

What happens when religious leaders have a direct spiritual experience?

Michal Pollan’s report reminds me of the mysteries of antiquity: “virtually all the religious leaders I spoke with reported an encounter with the divine. One talked about having 'a spiritual orgasm.'

A striking number—79%—reported that the experience had enriched their prayer, their effectiveness in their vocation, and their sense of the sacred in daily life. 96% rated their first encounters with psilocybin as being among the top five most spiritually significant experiences of their lives.

Interviewees tended to report “authentic spiritual or religious experiences” A priest is quoted as saying, “I wasn’t dreaming, I wasn’t imagining, I wasn’t hallucinating.” Many participants likened their experience to those of historical and scriptural figures. “I was able to experience what the mystics were for some reason able to experience spontaneously,” a pastor said. “I don’t think that . . . my experience was less than theirs.” According to the interviews, the divine was not usually embodied or visible but, rather, felt as a presence that suffused reality, or as a sense of oneness. “I realize my very pulse is God, my very breath is God,” a rabbi said.

No one I spoke to, not even the rabbis, described seeing the stereotypical God of the Old Testament. And many of the religious leaders, men and women alike, experienced the divine as a feminine presence. Participants characterized God as “soothing,” “maternal,” or “womb-like.” A United Methodist pastor from Alabama called this “mind-blowing.” One of Priest’s fellow-Episcopalians, a man, reported, “I had a total deconstruction of patriarchal religion.”

Some felt a marked tension between the conventions of their faith and the immediacy of their psilocybin experience. “I think I have less tolerance for institutional religion now,” a Presbyterian minister is quoted as saying. “There are other ways to connect with the divine.”

Here was the entire history of world religions in a nutshell: orthodoxy and authority in tension with the direct spiritual experience of the individual.


Early in her first session, Ahmed told me, she felt God right behind her. “Like, if I turned around, I would bump into God,” she said. “There’s a verse in the Quran in which God says, ‘I’m closer to you than your jugular vein.’ The jugular is the life-giving source. God was with me the whole time.” For her, God was neither masculine nor feminine. “God was above gender, above everything . . . an existence, not a figure,” she said. “And God was love.” Her epiphany was a familiar psychedelic trope, but that did not make it any less profound. “It was just mind-blowingly clear how wrong we have it as human beings, and how we need to nurture love, to put it at the center of our engagement with humanity and animals and the planet,” she told me. “I feel a closeness to God, even to this day, that I’ve never experienced before,” she told me.

“The experience made me a better person and a better priest.” Joslin is in his seventies, but he has shelved plans to retire; he argued that pastors have a role to play in helping parishioners make sense of psychedelic experiences, even while psychedelics are illegal. “Why should we be left out of these spiritual experiences? I thought we were in that business!”

Over time, many faiths pivot from a focus on direct spiritual experience, such as encounters with God or moments of transcendence, to a focus on tradition and belief.

Organized religion often opposes such figures. Religions can’t survive if they’re wide open to the claims of every individual with supposed experience of the divine. “You can’t have people going around saying, ‘God told me to do this or that,’ ” Pagels told me. “Because you can really go off the rails.” Even so, she was heartened by the depth and passion exhibited by many of the religious leaders in the study. “Traditions can become fossilized,” she said. Religious institutions will need to be “enlivened and reimagined and transformed” if they are to survive and serve people today. “It’s like art,” she added. “We don’t just stay with the art of the fifteenth century. People are still making paintings!””

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DEPT. OF PSYCHOPHARMACOLOGY


THIS IS YOUR PRIEST ON DRUGS

Dozens of religious leaders experienced magic mushrooms in a university study. Many are now evangelists for psychedelics.

By Michael Pollan
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Researchers at Johns Hopkins and N.Y.U. gave psilocybin to Christian and Jewish clergy members, an Islamic leader, and a Zen Buddhist roshi. Photo illustration by David Samuel Stern

 Michael Pollan

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