

# *The Potential Religious Relevance of Entheogens*

with Ron Cole-Turner, "Entheogens, Mysticism, and Neuroscience"; William A. Richards, "Here and Now: Discovering the Sacred with Entheogens"; G. William Barnard, "Entheogens in a Religious Context: The Case of the Santo Daime Religious Tradition"; and Leonard Hummel, "By Its Fruits? Mystical and Visionary States of Consciousness Occasioned by Entheogens."

## ENTHEOGENS IN A RELIGIOUS CONTEXT: THE CASE OF THE SANTO DAIME RELIGIOUS TRADITION

by G. William Barnard

*Abstract.* This essay first draws upon the work of William James and others to propose a nonphysicalistic understanding of the relationship between the brain and consciousness in order to articulate a philosophical perspective that can understand entheogenic visionary/mystical experiences as something other than hallucinations. It then focuses on the Santo Daime tradition, a religious movement that began in Brazil in the early part of the twentieth century, to provide an example of the personal and social ramifications of taking an entheogen (ayahuasca) within a disciplined religious context. The essay claims that the Santo Daime is one example of a contemporary mystery school; gives a brief history of the development of this religion; discusses the key theological assumptions of this movement; investigates the important role played by visionary/mystical experiences within this religion; underscores the centrality of healing and spiritual transformation for members of this tradition; and ends with an examination of the crucial significance of spiritual discipline within this entheogenically based religion.

*Keywords:* ayahuasca; consciousness; entheogen; William James; mystery school; Santo Daime; Huston Smith; spiritual disciplines; transformation; visionary/mystical experiences

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In *Cleansing the Doors of Perception*, a collection of essays on the religious significance of entheogens (mind-altering substances that "generate" a sense of sacredness within, such as psilocybin, peyote, and ayahuasca), Huston Smith emphasizes that the experiences catalyzed by entheogenic substances

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are virtually identical to classical mystical experiences (Smith 2003, 33). He cautions, however, that while these substances “appear to be able to induce religious experiences; it is less evident that they can produce religious lives” (30). Nonetheless, Smith goes on to claim that our culture has “an urgent need” to connect with “a convincing, inspiring view of the nature of things and life’s place in it,” and he suggests that entheogens may well have an important role to play in catalyzing this “ennobling vision” (115). According to Smith, one possible solution to our cultural predicament would be “to devise something like the Eleusinian Mysteries to get us out of Plato’s cave and into the light of day” (115). He stresses, however, that because “religion is more than a string of experiences,” such entheogenically inspired mystical and visionary experiences would, like the Eleusinian Mysteries, ideally take place within a ritual structure that was part of a disciplined way of life, and in a context where the goal was not so much to have the experiences for their own sake, but rather to integrate the revelatory and transformative insights provided by these entheogens into the fabric of daily existence (30).

I would like to suggest that Smith’s desire to see the birth of a modern day mystery school that revolves around the sacramental use of entheogens has, in fact, been fulfilled. Indeed, I would suggest that there are *several* such schools for the training of visionaries and mystics—not only the Native American Church with its sacramental use of peyote, or the rapidly growing ayahuasca religion, the União do Vegetal, but also the religion that I would like to focus on in this article: the Santo Daime, another ayahuasca-based religious tradition that began in the Amazonian region of Brazil in the early part of the twentieth century and which now has churches and centers in countries across the globe.

#### ARE ENTHEOGENS NOTHING MORE THAN HALLUCINOGENS?

Before I begin my examination of the Santo Daime tradition, however, I think that it is important to address a problem that Smith himself realizes must be overcome if the visionary and/or mystical states associated with entheogens are ever to be taken seriously within our culture—that is, the unquestioned assumption that entheogenic visionary/mystical experiences are nothing more than drug-induced hallucinations, and as such, are pathological distortions of reality rather than revelatory insights into Truth.

