Psychedelics and Soul Care

What Christians Need to Know

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Preface

This book is written by a Christian for Christians, inviting others to join in the conversation. Considering the topic of this book, *Psychedelics and Soul Care*, from a Christian perspective requires some familiarity with both the clinical and spiritually formative uses of psychedelics as well as sober attention to risks, risk reduction, and ethical living.

Since this is a primer that assumes no prior knowledge, I decided to introduce the reader to (a) an array of essential topics, (b) the basic shape of the related discourse on it, and (c) some suggested resources for those who want to go deeper. In choosing this approach, I may leave myself vulnerable to reasonable critique of omission and oversimplification. I have used these questions to guide me: "Have I said anything untrue, inaccurate, misleading, or ungracious? Have I represented other people's ideas fairly in a way they'd agree with?" I hope I have largely succeeded. Where I have not, I look forward, as always, to refining.

The potential for psychedelics to help many people move toward healing and wholeness is encouraging and even inspiring. And still, I want to be clear: psychedelics are not beneficial for all. Everyone is different and needs informed conversation partners in medical and spiritual contexts as they seek to address their concern or intention. In addition, federal and state laws must always be consulted.

I hope this book helps create more informed conversation partners in the church. I don't intend to convince readers to embrace or to eschew psychedelic use. Rather, I aim to help them arrive at reasoned positions, whatever they may be, and give them resources to serve people who have employed or are considering employing psychedelics.

Introduction

The Church and Today's "Psychedelic Renaissance"

A few years ago, I was interviewed about psychedelic chaplaincy on NPR's *Weekend Edition*. A couple of months later, I was wrangling young grandchildren and heading to my usual pew at church when an older parishioner approached me and asked if she could speak to me after the service. I assumed she was going to ask me to be a deacon, so I spent a good part of the next hour making a case in my mind for how I was going to break it to her gently that I simply *can't* be a deacon right now due to other obligations.

I found her after church and was ready with my defense when, to my surprise, she said, "I heard you on NPR and I was wondering if you could guide me on a psilocybin journey, and also I think my spouse is depressed so could you guide them, and also do you think our pastor has done psychedelics or knows anything about it?" I told her we needed a little more time to unpack all of that (the nursery workers were waiting to go home) and promised to schedule coffee.[1]

Without betraying confidences, I also told my pastor that this is exactly why clergy need to get informed about the current "psychedelic renaissance." This woman was a retired professor and former chair of our deacons, not a thrill-seeking teenager. As a result

1. Story used with permission.

of our conversation, I was invited to give a Dallas-wide "Lunch and Learn" talk at my church. It was well attended. Christians of all ages are expressing interest and want their clergy informed. Church leaders, including that former chair of deacons and my pastor, need a resource.

I hope this book is that resource.

Psychedelic-assisted therapy (PAT) is being researched and used for a variety of intractable mental health conditions. We are learning that, unintentionally, it's common in the course of treatment for a person to have a significant spiritual, existential, religious, or theological (SERT) experience.[2] In other words, someone might enter therapy solely to address a condition such as anxiety or alcohol use disorder but end up having an unexpected profound encounter with God.

Meanwhile, the Christian church, broadly construed, appears unaware of the so-called psychedelic renaissance. It is ignorant of the clinical trajectory, which is regularly presented in mainstream news media, and even more so of movements in the larger culture involving access to and use of psychedelics beyond medical contexts, including religious and recreational uses. When NPR runs a national story about psychedelic chaplaincy, yet seminaries where chaplains are trained have never heard of it, then it's past time for the church to get informed. Part of my own scholarly vocation is to help the church participate intelligently, skillfully, ethically, meaningfully, and faithfully with the ways psychedelics and the Christian tradition do—or don't—connect. I want to help Christians be able to articulate their convictions based on knowledge, reasoned reflection, and interaction with the Christian tradition. I believe this will help the church better serve those seeking healing and spiritual growth, engendering healing and wholeness for all of God's creation.

2. Roman Palitsky et al., "Importance of Integrating Spiritual, Existential, Religious, and Theological Components in Psychedelic-Assisted Therapies," *JAMA Psychiatry* 80, no. 7 (2023): 743–49.

So, how did a (mostly nice) ordained Baptist, New Testament scholar, seminary professor, grandmother of three end up writing about psychedelics and soul care?

In seminary, I served in the Chaplain's Department of Connecticut Hospice, America's first architecturally intentional hospice. Being in my early twenties and journeying with people and their families through the dying process had a profound effect on me. It was nothing less than holy ground—sometimes smelly, loud, and heartbreaking, other times awe-inspiring, tender, and peaceful, but *always* holy ground. I was especially intrigued by how the dying person and their family integrated the experiences they were having into their own spiritual lives. I witnessed a surprising variety of approaches, even among those who shared the same religious tradition.

