

Mushrooms at the table?

People have long tried to trace a connection between the early church's eucharistic practice and psychedelic substances. Scholars aren't convinced.

by [Don Lattin](#) in the [November 2023](#) issue



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In the tumultuous 16th century, a Dominican friar named Giordano Bruno argued that the universe was infinite and had no celestial body at its center. He also believed in the transmigration of the soul, also known as reincarnation. His execution by the Roman Inquisition on February 17, 1600, which prefigured the more famous heresy trial of Galileo, made him one of the early martyrs of modern science—despite his clear spiritualist bent.

“Unless you make yourself equal to God, you cannot understand God,” Bruno preached. “It is within our power to strip veils and coverings from the face of nature,” to illuminate those who “could not see their own image in the innumerable mirrors of reality which surround them on every side.”

Bruno’s ideas are sometimes highlighted by those who argue that there is a history in the church of a Eucharist fueled by sacred plants and fungi with psychedelic properties. Brian Muraresku argues just this in his 2020 book *The Immortality Key: The Secret History of the Religion with No Name*. The lawyer and writer subscribes to the “pagan continuity theory,” a speculative idea that a secret tradition dating back to the Eleusinian mysteries of ancient Greece has been kept alive by an underground network of witches and wise men through the use of mind-expanding plants and drugs. What passes for Holy Communion in the church today, he suggests, is just a pale imitation of these secret, age-old rites. Today’s wafer and wine, Muraresku writes, can be seen as a “placebo Eucharist.”

Muraresku argues that Bruno may have been enlightened by “drugs that the Vatican perceived as a heretical imitation of its own Eucharist, which it specifically convicted both Bruno and the witches of blaspheming.” At least some of the countless men and women condemned by the Inquisition were employing “drugs that were considered so unquestionably superior to the traditional Christian Eucharist, however, that the wizard [Bruno] and his sisters were willing to trade their lives for the ‘highest and final illumination’ that could only be delivered by a homemade Eucharist.”

It’s hard to find a theologically trained Christian scholar who will endorse the pagan continuity theory. Thomas Cattoi, an authority on Christian mystical traditions at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California, said there is no evidence that psychoactive plants had anything to do with Bruno’s heresy trial. John Mabry—a progressive Christian mystic and retired United Church of Christ pastor—calls Muraresku’s theories about pagans, drugs, and Christianity “a bunch of nonsense.”

“I had the misfortune of reading *The Immortality Key*,” said Mabry, who now teaches spiritual direction at the interfaith Chaplaincy Institute in Berkeley. “I didn’t appreciate the church-bashing. The church is an easy target, and for good reasons—the Inquisition, Crusades, pogroms. These are all horrendous things that should not be swept under the rug. But if you want to bash the church, write that book. If you want to speculate about entheogens, write that book.”

Muraresku's theories about a secret psychedelic tradition in Christianity—and the controversies they stir—are nothing new. In 1970, British Bible scholar John M. Allegro published *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*. He argued that many of the stories and characters in the Bible—Jewish patriarchs, Jesus Christ, even the various names for God—are verbal puns that can be traced back to a secret Sumerian code language describing an ancient fertility cult centered around the worship of a sacred magic mushroom, the red-topped *Amanita muscaria*.

Allegro speculated that the historical Jesus described in Matthew, Mark, and Luke never existed. He was a creation of later church fathers trying to purge the cultic mysticism of the early Jesus movement, whose mythic origins are better seen in the fantastic visions and revelations in the Fourth Gospel account provided by followers of John.

These were not just the wild-eyed theories of some 1960s hippie high on drugs. In fact, it seems that Allegro himself had not experimented with psychedelics. After serving in the Royal Navy during World War II, Allegro trained to become a Methodist minister but instead wound up with a degree in oriental studies from the University of Manchester. He went on to teach a course in Old Testament and intertestamental studies at that school. In 1953, he was named as the first British representative on an international team working on the translation and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Allegro's agnosticism clashed with the orthodox ideas of the Catholic priests and other Christian scholars who worked with him to translate and understand the scrolls. They gravitated to the orthodox assumption that Jesus was the unique and historical son of God, while Allegro argued that the best way to understand the New Testament was to see it as a blend of myth, mysticism, folklore, and history.

His book *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Reappraisal* (1956) would sell more than 250,000 copies over the next four decades. By the time he died at age 65 in 1988, Allegro had published 13 books, including *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Myth* (1979). But it was *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* that nearly destroyed his career. He was denounced by 14 different British scholars. He resigned from his faculty position at the University of Manchester. His publisher apologized for releasing the work. Historian and *Century* columnist Philip Jenkins has called the book "possibly the single most ludicrous book on Jesus scholarship by a qualified academic."

