

Review of *Altered States: Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America*. By Douglas Osto. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. 300 pp. \$ 35.00

Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experience. By William A. Richards. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 244 pp. \$ 29.95

Psychedelics—particularly due to their promise to treat a host of medical conditions—have been staging a comeback in recent years, as evidenced by several features published in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and other high profile popular publications. It was thus only a matter of time until a major university press jumped into the fray. The two books under review here are brought out by Columbia, and – while not belonging to a series *per se* – both take up the theme of psychedelics and “religious experience” in different yet related ways.

Altered States, a study of the relationship between American convert Buddhism and psychedelics, is by Asian Studies professor Douglas Osto, a self-professed experimenter with psychedelics and a Buddhist convert, who teaches at Massey University in New Zealand. For his book, Osto conducted a large online survey and interviewed a number of contemporary Buddhists and Buddhist practitioners about their views and personal experiences with psychedelics.

Although Osto does not position his work in this manner, *Altered States* continues a once fertile tradition in the American study of religion, which produced several texts around the turn of the 20th century. These texts regarded conversion as a singularly

powerful tool with which to probe religious experience: James Leuba's "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena," E.D. Starbuck's *Psychology of Religion*, and, of course, William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*. The similarities between Osto's book and these predecessors are striking: a focus on conversion, on individual, experiential narratives, a naïve sociology,—Starbuck and Leuba's questionnaires on one hand and Osto's online survey on the other, which he himself agrees it offers only "some anecdotal evidence" (3)— and an attempt to offer a psychological narrative that underscores the subjects' experience. In a sense, one could refer to Osto's book as a case study of the chemical adjuvants to conversion.

The book is divided into seven chapters, with an introduction, a conclusion, and a biographical postscript in which the author recounts his personal history with psychedelics and Buddhism. After an opening statement of the problem and a review of the existing literature (chapter 1), Osto offers an outline of the history of psychedelics and the history of Buddhism in America (chapters 2 and 3), a description and commentary of the interviews with contemporary students and practitioners of Buddhism (4,5,6), and a more theoretical discussion comprising the debates around: chemical mysticism, Buddhism and the psychology of altered states, and the epistemological status of experience (chapter 7). The bulk of the book is comprised of the three central chapters that describe Osto's interviews with American Buddhists and Buddhist psychedelic explorers, among whom are included a number of well-known names like Lama Tsony, Surya Das, Geoffrey Shugen Arnold, Charles Tart, and Rick Strassman. As a structuring device for his chapters, Osto uses the metaphor of the "opening/closing of the door," a phrase he borrows from his subjects. Accordingly, the three chapters deal with "Opening the Door" (those who think psychedelics drew them to Buddhism), "Closing the Door" (those Buddhists who gave up psychedelics or never used them in the first place), and "Keeping the Door Open" (those Buddhists who

continue to use them in their practice). While these chapters contain a good deal of biographical material pertaining to the lives of contemporary Buddhists and their intersection with psychedelics, Osto unfortunately neglects any more general discussion of the debates about intoxicants in the history of Buddhism. At the same time, he gives no clear statement about the ways in which the positions outlined by his interview subjects fit into this larger story. To be fair, Osto does point out that there is some similarity between psychedelic Buddhism and traditional tantric practices. In fact, he goes as far as to claim that contemporary psychedelic Buddhism is actually a form of Tantra (213). Such a claim would have merited a bit more elaboration: do Osto's psychedelic subjects agree with this categorization? are the practices and beliefs of psychedelic Buddhists commensurate with those of historical or even contemporary Tantrikas? It is not sufficient merely to point out that historical Tantrikas ingested mind-altering substances, or that they shrouded their practices in secrecy—as Osto's subjects also do. For not all secrets are kept for the same reason, nor are all mind-altering substances eaten with the same intention. One would have to show that there is actually a continuity here, otherwise the term “Tantra” becomes merely a rhetorical sleight of hand, a way of legitimizing the psychedelic Buddhists through a term that is custom defined to fit them—as well as any other group that might have ever practiced “the secret ingestion of transgressive substances for religious/spiritual purposes” (213).

Moving on from this, of particular note is Osto's foray into the psychology of religion, in a section in which he attempts to prove that the “opening the door” metaphor is rooted in human neurophysiology (115-119). Osto draws on a three-stage model that seeks to account for ancient cave art through speculation about altered states of consciousness. According to this model, developed by archaeologist David Lewis-Williams, the visionary transformation of consciousness during trances (shamanic, meditational, drug-induced) progresses from “entoptic phenomena”

(stage 1) through “iconic forms” (stage 2) and into “iconic hallucinations” (stage 3) (115-16). These three stages represent levels of “intensified inward consciousness” that correspond to visual phenomena of corresponding complexity (115).