It is crucial to address this issue. After decades of concerted efforts by powerful institutions in our society to condemn and criminalize the use of entheogens, it is arguably the case that many, if not most, members of our culture have internalized the message that all mind-altering drugs are psychologically and physiologically harmful, socially destructive, and addictive (although socially approved versions of drugs such as alcohol,

Prozac, nicotine, and caffeine mysteriously seem to be exempt from much of this criticism). It can, therefore, be quite difficult to persuade even well-educated people that entheogenic substances are, in fact, nonaddictive and that they have been safely consumed within structured ritual contexts for possibly tens of thousands of years. It can be difficult for even thoughtful people in our culture to swallow (so to speak) that within many indigenous cultures, mind-altering substances such as peyote, psilocybin mushrooms, and ayahuasca are seen as gifts from the gods; that they are valued as powerful medicines for the body and the mind and are taken in order to nurture harmonious relationships with others; and that these substances are deeply revered as the source of not only their music and art, but also their most fundamental religious beliefs and practices. For many, it can be hard to imagine that those who use entheogens would claim, repeatedly, fervently, that rejection of this visionary knowledge is, quite simply, a form of insanity.

Given our typically unexamined cultural antipathy toward mind-altering substances, it is understandably at times extremely difficult to accept that entheogenic mystical and visionary experiences are as valid and valuable as those that are catalyzed by nonentheogenic “spiritual technologies,” such as meditation, drumming, dancing, fasting, prayer, and so on. Given the taken-for-granted “scientific” (i.e., physicalistic and positivistic) perspective that many, if not most, academics and researchers have internalized, it is easy to see how the dramatic epiphanies produced by ingesting different species of sacred plants might be understood merely to be hallucinations, might be seen as nothing more than delusional experiences catalyzed by the malfunctioning neuro-chemical activity within the brains of those who have taken these psychoactive substances.

However, what is often not so evident is that, in many ways, this negative assessment of the experiences of those who take entheogens emerges out of a taken-for-granted, typically unexamined, 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 physicalistic 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 (James 1982 [1988], 84).

If we assume that the neurochemical activity of the brain *produces* our states of consciousness, then it simply makes sense to assume that if individuals, for instance, 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, the truth 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, if you are having extra sensory perceptions, then there is simply something wrong with your cerebral circuitry. Therefore, 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.

However, as James points out, 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" (James 1982 [1898], 86).

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 (Barnard 1997, 165). *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 *causes* 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.

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" (James 1982 [1898], 89). Indeed, James claims that, in some ways, the transmissive function has certain theoretical advantages over its more popular competitor. For example, 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 (89).

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 (James 1982 [1898], 92). 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” (93). For instance, a medium might possess detailed knowledge of the personal life of a client that she had never obtained through the use of her senses. Similarly, a person might suddenly receive a vision of a loved one who, hundreds of miles away, was dying at that very moment. James points out that it is difficult to see how the productive theory of consciousness can explain how it would be possible for these particular forms of knowledge to be produced within the confines of 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” (93).

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 Shelley’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 (James 1982 [1898], 86). Utilizing Shelley’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” (87).

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 (Huxley 2004 [1954], 23). 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), 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 (Fuller 2000, 73). Huxley 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 become attuned to “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” (Fuller 2000, 73).

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 recent theorists who have taken this nonmainstream 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. (Papanicolaou and Gunter 1987, 349–50)

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 were 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 (Papanicolaou and Gunter 1987, 350).

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 visionary/mystical experiences that take place after ingesting various entheogens can be understood as potentially valid and valuable, and not necessarily as delusive psychopathological hallucinations (Barnard 2011, 239–41).

However, it is also important to emphasize that accepting the transmissive theory of consciousness as an alternative way to understand the genesis of entheogenic experiences does not necessarily imply that all (or perhaps any) of these experiences are direct, unfiltered perceptions of Truth. For James (and Bergson) every moment of perception is a complex interactive relationship between (1) a “more” (James’s beautifully ambiguous term) that comes to the experiencer from beyond her/his ego boundaries (e.g., sense data, or in the case of mystical experience, the “raw data” that is received within the psyche of the experiencer from some nonordinary level of consciousness), and (2) the typically tacit, albeit densely detailed and compressed overlay of the experiencer’s memory, cultural expectations, and psychological structures that always, to one degree or another, shapes the more basic “givenness” of the sense data or mystical data into the specific forms and qualitative “feel” of the concrete experience itself.