Equally unimpressed was R. Gordon Wasson, a New York banker and self-trained mycologist who played a key role in the dawning of what we are now calling the psychedelic renaissance. In 1957 *Life* magazine published a lengthy, illustrated account of Wasson's "discovery" of a magic mushroom cult among the indigenous Mazatec people in the mountains of southern Mexico. Over the next few decades, that story and later accounts would inspire thousands of beatniks, hippies, and spiritual seekers to embark on mushroom missions or peyote pilgrimages across Mexico—establishing a psychedelic tourism industry that continues today with ayahuasca adventurers seeking shamanic wisdom in remote South American outposts.

In an interview about a year before he died, Wasson praised Allegro as a "brilliant man" who should be respected and esteemed for his role in translating the Dead Sea Scrolls. At the same time, Wasson accused Allegro of making numerous linguistic errors in *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*. In an interview published in the 1997 anthology *Entheogens and the Future of Religion*, Wasson said Allegro "jumped to unwarranted conclusions on scanty evidence" and then "made the unforgivable blunder of selling the manuscript to *The News of the World*," a British tabloid that serialized and sensationalized the work.

In 1978, Wasson teamed up with Albert Hofmann, the Swiss chemist who first synthesized LSD, and Carl Ruck, an authority on Greek myth and ethnobotany, to publish *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries*. Their book, which was largely ignored at the time, sought to identify the ingredients in the psychoactive potion that fueled secretive rites conducted for nearly two millennia at Eleusis, a pilgrimage site outside Athens.

Few movements in the long history of esoteric religion rival the Eleusinian mysteries for their influence and staying power. The mystery rites began around 1500 BCE as a local cult centered on Demeter, the Olympian goddess of the grain harvest, and spread throughout the Greco-Roman world until they were largely suppressed in the fourth century with the rise of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. In his contribution to *The Road to Eleusis*, Hofmann argues that the potion used in the rites could have easily contained hallucinogenic ergot, a fungus growing on wheat and barley—the very grains that Demeter blessed. In his laboratory, Hofmann analyzed the ergot from wheat and barley and found that it contained traces of lysergic acid amide, a less potent relative to LSD.

This obscure collaboration between Hofmann, Wasson, and Ruck is the work that Brian Muraresku resurrects and popularizes in *The Immortality Key*. He argues that the barley-based potions at Eleusis (the kukeon), the *soma* of ancient India, and the Dionysian wine of Roman rites were all spiked with psychoactive plants and fungi. He cites depictions in Christian art, along with intriguing yet somewhat sketchy archaeological evidence, to argue that esoteric sects within Christianity continued this entheogenic communion for centuries.

In a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1970, Wasson dismissed Allegro's credentials, saying he was "not a mycologist, but, if anything, a cultural historian." Wasson also got into a public debate with Allegro about the sole illustration in the first edition of *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*. It's a photograph of a 12th-century fresco on the wall of a ruined chapel in Plaincourault, France, built by the Knights of the Order of Malta upon their return from the Crusades. It depicts Adam and Eve covering themselves in the garden of Eden, flanking a giant "mushroom tree." A snake winds its way up the trunk.

"There the *Amanita muscaria* is gloriously portrayed, entwined with a serpent, whilst Eve stands by holding her belly," Allegro writes. "The cunning reptile prevails upon Eve and her husband to eat of the tree, whose fruit 'made them as Gods, knowing good and evil' (Gen. 3:4)."

In his book *Soma*, Wasson cites an art historian to bolster his argument that "the plant in this fresco has nothing whatever to do with mushrooms."

In *The Immortality Key*, Muraresku continues to present only speculative evidence that Jesus *could* have been passing around psychedelic wine at the Last Supper. In a 2021 conversation with Muraresku, Charles Stang pointed out that while there may have been Greek mystery cults or Dionysian movements communing with magic mushrooms or ergot-spiked beverages, Muraresku's book does not really link this to early Christian practices. "I'm not here trying to protect Christianity from the evidence of psychedelic use," said Stang, the director of Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions. "I expect we will find it . . . [but] I don't think we have found it, and I think that's an important distinction to make."

Muraresku conceded the point. "All I present . . . is wonderfully attractive and maybe even sexy circumstantial evidence for the potential use of a psychedelic sacrament amongst the earliest Christians."