I went on to complete my PhD in biblical studies and become a professor who regularly teaches a class called Evil, Suffering, Death, and Afterlife. I also specialize in disability studies, which asks questions like: How are different bodies treated in the Bible and in contemporary culture? Which bodies serve as models and which as warnings? Which are approved and admired, and which are problematized, policed, and pathologized? How does religion affect attitudes to bodies and embodiment itself, positively or negatively? I also specialize in the Gospel of John, which is nothing if not mystical.

As a scholar, I'm always interested in the advancement of human knowledge. But I'm also a seminary professor training spiritual leaders to soul-journey with people from cradle to grave, and I'm a clergyperson captivated by matters of spiritual formation. So, when I learned about a Johns Hopkins study involving religious professionals and psilocybin, both my academic and ministerial interests were piqued.[3] Researchers gathered about twenty-five of us from different religious traditions, including Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, and a variety

3. "Effects of Psilocybin-Facilitated Experience on the Psychology and Effectiveness of Professional Leaders in Religion," September 16, 2014, NCT02243813, https://tinyurl.com/39er22w3.

of Christian denominations. One requirement for participation was no previous psychedelic experience, and I certainly qualified.

So, in the fall of 2017, I had two high-dose psilocybin sessions set one month apart. As a result, I am personally familiar with the terrain involved in psychedelic sessions. Because my experience was legal, I can speak publicly about it. Like most participants in this study, I count the psychedelic sessions among my most meaningful spiritual experiences.[4]

I encountered God in extremely profound ways in those two day-long sessions. I experienced a range of emotions, from love and belovedness to joy and laughter to awe and gratitude to grief that I didn't even know I harbored. There were also some very challenging experiences and lessons that were initially unwelcome. And, maybe not surprisingly for a Bible scholar, I experienced and understood Christian Scriptures in new ways.

My psychedelic sessions also brought me into embodied mystical experience with personal and vocational effects. Hence, my current work is at the intersection of psychedelics and medicine, law, and religion. I serve as a field scholar for the Emory University Center for Psychedelics and Spirituality, whose mission is "to push the frontier of psychological and spiritual health through the research, practice, and training of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy."[5] I am also an affiliated researcher on Harvard Law School's Petrie-Flom Center for Health Law Policy, Biotechnology and Bioethics, specifically the Psychedelic Use, Law, and Spiritual Experience (PULSE) project.

I'm part of the Transforming Chaplaincy Psychedelic Care Network, which engages and produces research and professional chaplaincy practices toward the development of accreditation standards,

4. Results of the study appear in Roland R. Griffiths et al., "Effects of Psilocybin on Religious and Spiritual Attitudes and Behaviors in Clergy from Various Major World Religions," *Psychedelic Medicine* 3, no. 4 (2025): 172–91, https://doi.org/10.1089/psymed.2023.0044.

5. Emory University Center for Psychedelics and Spirituality, mission statement, https://tinyurl.com/d4sf5mpn.

ethical codes of conduct, and systems of accountability. I'm also a member of the Psychedelic Educators Network, which is "dedicated to advancing the understanding and research of psychedelics through academic instruction" and includes faculty from diverse disciplines—including psychology, psychiatry, pharmacology, biochemistry, humanities, social work, nursing, anthropology, and more. I've completed the year-long intensive training program through CIIS for Psychedelic Therapies and Research, including a specific week of intensive training dedicated to treatment-resistant PTSD. I serve as a small group mentor and lecturer for the CIIS program. I have also done experiential facilitation training for ketamine-assisted psychotherapy in a pilot program in which clinicians and religious professionals trained together in an effort to increase interdisciplinary collaboration.

I've spoken (and listened) to a wide variety of audiences in various contexts. This includes scientists, medical professionals (medical doctors, therapists), clergy (in both congregational and chaplaincy contexts), laity, nonprofit groups, seminary communities, and wider university audiences. I helped design and implement the unique Christian Clergy Study (CCS) conducted through the Emory Center, which uses both surveys and interviews to learn about the knowledge, concerns, attitudes, and religious approaches that inform how clergy think about psychedelics. This follows on the heels of the first-ever evidence-based studies of Muslim and Jewish attitudes about psychedelics.

I know firsthand that there is broad and deep interest in this topic, and I hope to take what I've gleaned from all those contexts and pare it down to some essential points in the following pages.