Understood in this way, it could be argued that during a mystical or visionary event, mystics (entheogenically based or not) are experiencing

a “more-ness” that comes to them seemingly of its own volition, that feels immediate, and which possesses a certain (albeit perhaps shifting) degree of objectivity, while simultaneously, below/above their conscious awareness, the mystics’ preconscious cultural and psychological assumptions are filtering and shaping that “more-ness” into forms that they would expect to perceive. In this way, for example, those within the Santo Daime tradition, drawing upon the Christian elements of their rich cultural syncretism, would perhaps be more likely to have a visionary experience of the Virgin of Conception than indigenous shamans (at least those who lack that Christian matrix), even if both groups used an identical entheogen in their ceremonies. However, it could also be argued that this mystical/visionary encounter is more than a simple product of that tacit set of cultural/psychological assumptions, given the fact that there are numerous accounts of mystical/visionary experiences, entheogenic or not, that appear to confound the mystic’s expectations, that seem to offer to the mystic a quality of knowledge that could not have been drawn from the mystic’s prior cultural/psychological background.

From a Jamesian point of view, it is difficult to say precisely to what extent we make our experience, and to what extent experience makes us. However, even this recognition of the difficulties that are inherent in any philosophical investigation of mystical experience (especially in their entheogenic varieties) can move us toward a more subtle, and more nuanced, understanding of the interactive nature of mystical experience, can let us speak convincingly about the genesis of mystical experiences, while, at the same time, providing mystical experiences with the opportunity to speak back to us in their own, often surprising, ways (Barnard 1997, 89–146).

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SANTO DAIME TRADITION

If we can let go of our deeply engrained prejudice against the validity and value of entheogenic visions and/or mystical states of consciousness, it might be worthwhile to examine in more detail what happens when these alterations of awareness occur within the context of a disciplined religious structure.

One example of what occurs when entheogens are taken within the context of a disciplined ritual structure is the Santo Daime religious tradition. The Santo Daime arose in the second decade of the twentieth century with the religious revelations of Raimundo Irineu Serra, an itinerant Afro-Brazilian rubber tapper and border guard who lived and worked in the rainforest on the border between Brazil, Peru, and Bolivia. Having heard that the indigenous and mestizo people of that region used ayahuasca during their ceremonies, Serra decided to take it himself. (Ayahuasca is a psychotropic 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 that an entheogen is produced).

After having drunk ayahuasca, Serra had a series of powerful visionary experiences. In one of these experiences, a sacred being, understood by him to be the “Queen of the Forest,” and later revised as the Virgin of Conception, told Serra to found a new religious movement that centered on the sacramental use of the tea. Having renamed the tea the Daime (“daime” in Portuguese means “give me,” as in “give me Love, give me Light,” invocations often found in the revealed hymns of the tradition), over the course of the next several decades Serra created the liturgical format of the religious movement and slowly gathered a group of followers (Dawson 2007, 72). Over time Serra became well known as a powerful healer, visionary, and spiritual teacher, and the Santo Daime religious tradition gradually began to take shape in the Brazilian frontier town of Rio Branco.

As formulated by Mestre Irineu (the honorific that Serra was eventually given by his followers), the Santo Daime tradition draws upon folk Catholicism, West African religions, the Kardecist Spiritist tradition, neo-esoteric modes of discourse, as well as indigenous “vegetalista” practices and assumptions, and centers around the ceremonial drinking of the Daime. 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 Christ, 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” (Polari de Alverga 2010, xxii–xxiii).

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 Sebastião Mota de Melo, later known as Padrinho Sebastião. This line is now legally known as CEFLURIS.

Padrinho Sebastião 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 he became known from a relatively early age as a powerful visionary and mediumistic healer of the impoverished people of that area. In 1959, following the guidance of one of the beings that he frequently incorporated in his mediumistic sessions, Padrinho Sebastião traveled with his family to Rio Branco (MacRae 1992, 56). He had been suffering for several years from a severe and chronic liver disease, and in hopes of a cure, he approached Mestre Irineu.