The key for Osto is the fact that entrance to stage 3 is supposedly accompanied by the experience of passing through a tunnel or vortex—this passage is (questionably) assimilated to the “opening the door” metaphor. And there are several problems with this argument. First, even if Lewis-Williams is correct that all “visionary states” follow this trans-cultural and trans-historical model, it is nonetheless the case that Osto’s subjects seem to be describing a general change of direction in life through their metaphor (i.e. a kind of conversion) and not merely a visionary experience. If the visionary moment and the lasting conversion are related, Osto does not clearly specify how. Moreover, it is not clear if the Lewis-Williams model is a description of what is “actually” happening in the minds of visionary subjects, or in fact itself merely a metaphor, and thereby less illuminating than Osto might think: are there “stages,” “vortices,” and “portals” in consciousness? Indeed, in what way does the term “iconic hallucination” tell us more about what’s happening than a more simple formula like “seeing a bodhisattva”? Finally, one might wonder why it matters that a metaphor is “rooted” in neuropsychology. Are the meaning and value of a metaphor merely a function of their being psychological epiphenomena, or are such meanings and values socially and culturally constructed, such that their “rootedness” in psychology is a matter of indifference for Osto’s purposes?

Despite failing to answer these questions, in chapter 7 Osto does a good job of outlining the theoretical issues raised by his inquiry. After carefully laying out the terms of the debates about chemical mysticism and after questioning whether unmediated experiential knowledge is possible, Osto nonetheless claims not to be able to answer questions such as: “Are psychedelics the true Dharma?,” “Can psychedelics be used as an adjunct to religious lives?,” or “Are

drug-induced mystical or religious experiences authentic?" The only answer Osto can provide to these questions is "maybe" (200). Some readers may see this response as evasive, an attempt, perhaps, not to alienate any of the groups Osto is studying. However, in a very real sense, Osto is right to say that the aforementioned questions are "unanswerable" (199), for they are theological questions posed in a context devoid of an ultimate authority to which all of his subjects would likely defer. As it stands, the answers his subjects give to such questions depend less on tradition and theology than on the particular epistemology common to "contemporary alternative spiritualities," according to which "the individual's own experience functions as the highest source of authority for them" (128-29). Osto might have pursued this line further. In addition to critiquing the notion of an unmediated experience that is not to some extent constituted by the subject's own ontological presuppositions, or pointing out that his subjects fit well into what Catherine Albanese in *A Republic of Mind & Spirit* has called "American metaphysical religion," it would have been useful to look more deeply at the origin of this experiential epistemology in the psychology of religion and the Liberal Protestant tradition upon which the former drew. It would have also been instructive to compare his subjects' views with those of other contemporary religious groups who use psychedelics. At the end of the book one is left wondering if there is indeed a deeper connection between Buddhism and the psychological effects of psychedelics, or if in fact a host of other groups might not have also been opening the door to alternative beliefs in their own experimental tunings in and turnings on.

Psychologist William Richards's *Sacred Knowledge* is largely a statement of the author's personal theological beliefs, which he calls "perennialist" (11), but which might also be described as Liberal Protestant with a strong psychedelic component. Richards, one of the pioneers of the use of psychedelics in psychotherapy and palliative care, divides his book into five chapters, together with a preface, an introduction, and an epilogue. This work is a mixture of

autobiography, theological reflection, anecdotes, and psychology of religion, and also draws on Richards's personal collection of narratives of cancer patients whose lives were improved by taking psychedelics.

The first chapter sets the stage, discussing the revival of psychedelic research and introducing some of the author's terminological choices: "mystical consciousness," "psychedelic substances," etc. Chapter 2 delves into an analysis of the said "mystical consciousness," with sections that explore intuitive knowledge, the distinction between mystical experiences of internal and external unity, the changed perception of time and space, and "visions and archetypes." Chapter 3 discusses "interpersonal dynamics," with reference to topics like the experience of meaninglessness, somatic discomfort during psychedelic experiences, conversion, death, and the integration of religious experiences into one's life. Chapter 4 outlines the future prospects of psychedelic research in areas such as medicine, education and religion, and offers tips on how to get the best results out of a psychedelic session. The final chapter is a conclusion, which (among other things) puts forward Richards's belief that we are entering a new paradigm presaged by the insights gained from mystical states of consciousness, psychedelically induced or not. Finally, a brief epilogue offers a list of theological statements for further reflection: for example, "1. In case you had any doubts, God (or whatever your favorite noun for ultimate reality may be) is" (211).

The best sections of the book are those in which the author recounts snippets of his own life story: his friendship with Walter Pahnke, his first psilocybin trip, the meeting with Timothy Leary, his wife's struggle with cancer and her untimely death, and the personal narratives he has gathered in the course of his work with terminally ill patients.

