9. New Views of Timeless Experiences: Contemporary Research on the Nature and Significance of Transpersonal Experiences

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If there is one thing that is clear about psychedelics it is that they can unleash an awesome variety of experiences. Some of the most powerful, as well as the most profound and transformative are also some of the most controversial: specifically transpersonal experiences in which the self-sense expands beyond (trans) the personal or personality to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, the world and the universe.

Some of these echo experiences that have long been the goal of the world's great spiritual-contemplative traditions and in certain cases appear phenomenologically indistinguishable from full blown mystical experiences, as Walter Pahnke demonstrated in his famous Harvard chapel Good Friday study. Some researchers, e.g. Zaehner, have argued that drug induced experiences could not possibly be the same as those that contemplatives labor for decades before tasting. However the religious scholar Huston Smith (1964/1993) seems to have demolished this claim in his classic paper "Do drugs have religious import?" and theoretical arguments for their identity have also been advanced (Stace, 1987; Walsh, 1991).

Yet even if some psychedelic experiences are phenomenologically indistinguishable from classic contemplative and mystical experiences this is certainly not enough to establish their significance and value in the eyes of many contemporary academicians and mental health professionals. For to many such people religious experiences themselves are suspect and may even be taken as evidence of psychopathology. Such views reflect both the history of psychiatry and much of the modern and postmodern cultural zeitgeist. Yet it is increasingly clear that such pathologizing interpretations are no longer tenable in the light of recent research. The aim of this article is therefore to trace the evolution of our understanding and to make clear that observations of the power and potential benefits of transpersonal experiences, whether psychedelically or contemplatively induced, are fully consistent with contemporary research and theory.

The Evolution of Our Understanding

In psychiatry, it was Freud who set the original tone. The title of his book *The Future of an Illusion* left little doubt about his views on the nature of religion. He regarded it as a developmental relic to be outgrown and mystical experiences as severely regressive. Nor were Western religions the only ones to be dismissed. In a well known text *The History of Psychiatry*, Alexander & Selesnick (1966) pointed to "the obvious similarities between schizophrenic regressions and the practices of yoga and Zen."

Of course such views were understandable, given that mental health practitioners were seeing disturbed individuals whose relationships to, and use of, religion were often also correspondingly disturbed. Moreover, this dismissive trend also reflected a larger, centuries-long trend in Western culture. Beginning with the age of enlightenment, the rise of science had performed the healthy and much needed function of freeing European civilization from the stifling grip of the church's dogmatic control. Within a mere evolutionary blink of the eye the dominant arbiters of reality shifted from church and clergy to science and scientists.

The peak--or nadir, depending on your perspective--of this shift was symbolized by Auguste Comte, founder of positivism. To satisfy the needs of the unsophisticated masses, Comte proposed a new church complete with scientists as saints. Comte modestly allowed that he would be willing to serve as pope; but alas, he became increasingly grandiose and died deranged. Yet Comte notwithstanding, science continued to pour forth its marvels and the human vision of the universe expanded from leagues to light years, and from countries to the cosmos.

Yet in other ways the human vision of the universe and of ourselves was curiously diminished. Whereas the scope of the known universe kept expanding, its meaning and significance kept contracting. Comforted by the great religious myths, humans had once felt themselves to be children of God, at home in a coherent, divinely ordered world designed expressly for their wellbeing. Now they saw themselves as meaningless blobs of protoplasm, adrift on an uncaring speck of dust in a remote unchartered corner of one of uncountable billions of galaxies. Human beings were increasingly demoted to mere sophisticated machines: the "stimulus-response machines" of behaviorists, the "wet

computers" of artificial intelligence, or for evolutionary biologists "a pecularily baroque example of the lengths to which nuclear acid is prepared to go to copy itself" (Chedd, 1973).

Of course mind and transcendental experiences were similarly deflated. Mind came to be regarded as merely "an epiphenomenon of the neuronal machinery of the brain" and transcendental experiences were dismissed as the disordered fire-works of that machinery. Francis Crick, discoverer of the nature of DNA, epitomized this view with his suggestion that belief in the existence of God might be due to mischievous mutant molecules that he named "theotoxins."

Consequently, all meaning, purpose and values--no matter how venerated or venerable -- suddenly seemed groundless. The net result was what Lewis Mumford described as "a disqualified universe," and what the sociologist, Max Weber, called "the disenchantment of the world." This disenchanted world was now reduced, as the Nobel Laureate philosopher of science Alfred North Whitehead (1967) lamented, to merely "a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colorless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly."