After taking the Daime, Padrinho Sebastião 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 Sebastião’s illness (Polari de Alverga 2010, 75). In Padrinho Sebastião’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” (Polari de Alverga 2010, 75).

Padrinho Sebastião 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 Sebastião set up a Santo Daime center of his own outside of Rio Branco. After Mestre Irineu’s death in 1971, the community that had grown around Padrinho Sebastião continued to flourish. In 1980, Padrinho Sebastião, accompanied by hundreds of his followers, left Rio Branco and settled in a remote location called Rio do Ouro. After several years of arduous work, enduring sickness and hardship, a private landowner turned up, claiming his right to the land. The community left Rio do Ouro soon afterwards, and by 1984 relocated to another area, this time deep in the rainforest, on the banks of the Mapiá Igarapé, a small affluent of the Purús River. Over time, this community came to be known as Céu do Mapiá (Schmidt 2007, 57).

Around this same time, affiliated Santo Daime centers were set up in major Brazilian cities. These centers attracted many new members, but along with the growth of other ayahuasca religions such as the União do Vegetal, they also drew attention to the use of ayahuasca in urban areas. In 1984, a commission of army officials, university teachers, psychiatrists, psychologists, doctors, and others was appointed to study the religious use of ayahuasca; as part of their investigation they traveled to Céu do Mapiá. 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 (Dawson 2007, 70). On August 26, 1987, after a careful investigation, the commission released its findings, noting that ayahuasca had been used by various ayahuasca religions for many decades without any noticeable social damage, and, in fact, that this usage led to increased social cohesion and personal integration (Barnard

2013). The commission recommended therefore that ayahuasca be removed from the government's list of forbidden substances. Even though several subsequent complaints led to a series of governmental investigations, the ritual use of ayahuasca remains legal in Brazil (MacRae 1992, 75).

After the death of Padrinho Sebastião 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 and Céu do Mapiá has thrived. At this point, Céu do Mapiá has approximately 1,000 inhabitants and is a place of pilgrimage for numerous people from all over the world who come to find spiritual illumination and physical healing.

#### THEOLOGICAL AND VISIONARY ASPECTS OF THE SANTO DAIME TRADITION

In Santo Daime churches, practitioners meet regularly in order to drink Daime collectively as a sacrament. During the rituals (or *trabalhos*, i.e., “works”) of the Santo Daime, participants gather together (men on one side, women on the other) around a central altar table. They then sing, often for hours, with great reverence and devotion, from collections of simple, yet hauntingly beautiful hymns that were originally “given” from the astral or spiritual world to the more advanced members of the movement. According to Santo Daime practitioners, praying and praising God together musically in this way, with great purity and focus, accompanied by the rhythmic shaking of hand-held rattles (*maracas*) generates a powerful current of transformative spiritual energy (*corrente espiritual*). This energy, as one researcher notes, “binds participants vertically with the spiritual plane and horizontally with each other” 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 (Dawson 2007,76).

The powerful visionary/mystical experiences that individuals have during Santo Daime works are called *mirações*. Like classical mystical experiences, these *mirações* are said to be exceedingly difficult to describe, at least with any degree of adequacy, but the reports that have been gathered frequently emphasize that *mirações* are not static visions (Schmidt 2007, 167). Instead, the participants take part in a dynamic process that can include the unfurling of stunningly beautiful geometric patterns within the consciousness of the participant; vivid interactions with a wide range of nonphysical beings; travels to numerous, extremely diverse, spiritual dimensions of reality; and the transfiguration of the natural world, seen as shining with divine Light (Shanon 2002, 17–9). One long-time Santo Daime practitioner from the United States describes his experiences in

the following way (personal communication, 2008): “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 *salão* [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.

Of course, not all of the teachings that take place within the Santo Daime are so overtly visionary and mystical. Daimistas are also taught in a more public and concrete form via the revealed hymns that serve as the musical heart of the movement. Through these hymns, which are repeatedly recited and affirmed in a ritual and communal context, the central teachings and values of the Santo Daime tradition are expressed and underscored.

