

Chapter 24

Modern American Christianity—Part 2

Just as is the case with yoga and meditation, the Christian church needs to reckon with cannabis and natural psychedelics. The church now looks with great skepticism on these plant-based medicines because of their past association with “pagan” religious practices. In the past, it also has been easy for the church to dismiss cannabis and psychedelics because they were illegal to possess.

Paul advocates civil obedience in the Book of Romans from the New Testament. Without direct experience of how therapeutic something like psilocybin-containing mushrooms can be, or without a willingness to consider science, it is easy to dismiss psychedelics, and perceive them only in the way the government describes them, as more dangerous than heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine, or even alcohol. This attitude almost seems to be recommended by Paul because of his arguments about obedience to the law.

I mentioned *The Immortality Key* by Brian C. Muraresku. In this book, Brian presents strong evidence that the ancient pagan psychedelic rituals from Greece

and elsewhere were practiced alongside Christianity in the first centuries of its existence as a religion. Brian suggests that it is time for the church to reclaim these gifts of creation to help heal trauma and inspire belief. The church could reclaim these tools to help heal trauma regardless of belief, but I think that men and women may believe differently after having the same powerful experiences with psychedelics that I had. My experiences are not unique.

My dad and other theologians and pastors would tell you that true reformation and revival in the church begins with repentance, not with psilocybin mushrooms. There is a notion that God's people can repent of their sin and self-reliance and draw closer to God to get more in line with his plan. While I am not a pastor and do not want to be, I could be a lay person facilitator of all of the practices I describe here. I believe that if the church tried to feed and house the poor, teach meditation and yoga, heal trauma, and advise people on how to build heart-centered wealth, these practices could communicate Jesus' love unconditionally. I will leave the calls to repentance and revival to the pastors and evangelists. I think that Jesus' message was most powerful when he took actions as opposed to speaking words. He did both

of course.

Christians' suspicion of psychedelics is not entirely unfounded. The Christian New Testament includes warnings against *pharmakeia*, the Greek word for “sorceries”. In the Book of Revelations 18.23, men turn away from God because they are deceived by the *pharmakeia* of Babylon. In the Book of Galatians 5.19-20, Paul condemns sorcery using the Greek word *pharmakeia*. The specific language of the entire passage is instructive to understand the real intent of his words:

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft [*pharmakeia*]; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

It is obvious that *pharmakeia* is the root word for “pharmaceutical”, and apart from sorcery, most lexicons give the first definitions of the word as “the use or administration of drugs” or “poisoning”. Importantly, apart from these definitions, an alternative meaning is “idolatry”. Idolatry has to do with worshiping other gods, and the human mind can make a god of anything.

Idolatry is how *pharmakeia* is translated in this passage (along with witchcraft).

Some Christians interpret these passages as condemning any use of pharmaceuticals, that any use of prescription medicine violates God's laws.

These considerations are legitimate because to properly practice Christianity, you are instructed to "pick sides". The direction from the Torah in Deuteronomy 6.4, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" precludes the worship of any other gods, including relying on our own efforts or understanding. This was Israel's commandment, but it continues to have relevance for Christians because Jesus said that it was the most important commandment in the Gospel of Mark 12.29. I personally do not want to seek out any other gods in my practice of Christianity. It only would bring me confusion. I would not recommend my Christian brothers or sisters to seek out other gods either. I believe Jesus is sufficient.

The distinction that I would make to understand the warnings about *pharmakeia* is the same one that Christians use to justify taking prescription medicines. How can we be engaging in paganism (turning to other gods) if we perceive a medicine as an agent for healing

that God created?

If we take medicine with the intent of communicating with demons or spirits, that would be the wrong use of medicine. It would be unusual to perceive that you have the ability to commune with spirits after taking antibiotics, but many people report encountering entities, aliens, and machine elves after ingesting DMT or psilocybin. These “demons” could be projections of my own consciousness, but they certainly could be real demons I suppose. Do I encounter demons when I dream? From this perspective, I appreciate the warnings in the New Testament against *pharmakeia* because I can imagine how psychedelics could be used to attempt to engage with these entities. If the entities are demons and I smoke DMT with the purpose of interacting with the machine elves, that may indicate that I am consulting with foreign gods. This is certainly a topic for another book.

If my intent is on glorifying God and enjoying him forever, and to bring health to my life so that I can serve my community, I should be able to take antibiotics and be confident I am not engaging in demonology. I can also take psilocybin with the same intent. If I perceive it as a natural psychopharmaceutical that could

alleviate persistent depression and anxiety, as long my intention in taking the medicine is that I would be directed toward God and not to communicate with demons (or angels or spirits), could it be wrong? This is almost too obvious to have to describe, but it is necessary for Christians to consider in the context of natural psychedelics. It is important because the church could take a role in healing trauma through implementing practices like the Marsh Chapel Experiment, an experiment in 1962 where psilocybin was administered to Harvard divinity students.