However, the book suffers from theoretical indulgence related to Richards's unwillingness to interrogate his assumptions and from

a lack of scholarly apparatus (quotes are not referenced and the bibliography is only “selected”). One of Richards’s main claims is that psychedelics can engender mystical states of consciousness. However, the author has not absorbed the recent literature that looks critically at the concepts of “mysticism,” “religion” and “experience”—Wayne Proudfoot’s *Religious Experience*, Grace Jantzen’s *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, Richard King’s *Orientalism and Religion*, Robert Sharf’s essays on “Buddhist Modernism” and “Experience,” or Timothy Fitzgerald’s *The Ideology of Religious Studies* to name just a few. Richards claims to have experienced mystical states while on psychedelics, and to have observed them in others. In keeping with his avowed perennialism, psychedelic mystical states are assimilated to whatever similar “state of spiritual awareness” one gets in any of the “world religions”: *samadhi*, *nirvana*, *wu wei*, etc. (10). Richards views “unitive consciousness” as a hallmark of the mystical state, and in a later section (78-96) he argues that visions are not a part of mystical consciousness *per se*, as visions still preserve a subject-object distinction. Whatever the case may be, according to Richards, visions bring one to see “archetypes,” and he further considers Jung’s collective unconscious to have been “empirically validated” by “the records of psychedelic researchers” (80). While Jungians may be thrilled to hear this, I would only point out that the problem with the collective unconscious has never been a lack of archetypal encounters.

Ultimately, there is little that is new in Richards’ psychedelic mysticism. His book is one more riff on an idea that can be traced back to Benjamin Paul Blood’s *The Anesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy* and William James’s musings on nitrous oxide, and which was reactivated by the psychedelic revolution of the 1960s. Richards does not add much to the discussion, and though he writes about “mystical consciousness,” he says little about the debates surrounding consciousness itself: whether there are different forms of it, what those forms might be, or even if “consciousness”

is the correct term to use. In his own words, he takes a “‘meat and potatoes’ approach to discussing the mysteries of our being” (22). Nor is anything particularly insightful in Richard’s Jamesian description of the types of noetic content (“intuitive knowledge” as Richard calls it) that one gets with “mystical consciousness”: about God, immortality, love, etc. (39 ff.). One would have expected that a psychologist would have something to say about “intuition”: what is it, how does it function, and how does one distinguish the intuitive other sources of knowledge? Instead of offering a psychological elucidation, Richards treats the reader to a familiar perennialist litany: it does not matter if you call God “God” or “Shiva,” or “the Void,” or “the Numinous.” Words are too small to contain the divine majesty and, at any rate, “the greater the awareness of the eternal grows in human consciousness, the less preoccupied the everyday personality becomes with its own favorite collection of words and concepts” (43). What’s troubling about Richards’s descriptions is not the fact that he does not take the words of other traditions seriously enough to assume that they may tell a different story than that of his “mystical consciousness”; his aim, after all, is to present his own theology. What’s troubling is that he does not even appear to realize that he is propounding a Christian model, and that the very conceptual framework that he is using—the distinction between an essential experience and a secondary translation of that experience into words, rites and institutions—is a Liberal Protestant framework, one originally developed by Friedrich Schleiermacher, and later taken up by the American psychologists of religions, including James (58).

The question that needs to be asked is: what role do psychedelics play in this model? As Richards would have it, “these molecules do indeed appear to be intrinsically sacred” (185), an understandable statement given that they are taken to reliably induce those private, ineffable experiences Richards holds so dear. Another way of phrasing this idea is to say that psychedelics can induce conversions, those same conversions or psychological states of transformation

that James thought could heal “the divided self.” Richards makes this suggestion himself, but without developing the link with James (113-18). The difference from James seems to be that whereas for the pragmatist philosopher conversions were ultimately mysterious phenomena, for Richards they are demystified. Conversions can be reliably induced, provided one respects Richards’s ritual prescriptions: the right dosage, a comfortable setting, a trained guide, a sleep mask, and soothing music (a playlist is provided in the appendix). It is perhaps only a slight exaggeration to suggest Richards’s book is an argument for instituting psychedelics as the principal sacraments of the Liberal Protestant faith.

The fact that Richards’s book reiterates this Liberal Protestant model should give us pause, especially when we consider (as Richards himself does) the “new frontiers” these substances might open up in the study of religion or in education. I am not as convinced as Richards that a trip on psychedelics could offer much insight into the life and experience of a Jewish prophet (172); similarly, I am doubtful whether such a trip would offer any new philosophical insight into Plato’s myth of the cave (154). These proposals are based on the supposition that the experience of a contemporary tripper can somehow simulate the experience of the prophet or of Plato. Not only is this an enormous *if*, but the discussion about the truth value of this statement is not one that can be settled by simply taking psychedelics. We should, I submit, be careful about thinking that there is any easy, “experiential” solution to our intellectual quandaries, and we should also be wary of finding in psychedelics a magic bullet with which to treat our loss of meaning or quench our thirst for transcendence. If Richards’s book shows anything, it is that what we actually may need is not more psychedelic experiences, but more critical engagements with those experiences. Only in this way may we perhaps stop ourselves from using these substances as a way of covertly promoting our personal theological convictions.

Altered States and *Sacred Knowledge* are both useful books in that they may spark conversations about the contemporary meaning of psychedelics, the nature of the experiences which these substances can induce, as well as (particularly in Osto's case) the role that psychedelics played in the 20th century rise of Buddhism and other new religious movements in the West. Specialists in American religious and cultural history will derive some profit from critically engaging with the views contained in the two volumes. These positive qualities notwithstanding, their respective weaknesses make them difficult to recommend with the same enthusiasm that their authors appear to have put into their composition.

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