While there is not much overt philosophical and theological discussion within the Santo Daime, certain elders have articulated some of the central metaphysical assumptions of the tradition. One elder, for example, says 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” (Polari de Alverga 2010, xxiv). With Jesus’ death, the elder explains, this “living matrix of consciousness,” this “organizing principle of humanity’s awakening,” in and “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” (Polari de Alverga 2010, xxiv).

According to this same elder, this “direct experience of God” is the “birthright of all humans” (Polari de Alverga 2010, xxiv). He goes on to suggest that “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” (Polari de Alverga 2010, xxiv). He argues that taking the Daime is a type of spiritual “short cut,” that it is “a very intense, demanding path” meant for those people who are ready to take a huge evolutionary leap, for those individuals who are willing to undergo the “deep cleansing and healing” that is required in order “to take this leap” (Polari de Alverga 2010, xxvi). He then goes on to claim the following:

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. (Polari de Alverga 2010, xxx)

Another elder within the Santo Daime tradition adds that “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” (Polari de Alverga 2010, xxxi).

#### INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL TRANSFORMATION WITH THE SANTO DAIME TRADITION

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, or even because of the profound mystical and visionary experiences that frequently occur, but rather, 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.

It is important to underscore that 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 15 months in Céu do Mapiá, there is a compelling account of a man named Ernesto who was a drug addict before becoming a Santo Daime practitioner. Ernesto describes the difficult transition that he went through as he combated his drug addiction with the help of the Daime, explaining: "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" (Schmidt 2007, 127). 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. (Schmidt 2007, 127)

Practitioners of the Santo Daime tradition also believe that the Daime can heal numerous severe illnesses. As Schmidt notes: "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 (Schmidt 2007, 65). 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" (Schmidt 2007, 65).

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 São 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 São Paulo confirmed were similar to the ones used during ordinary brain surgeries. (Schmidt 2007, 128)

It is important to emphasize, however, that within the Santo Daime tradition, healing is not necessarily equated with a physical cure. The Daime is said to do much more than to cure physical or emotional ills. Equally importantly, participants believe that drinking the Daime engenders and supports healing at the deepest level, in that it ignites a powerful process of spiritual growth, that is, the movement from the darkness and suffering of ignorance and illusion toward the light and joy of divine love and self awareness. In this broadest sense, the entire thrust of the Santo Daime tradition can be seen as unifying the often separate tasks of healing and spiritual development.

#### THE DISCIPLINES OF THE SANTO DAIME TRADITION

But the types of physical and spiritual transformations catalyzed by the Daime do not come automatically or easily. Instead, they emerge gradually, over the course of taking part in the ritual calendar of Santo Daime works. These scheduled works take place quite frequently—at least twice a month and during certain festivals, often several times a week—and they last anywhere from a minimum of four hours to the all night dance works that can take up to twelve hours or more to complete. In this way, Daimistas do not just drink Daime every now and then, they don't drink Daime if and when they choose, and they don't drink Daime by themselves. Instead, by taking part in the communal ritual contexts offered by the Santo Daime tradition, Daimistas are given the opportunity to immerse themselves, with discipline and commitment, in a regular way, within the intense, highly rarified vibratory space that is opened up within themselves by taking the Daime. The various rituals that are part of the ceremonial structure of the Santo Daime tradition become, in this way, a type of alchemical container, a strong and cohesive structure that is able to hold and direct the dynamic energies and states of consciousness that are experienced by Daimistas.

Santo Daime dance works are an example of the extremely demanding level of discipline and commitment that is required of initiates within the tradition. After a group recitation of prayers and after having been served the Daime, everyone lines up, with almost military precision, in marked out rows surrounding the central altar, women on one side and men on the other. Then, for hours upon hours, everyone staying in their place, in their row, they dance the same simple steps, back and forth, over and over, holding a hymn book in one hand and often playing the maracá in the other, all the while singing hymn after hymn after hymn (hymns that are often sung very quickly, and typically in Portuguese). During this

whole time the Daime is unfolding, very forcefully, within each person. Understandably, it can take a lot of effort to not be swept away. Therefore, Daimistas are encouraged to ground and center themselves, to focus on their heart and their breath. In addition, with the help of the hymns, Daimistas gradually learn how to align themselves, over and over again, with the presence of God within; they learn how to pray to God and the divine Mother for strength and clarity; and little by little, step by step, they gain the capacity to manage all of this, even as they might also be struggling with how to cope with intense bouts of nausea and/or lightheadedness.