This book is for Christians and those who are in relationship with them. It's for readers committed to curiosity, learning, and a desire to be equipped for greater service to God's beloved world. I assume no knowledge about or experience with psychedelics. In addition to lay Christians, I hope the following groups will benefit from this book:

- therapists who work with Christians
- therapists who are themselves Christian and wonder how their work in this space coheres with their own religious tradition
- chaplains who work with Christians
- chaplains who are themselves Christian
- theological educators and their students
- religious studies professors and their students
- clergy.

Appendices A–C specifically address clergy, chaplains, and therapists, but all readers might benefit by reading them.

I was invited to speak on "Psychedelics and Soul Care: What Churches and Seminaries Need to Know" during my seminary's Community Hour program. The conversation between faculty, staff, and students was lively, and the reactions and questions were wide-ranging. Some people had had their own psychedelic experiences. One student approved of psychedelics in therapeutic settings, but not for spiritual formation. To him, having a mystical experience via psychedelics amounts to "cheating," bypassing the discipline necessary to achieve such an experience.

One of my Greek students asked how modern psychedelics relate to what the Bible says about *pharmakeia*. Another student who had a background in addiction counseling was perplexed about how a drug could be used to treat a drug addiction. One faculty colleague, who was in the process of accompanying a dying spouse, informed the students about how psychedelics are being used to treat crippling end-of-life distress. I shared about how some Christians are developing psychedelic retreats tied to Christian liturgical traditions and rituals, and some wanted to know how they could participate in such an experience. Others wanted to know how they could get training in psychedelic chaplaincy. Everyone agreed we needed a lot more time to talk about all of this.

All these faculty, clergy, staff, and students need a resource to sort through these questions, hopes, and fears.

I also spoke on a webinar for the Chacruna Institute, and over six hundred people attended. Many in the audience do not participate in mainstream Christianity and were surprised to find an ordained clergyperson open to this conversation and able to demonstrate how it relates to Christian Scripture. My talk at the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) conference was attended by a psychiatrist who had also never met a clergyperson involved in the conversation about psychedelics as it relates to spirituality; she subsequently invited me to address a group of medical professionals at the Cleveland Clinic. One attendee indicated she had been wondering how her work as a therapist using these medicines to great healing effect correlated (if at all) with her own faith convictions.

Whichever kind of reader you are, I hope you find this book to be a useful resource. I have divided it into four parts.

Part 1: Clinical Contexts

Psychedelics are bringing deep healing to people suffering from a variety of ailments. And they are not without risk. In this section, I address advances in knowledge, current research, and clinical applications. How might the church approach the topic, and what is its responsibility in terms of, among other things, pastoral care and denominational guidance?

Part 2: Spiritual Formation

As psychedelics become more available, we need to consider those Christians who will seek to experience psychedelics in individual or group settings for purposes of spiritual formation. Christianity is based upon the claim that people personally encountered a man who had been executed by the Roman government, was then resurrected, and called them to a particular way of life that we now call Christian. Easter, the most important day on the Christian liturgical calendar, celebrates these resurrection encounters.

The Christian Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, narrates such mystical experiences and even various induction techniques through which to invite them. We have the visionary experience of Balaam that involves a talking donkey (Num. 22:22–35); or Mary encountering the angel Gabriel asking her to give birth to the Son of God (Luke 1:26–38); or Mary Magdalene, the first apostle, encountering the risen Jesus and trying to grab hold of him to keep him from ascending (John 20:11–18); or the apostle Paul experiencing a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus and becoming temporarily blind as a result (Acts 9:1–9). And the list goes on.

Thus, when contemporary Christians have psychedelic mystical experiences, whether in the context of medical treatment or intentional spiritual formation practices, they stand in a long line of religious ancestors who have traveled this terrain.

My argument focuses not on whether our religious ancestors ingested psychedelics, but rather upon the ways that the non-ordinary experiences in the Bible might be generative for those preparing for or integrating psychedelic sessions. Christianity provides a time-tested container for meaning making and, importantly, for incorporating the extraordinary spiritual experience into one's ordinary daily ethical life.

The spiritual formation portion of the book is the longest for a number of reasons. Since this is a book specifically aimed at psychedelics vis-à-vis Christianity, it's important to delve into details of Christian tradition, practice, and theology. And while there are many resources that readers can access to learn more about clinical uses of psychedelics, as well as risk-reduction strategies, there is a shortage of well-grounded books providing an overview of the topic from a Christian perspective.[6]

6. One valuable exception is Ron Cole-Turner, *Psychedelics and Christian Faith: Exploring an Unexpected Pathway to Healing and Spirituality* (Wipf & Stock, 2025).