There is a passage from my source text with which some Protestants may not be familiar. The sect of Christianity that I most closely identify with is Protestantism. Many Christians (including Protestants) do not really know the Bible, or only have a vague notion of everything that it says. I can't claim to have total knowledge of the contents of the Bible, but I have read it cover to cover a few times and specific parts of it many times.

The Bible is a long book. In fact, one of the other major Christian sects that you may have heard of, Catholicism, has a different Bible from Protestantism because it includes additional books making it even

longer. One of these additional books of the Bible that is “extra-canonical” to Protestants is the Book of Sirach, also known as the Wisdom of Sirach, also known as the Book of Ecclesiasticus (not to be confused with Ecclesiastes!).

For purposes of this chapter, I would commend the Book of Sirach to my fellow Christians whose consciences have ever been pricked by taking prescription medicines, thinking they were violating Paul’s prohibition against *pharmakeia*. Sirach, Chapter 38, verses 1 through 8 are quoted in their entirety below (from the New Revised Standard Version):

Honor physicians for their services, for the Lord created them; for their gift of healing comes from the Most High, and they are rewarded by the king. The skill of physicians makes them distinguished, and in the presence of the great they are admired. *The Lord created medicines out of the earth, and the sensible will not despise them* [emphasis added]. Was not water made sweet with a tree in order that its power might be known? And he gave skill to human beings that he might be glorified in his marvelous works. By them the physician heals and takes away pain; the pharmacist makes a mixture from them. God’s works will never be finished; and from him health spreads over all the earth.

I picked psilocybin-containing mushrooms growing wild in a cow pasture in the most geographically-remote place in the world, Hawaii. These psychedelic mushrooms grow EVERYWHERE! I cannot help but believe that God created these mushrooms as natural psychopharmaceuticals. Do you think that the ancients did not know about them? Undoubtedly, early Christians knew about the ancient Greek pagan rituals, the Mysteries of Dionysus, and the Temple of Eleusis. It would be supremely arrogant of us as moderns to think that it is only now in the 20th and 21st centuries that we are beginning to interact with psychedelics. That is why Brian Muraresku's book is so important. Now, in the 21st century science is proving that psilocybin is far safer and more effective than manufactured prescription drugs. What is most remarkable is that psilocybin grows from the ground.

When the man-made drugs proved ineffective for me, and when my sacred text tells me that medicine grows from the ground, do you think that I am going to obey a law that was enacted specifically to perpetuate racism in the United States and deprive myself of a healing agent? My legal justification for possessing cannabis, DMT, and psilocybin is based on medical

necessity and religious liberty.

As is the case sometimes with the Bible, it seems to be self-contradictory, and in this instance, Paul's warnings and the warnings from the Book of Revelations against *pharmakeia* seem to contradict Sirach's approval of physicians and medicine. The only thing for the faithful to do is to attempt to harmonize the apparently contradictory passages. I want to try to be brief in this summary and not go into detailed descriptions of hermeneutic methods that my dad would be far more skilled at describing than me. The passage from Sirach and its commonsensical wisdom seem to give me permission to take medicines that grow "out of the earth". I will be "sensible" if I do "not despise them."

As I have mentioned before, the plant medicines that I ingested and that have given me the greatest healing (cannabis, DMT, and psilocybin) have all drawn me closer to my Christian God. I believe that my faith in Jesus has only deepened through my ingestion of psychedelics. I have experienced an expansion in my capacity for love and for empathy, and that makes me really happy. I no longer want to kill myself. Psychedelics gave me a real sense of how it feels to be loved by God.

What the Marsh Chapel Experiment (and other experiments just like it) showed is that mystical experiences induced by psilocybin are just as legitimate to the people who experienced them as non-induced mystical experiences. How can that be a bad thing? There is a notion of “relying on the arm of flesh” in Paul (as described above in the discussion of Galatians), but in the context of psilocybin, that is a spiritualized way to recommend that I turn away from common sense. This is a way of justifying someone’s cognitive bias based on willful ignorance, to forbid something that may be tremendously useful, and in fact, the one thing that really can heal something like persistent depression, PTSD, or anxiety.

My use of psilocybin drew me away from “[t]he acts of the flesh”. Since ingesting psychedelics, I have gained new perspectives on pornography and sexual abstinence. I have largely quit drinking alcohol. I have reengaged in my Christian faith. I spend hours at a time, sometimes daily, with the scriptures in my art (the T. H. Chalm Bible Poetry I described earlier). My feelings of anger and discord with my ex-wife have reduced. I am less jealous, less envious, I have fewer instances where my temper gets the better of me. My ambition has been

redirected, and I seek out unity rather than division. I believe all these things have occurred by the power of God (Jesus) working through me, and one of the main ways that they have occurred is because I obeyed Sirach's encouragement to be sensible. Sirach 38.4 says that "sensible" people will not despise them," with the "them" referring to the "medicines out of the earth" that "[t]he Lord created."