Santo Daime works are not called “works” for nothing. They are neither for the faint of heart, nor are they for those attempting to run away from their problems or from the world (Dawson 2013, 65). Santo Daime works are not about partying, or getting high. Instead, in the context of these works, a group of people gathers together, with great respect, to take a sacrament. Then, over time, with tremendous self-effort and discipline, little by little they learn how to become increasingly translucent conduits of Divine Power, Light, and Love, and they do this not just for their own self-transformation, but also to serve others and the world.

What Daimistas learn, fairly quickly, is that the primary focus of the Santo Daime tradition is not really about having one visionary or mystical experience after the other. They are quick to admit that those are wonderful when they happen, and they happen quite frequently, but in reality the developmental goal of Santo Daime works is to learn how to become increasingly “firm.” Firmness (*firmeza*) is the ability to be grounded, centered, calm, in your heart, and connected to God. Firmness is the ability to sing the hymns with clarity and devotion, letting the Force of the Daime flow through you unimpeded, and responding appropriately, moment by moment, to what is taking place within you and around you as the ritual moves forward. Firmness is the end result of grace and self effort: the grace of receiving within yourself the divine Light and Love that has chosen to incarnate within the Daime, and the self-effort of putting forth the strenuous and demanding work of opening yourself up again and again during a ritual to what that Light wants to reveal within you—remembering to breathe deeply, telling yourself over and over again to relax and trust, and affirming and acknowledging the presence of the Christ that shines within each person as their highest Self.

Firmness does not happen overnight. It is said that, as a Daimista, it is necessary to possess a lot of patience and faith, not only to cultivate this inner orientation and alignment within yourself, but also to make your way through the intricate subtleties of Santo Daime ritual protocol. There’s no handbook that teaches a Daimista the nuances of how to behave within the ritual space (*salão*). Instead, Daimistas learn by cultivating another set of virtues: “paying attention” and humility (Dawson 2013, 65). By putting their ego to one side, and by paying close attention, Daimistas gradually



figure out, for example, what gestures to make during communal prayers and when; they learn when and how to step forward in the serving line for the Daime; they learn where to face when drinking the Daime and how to enter and leave their row during a dance work; they learn when it is important to remain in their place and when it is important to leave the salão, as well as how to dress, how to dance, and so on.

In addition, Daimistas are given the task of learning hundreds, if not thousands of hymns. Therefore, dedicated Daimistas spend an extensive amount of time studying the hymns so that these beautiful and inspiring transmissions from the astral realm can be sung with great precision and accuracy. This level of learning takes tremendous time, effort, and devotion. But with the exception of the central importance of the Daime itself, it is often said that there is nothing more important in the Santo Daime tradition than the ability to sing the hymns, with clarity and love, in tune, on the beat, unifying your voice with all of the other voices in the salão, allowing yourself to be carried forward by the beautiful melodies of the musicians who might be playing the guitar, flute, or accordion, and letting yourself be uplifted and transfigured within that surging, rapturous chorus of devotion and love.

At some point, many Daimistas also choose to become initiates in the Santo Daime tradition, that is, they become *fardados*. As *fardados*, Daimistas begin to take on increasing amounts of responsibility to help their brothers and sisters, their fellow Daimistas, during the works. One way to accomplish this task is to become a guardian (or *fiscal*). Guardians (on both the women's and men's sides of the hall) are there to help those who are struggling to effectively navigate the turbulent currents of the Daime; they are there to make sure that everyone behaves in an appropriate way during the works; they are there to support and to challenge, to guide and to discipline (they also take on many "mundane" tasks such as making sure that there is adequate drinking water; that altar candles stay lit, and so on). And the guardians themselves are, in turn, watched over by the head of the guardians, and over these ritual heads, watching out for the church as a whole, are the men and women who are the overall leaders of the ritual.