While Christians can humbly learn more from those already operating in the psychedelic space, it is also the case that our tradition, done well, may have something to offer those in the psychedelic space. Our tradition is well acquainted with mystical experiences, visions, angels, demons, symbols, embodied encounters with that which is beyond ordinary states of consciousness, being possessed by the Spirit, beatific visions, and the long, anguishing, sometimes terrifying dark night of the soul. In addition, we have processes for discerning what things may mean or may not mean. We understand the importance of a regular community of support for making meaning.

Recall that the senses have been a valued way of knowing from day one of Christianity. We have access to embodied practices such as music, silence, incense, fasting, chant, liturgical dance, prayer, eucharist, kneeling, prostration, and standing for the gospel reading. Some forms of Christianity embrace sensual religious experience while other forms are more divorced from, suspicious of, or disdainful of it.

If we know our tradition well, we can be useful companions for those having psychedelic journeys and those seeking to integrate those experiences afterwards, whoever they may be, Christian or otherwise.

Part 3: Risk Reduction

Psychedelics are powerful substances, and caution is in order with both clinical and spiritual dimensions. As Scripture teaches, touching the holy is not to be taken lightly. Psychedelics are generally not physically toxic or addictive. They are, however, contraindicated for some people for psychological or physiological reasons. They can lead to adverse effects and negative outcomes for some people. This may be especially true when little attention is paid to clinically supervised preparation, a safe environment, skillful facilitation, and dedicated integration. Some adverse effects are mild and temporary; others are

more serious and extended. Fortunately, research is being conducted to increase safety and to produce enduring positive outcomes in the context of clinical use of psychedelics.[7]

Psychedelics can make one more vulnerable to suggestibility. Unfortunately, through numerous spectacular failures, the church has learned how important it is to create more safeguards against and actual accountability for those who violate the vulnerable people under their care or influence. Thus, attention to the safety of the physical environment, including the people accompanying the participant, is paramount.

As psychedelic use becomes more widespread both inside and outside clinical settings, the church should participate in risk-reduction efforts for those who've already had psychedelic experiences and for those considering them.

Part 4: Ethical Concerns

Justice is central to the Christian faith. There are multiple words for it in the Bible (e.g., *krima* and *dikaiosynē*), and sometimes it's translated as "righteousness." Two verses that readily come to mind for Christians are Amos 5:24: "But let justice [Hebrew: *mishpat*; Greek: *krima*] roll down like waters, and righteousness [Hebrew: *tzedakah*; Greek: *dikaiosynē*] like an ever-flowing stream" and Micah 6:8: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice [Hebrew: *mishpat*; Greek: *krima*], and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Justice is about right relationship between us, God, and God's creation.

There are justice issues to be addressed by the church when it comes to psychedelics. This includes right relationships with Indigenous and First Nations siblings who have a much longer history with these medicines, especially in sacred communal settings. It also includes right relationships with those from Black communities and

7. Note that I am referring solely to legal clinical contexts here.

other minority communities who are underrepresented and underserved. Creation care—that is, right relationship with God's created order—is an important aspect of Christian discipleship. Finally, there are a number of ways economic ethics pertain.

At my seminary, we have a required course called The Church in Its Social Context. In it, students learn to do the vital work of understanding the context of their ministry so that they can effectively serve the people whom God has placed in their care in this time instead of simply relying on how things have always been done. I never stop learning from Nancy Ammerman, whose specialty is "lived religion." Understanding lived religion is important for our life together, since religious practice always has a social aspect to it. About the mystical element, she writes: "We will expect variation of all sorts—in the degree to which spiritual experience represents a break with ordinary consciousness, for example. Is it a rather quiet or routine awareness of 'something more' that does not disrupt mundane activity in the ordinary world? Or does it transport a person into an alternative state of awareness?"[8]

The expanding intersection of psychedelics and religious practice falls into the category of lived religion, and it's endlessly interdisciplinary, which I find fascinating and fruitful. Scripture, history, culture, theology, metaphysics, science and religion, pastoral care, ethics, spiritual formation, preaching, liturgics, mysticism—these are all courses in our curriculum and concerns of the church, and engaging today's psychedelic renaissance requires all of them! John Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism, declared: "I look upon all the world as my parish."[9] Thus, I feel like I'm in good company when I urge us to serve the wide array of people inside and outside the church who

8. Nancy Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices* (NYU Press, 2021), 54.

9. The original quote comes from a letter Wesley wrote on June 11, 1739. In popular parlance, however, the quote often gets paraphrased to "The world is my parish!"

are exploring the world of psychedelics. Though apocryphal, Wesley is also often credited with saying, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can." May this book serve that end.