Because I did not invoke demons, angels, or spirits, I took psilocybin just like most people take Prozac, and with the same intention that I have when I take antibiotics. Most Christians would not bat an eye Prozac or antibiotics, and why? Because they took the commonsense approach of trusting their doctors.

My doctor could not prescribe psilocybin, though, because it is illegal to possess. It is also a plant-like organism (a mushroom) that grows from the ground. The legal issue has been remedied in some places. Several municipalities (Denver, Ann Arbor, Santa Cruz, to name a few) have decriminalized psilocybin-containing mushrooms. If there is no law against the mushrooms, couldn't they be treated similarly to medical cannabis?

Everyone knows about how the status of cannabis

has shifted in the United States. I first obtained a recommendation for medical cannabis from a doctor in California in 2010. I provided my medical records showing that I had tried at least three other prescription psychopharmaceuticals for depression and anxiety and told the doctor that none of them helped as much as cannabis. He gave me a “recommendation” (not a prescription) to take cannabis for my symptoms. While it was not a prescription, the imprimatur of a doctor was relevant when I was measuring my conduct against God’s word.

The point here is, couldn’t the same thing be done with psilocybin-containing mushrooms? The psychedelic effects of psilocybin are substantially more pronounced than the effects of cannabis. I would recommend a greater degree of care when consuming psilocybin as compared with cannabis. Note that through microdosing, it is *easy* to experience psilocybin’s healing potential in a gentle and completely safe way. The main safety issue with psilocybin is that if you take a large enough dose, you will be severely disoriented for a few hours, you would be unable to drive, and you may have some impulses to do nonsensical things that a trip sitter can help redirect. If you read about experiences

with psilocybin, you will learn that the only real supervision that is required is from a friend, not a doctor. A trip sitter is adequate to help facilitate a safe experience with psilocybin. This is how medically safe psilocybin is.

The church could take an active role in helping facilitate healing rituals with psilocybin just like the Marsh Chapel Experiment, also known as the “Good Friday Experiment”. If you have not read about this, it provides an example of how the church could lead psychedelic healing rituals.

Many people have heard of Timothy Leary and Ram Dass (Richard Alpert), both of whom were professors at Harvard University in the 1960s. Their popularity (or notoriety) arose from their association and advocacy of the use of natural psychedelics and LSD as healing agents for mental health issues. One experiment that they conducted involved giving psilocybin to prisoners (the Concord Prison Experiment) and measuring recidivism rates. They conducted extensive research in the use of psychedelics as healing agents until 1970’s United States federal Controlled Substances Act classified psychedelic medicines (including cannabis) as more dangerous than heroin, methamphetamine, and

cocaine. Because of their supposed danger, possession of psychedelic plants was severely criminalized at the U.S. federal level, and the states followed suit. Alcohol, determined to be the most dangerous drug by the Lancet study, has been completely legal in the United States since the end of Prohibition in the 1930s.

In association with Leary's and Alpert's research, Walter N. Pahnke, a graduate student in theology at Harvard Divinity School, designed an experiment where psilocybin would be given to a group of divinity students to determine whether the medicine could initiate a mystical experience in religiously inclined persons. The experiment was conducted in 1962 on Good Friday at Boston University's Marsh Chapel with ten participants receiving psilocybin and ten receiving a placebo. Almost all the participants in the study who took psilocybin reported having profound religious experiences. One of the participants, Huston Smith (who went on to author multiple textbooks on comparative religion) described the experience as "the most powerful cosmic homecoming I have ever experienced."

I described the Ayahuasca ceremonies in which I participated. All a church would need to do is provide a safe place, and it could facilitate similar trauma healing

retreats with psilocybin. The dosage on my cannabis recommendation was “as needed”. With volunteer trip sitters, the church could help people heal trauma without requiring anything in return. How do you think people would respond to that kind of unconditional love? If the church could take an active role in binding up the wounds of mental illness in this way, don’t you think that it would have a greater place of relevance in our culture? Wouldn’t that be a way to redeem the evils that have been done in the name of Jesus? What if the Catholic church could hold PTSD healing rituals for people who have been traumatized by pedophile priests? This could be accomplished with a natural substance (a mushroom) that is medically as dangerous as coffee, or something that you might put in a salad or spaghetti.

The main danger from psychedelics is that they remain illegal to possess in many jurisdictions. If their possession were decriminalized, with minimal supervision, psilocybin ceremonies could be safely conducted at churches by lay (non-clergy) volunteers. It is simply a matter of reforming the laws first, and our will, understanding, and appreciation of God’s word next. The church can facilitate healing mental illness just like Jesus did with the miracle of the demon-

possessed man (the “exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac” described in the Gospels of Mark and Luke) who undoubtedly was suffering from (at least) severe complex PTSD.