Being a Daimista means being a part of a fellowship, a part of a community. The rituals of the Santo Daime are intended to cultivate a deep and abiding communion with other Daimistas, with nature, and with all divine Beings. The Daime therefore is always taken in a ritual context, in the company of others. This communal context means that Daimistas are given numerous opportunities to learn how to love and respect their brothers and sisters, even if some of those brothers and sisters can at times be, shall we say, somewhat idiosyncratic and/or difficult to deal with. Daimistas are therefore repeatedly taught the importance of not speaking ill of someone behind their back, how to forgive others for being less-than-perfect, how to forgive themselves for their own limitations, and how to have patience with

the countless subtle and not-so-subtle expectations and demands of others. Daimistas quickly learn that it is crucial to see beyond those aspects of their experience in the Santo Daime tradition that may well be off-putting or irritating, in order to appreciate the deeper perfection that shines in and through all of the messy humanness.

While there are numerous Daimistas who are extremely loving, clear, and radiant (so much so that they are almost saintly), many other Daimistas are, shall we say, all too human. But to be charitable, Daimistas take on a lot. It can be exhausting to be a Daimista—it is very rigorous, demanding work that can stretch a person to the limits of her or his capacity. As such it is perhaps not surprising that, especially in the beginning of their journey, many Daimistas might at times feel that they have become worse off rather than better. It is perhaps to be expected that during the highly charged process of self-awareness that is generated by the power of the Daime, they might at times feel somewhat disoriented and thin-skinned as their previous social facades and internalized cultural certainties are, over and over again, uncovered and exposed as illusions. Daimistas are therefore strongly encouraged to be tolerant, within themselves and with others, during those all-too-understandable moments when edginess and irritation flare up.

Just like practitioners of other mystical traditions, Daimistas also learn to be on guard against the (again, understandable) temptation to conflate the frequent and quite powerful inner experiences they are given in-and-through the Daime with their own egoic identity—a conflation that can, sadly, at times lead to a tendency toward arrogance, pride, and/or self-righteous. However, because Daimistas are part of a religious community, these all-too-human imperfections are often pointed out and challenged, frequently with enormous courage, skill, and compassion, by other brothers and sisters.

The Daime is understood to awaken and to spiritually ignite those who take it as a sacrament, so Daimistas are regularly and powerfully taken outside of their comfort zone, and are raised above the sweetly comfortable, but rather low-level hum of ordinary existence into a transfigured mode of perception. What Daimistas discover, first hand, is that participating in Santo Daime rituals offers an opportunity, via the super-intelligence and compassion of the Daime, for their energetic matrix to be purified, cleansed, and raised to increasingly higher and higher vibratory levels, so that they can, over time, learn how to open themselves up to more divine Light, more divine Power, and more divine Love. In this way, it is said that the energy systems of Daimistas are (as it were) “re-wired” so that they can tolerate, and then ultimately become a conduit for, increasingly higher vibratory levels of energy and consciousness.

This potentially wondrous, but at times exceedingly challenging, inner “rewiring” is understood, little by little, to create dramatic and highly

beneficial transformations within the day-to-day existence of Daimistas. As an aftermath of having been immersed, over and over again, in the ever-new experiences of sheer exuberant beauty and extravagant, overflowing Love and Light that comes from taking the Daime in a sustained, ongoing, and disciplined way, Daimistas speak of having a heart that is more open than it once was; of spiritual eyes that are more attuned to the Divine Beauty that shines through every moment of existence; of an increasing sense of compassion for the suffering that this world is undergoing; and of a deepening ability to rest in the soft glow of divine Presence in the midst of everyday life. These personal and ultimately communal transformations are difficult to quantify, but in the end, they are what keep Daimistas coming, what keeps them willing to commit to the hard work that is required in the spiritual Mystery School that is the Santo Daime.

#### NOTE

This article is based on a presentation entitled “The Rebirth of Entheogens: New Medical Research on Drug-Related Mystical Experience and Its Implications for Religious Studies,” offered at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Baltimore MD, November 24, 2013.

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