woman's house for a birthday party. She wasn't sure whether to ask the medium about the

experience, so she just sat in the woman's kitchen, watching her wash dishes. Schmidt adds: "After a while I decided to ask her the same questions as I remembered them fairly well. Suddenly she stopped working, looked at me and said: 'Kristina why are you asking all these questions again. I have already answered them. Do you remember when I stood there in the doorway, looking at you, during the ritual?' 'Yes,' I said. 'Well, then you know already,' she said and continued with what she was doing." Schmidt, Titti Kristina. *Morality as Practice: The Santo Daime, an Eco-Religious Movement in the Amazonian Rainforest*. (Uppsala, Sweden: Dissertation, Uppsala University. *Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology* 41. 2007), p.170.

<sup>xx</sup>Written communication, 2008.

<sup>xxi</sup>*Forest of Visions*, p. xxiv.

<sup>xxii</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>xxiii</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>xxiv</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>xxv</sup>*Ibid*, p. xxvi.

<sup>xxvi</sup>*Ibid*, p. xxx.

<sup>xxvii</sup>*Ibid*, p. xxxi.

<sup>xxviii</sup>*Ibid*, p. 58.

<sup>xxix</sup>*Ibid*, p. 59.

<sup>xxx</sup>*Morality as Practice*, p. 127.

<sup>xxxi</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>xxxii</sup>*Ibid*, p. 65.

<sup>xxxiii</sup>*Ibid.*

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<sup>xxxiv</sup> Ibid, p. 128.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Ibid, p. 62.