And yet, as Whitehead pointed out "this position on the part of the scientist was pure bluff." Scientists had made the understandable but disastrous mistake of sliding from science into scientism; from believing that science was a superb way of gaining some information about some things to believing it was the best or only way of obtaining information about all things; from saying that what science can't observe it can't observe to saying that what science can't observe doesn't exist (Wilber, 1983).

Contemporary Understandings

Yet as with so many things, the times are changing, and with them our views of science, religion and transpersonal experiences. It is now increasingly clear that the reductionistic dismissal of religion by science and its pathologization by psychiatry are largely based on unsophisticated views of science, religion and transpersonal experiences. While there is much in religion that is problematic there is also much that is beneficial.

Science is only one way of obtaining valid information. For a comprehensive view of ourselves and the world, it needs to be complimented by experiential, interpretive (hermeneutical), and introspective modes of knowing. In addition, a materialistic, reductionistic, disqualified worldview of nature and humans--so long assumed to follow naturally and necessarily from science--is only one of many possible views.

It is now clear that the terms religion and spirituality can refer to so many different behaviors, values and institutions that understanding them and their psychological significance requires bringing order into this semantic chaos. One useful approach is to look at religion and spirituality from a developmental life-span perspective.

Researchers increasingly divide development into three major phases: preconventional, conventional and transconventional; or prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal. Whether it is the development of cognition, morality, faith, motivation or a self-sense, it is clear that we enter the world unsocialized (at a preconventional stage) and are gradually acculturated into a conventional worldview and modus operandi. A few individuals develop further into postconventional stages of post-formal operational cognition (see, for example, the work of Flavell and Arieti), transconventional morality (Lawrence Kohlberg), universalizing faith (James Fowler), self-actualizing and self-transcending motives (Abraham Maslow), and a transpersonal self-sense (Ken Wilber). These diverse studies have been synthesized into a remarkably comprehensive theory of transpersonal development by Ken Wilber (1981, 1986).

What is crucial for a contemporary psychological understanding of religion is the recognition that religious belief, behavior and experience can occur at any stage --preconventional, conventional or post-conventional-- and can vary dramatically in form, function and value according to the stage. There is no question that religion can be tragically misused in the service of, for example, egocentricity, bias and fanaticism. But the great mistake of many scientists and mental health practitioners who dismissed religion wholesale was to mistake parts of preconventional or conventional religion for all of religion; to equate dogmatic mythical or magical thinking with all religious thinking; to fixate on religion as a defensive maneuver and overlook religion as a developmental catalyst; to conflate preconventional regression with transconventional progression; and to confuse the schizophrenic's prepersonal loss of ego boundaries with the mystic's transpersonal recognition of the unity of existence.

The net effect is what is now known as "the pre/trans fallacy": the confusion and conflation of preconventional/prepersonal religious developmental stages with transconventional/transpersonal stages. Henceforth we will need to be far more precise in identifying the function and developmental level of religious behavior, belief and experience.

Fortunately, relevant research on religion, spirituality and transpersonal experiences is expanding dramatically and includes some of the following helpful background findings.

Growing numbers of contemporary psychoanalytic thinkers are forging new psychoanalytic perspectives of religion and no longer see psychoanalysis and authentic spirituality as incompatible. People who have transpersonal or mystical experiences, far from

being necessarily pathological, score above average on multiple measures of well-being.

Several hundred studies of meditation confirm that, in addition to inducing the transpersonal experiences that are its goal, it can produce wide-ranging psychological, physiological and biochemical effects and therapeutic benefits. Intriguing findings include evidence for enhanced creativity, perceptual sensitivity, empathy, marital satisfaction, lucid dreaming, sense of self-control, and self-actualization. Developmentally, several studies suggest it may foster maturation on scales of ego, moral and cognitive development. Clinical research suggests that it can be therapeutic for several psychological and psychosomatic disorders including anxiety, phobias, posttraumatic stress, insomnia, drug abuse, chronic pain and mild depression (West, 1987; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

Near-death experiences can be profound transpersonal experiences and whatever their precise nature may finally turn out to be, are far from being signs of severe pathology as was once widely assumed. Rather they seem to be followed by surprisingly large, long lasting and beneficial psychological changes, especially associated with decreased concern with materialism and increased interest in love and learning.

In the new psychiatric diagnostic manual, DSM-IV, a new category for religious or spiritual problems refers to religiously based difficulties that do not reflect pathology. This new code is an important step in institutionalizing the recognition that religious interests, concerns and experiences are not synonymous with pathology.

Together, these findings make abundantly clear that transpersonal experiences are far from being synonymous with pathology. Rather, they can be surprisingly beneficial and transformative and are most likely to occur in people of exceptional psychological health and maturity. These facts, plus their remarkable frequency and power in psychedelic sessions, suggest that they deserve to be a focus of further psychedelic research.

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