Stang then questioned Muraresku's belief that "psychedelics are so significant that they might usher in a new Reformation."

"How can you reasonably expect the church to recognize a psychedelic Eucharist?" Stang asked. "Do you think that by calling the Eucharist a 'placebo' that you're likely to persuade them?"

Muraresku, who writes that he has not personally experimented with psychedelics and "still considers [himself] a good Catholic boy," stressed that he was not trying to antagonize the church.

"I see a thirst, especially in young people, for real experience," he said. "What comes to my mind is how, if at all, can psychedelics enhance faith or re-enchant Christianity. . . . I don't think that psychedelics are coming to replace the Sunday Eucharist. . . . If there is a place for psychedelics, I would think it would be in one of those sacred containers within monastic life, or pilgrims who visit one of these monastic centers. . . . Or maybe in palliative care. . . . I can see psychedelics being some kind of extra sacramental ministry that potentially could ease people at the end of life."

It's easy to get lost amid all the theological, political, and historical debate over what role, if any, sacred plant medicines have played in Christianity over the last two millennia. From the earliest decades of the Jesus movement, there have always been many Christianities operating simultaneously, often in conflict with one another.

Once you start looking for mushrooms in Christian art, you start to see them everywhere. The intriguing presence of fungi in the frescoes can easily be taken out of context and misrepresented. At the same time, the evidence in Christian art can't be explained away. Just open to the insert of color photos in Jerry and Julie Brown's *The Psychedelic Gospels* (2016). Exhibit A: a basket of *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms in the basilica in Aquileia, Italy, circa 330. Exhibit B: an angel holding a mushroom in the fresco of a tenth-century church in what is now Turkey. Exhibit C: Jesus blessing a bowl of mushrooms in the Great Canterbury Psalter in England, circa 1200. Exhibit D: numerous mushrooms tucked into the stained-glass windows in Chartres Cathedral in France, circa 1210.

There's evidence, and then there's belief. In the end, it really comes down to belief. Entheogens may have played some role in the inspiration of mysticism in the early church and within the long Roman Catholic tradition, just like they do among today's

devotees in syncretic Christian movements like the Santo Daime ayahuasca church in Brazil and the Mazatec mushroom church in Mexico. These movements have always operated, almost by definition, on the mystical edge of the church.

Sacred plant medicines have the power to inspire seekers to take control of their own spiritual lives, which has and continues to threaten the guardians of orthodoxy and the powers that be. At the same time, speculation about an alleged tradition of psychedelic Christian communion often ignores the *actual* history of mysticism in this ancient faith. “I resent the reduction of mysticism to psychedelic experience,” said Mabry. “There is so much more to it than that. It completely dismisses the mystical power that the Eucharist has had for a couple thousand years. It’s a willful dismissal of centuries of powerful mysticism in the Christian tradition.”

Mabry makes a good point. But it’s also true that some aspects of Christian mysticism may be employed as road maps to prepare for a psychedelic journey and to integrate the insights one might have there.

Cattoi, the expert on Christian mysticism at the Jesuit school in Berkeley, suggests that one such map could be the *Philokalia*, a collection of long-forgotten writings that were put together by two monastics in the late 18th century. The texts themselves were written in the fourth to 15th centuries. They present a way of looking at consciousness that differentiates between deductive and intuitive modes of experiencing the world.

“We have an underlying faculty that is noetic—a direct perception that doesn’t go through inference and reasoning,” said Cattoi. “It’s a form of intuitive knowledge. It’s a faculty that allows you to perceive the presence of the Divine in the world without the mediation of reason.”

These Christian mystics lay out three stages of preparation to develop mystical insight. The first two are purgation (learning not to be controlled by your passions) and illumination (seeing the world the way it really is). These then lead to a unitive consciousness and the direct experience of the Divine.

“It is a kind of decentering of the self, where you get to the point where you can be fully present in the world by the cultivation of attention,” Cattoi said.

Cattoi sees psychedelics as “a way to re-access our own noetic capacities,” but only if it is “grounded within a broader framework of ethical reconfiguration of one’s own

inner life and is part of a whole program of growth.” He is familiar with the emerging psychedelic movement, having also trained to become a licensed therapist at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, which has long been a mecca for the study of the spiritual or therapeutic potential of psychoactive drugs.

“In the *Philokalia*,” Cattoi said, “you find breathing exercises or other psychophysical exercises, such as fasting, to bring about altered states” of consciousness, but no references to sacred plant medicines or fungi. So he sees little evidence to support the pagan continuity theory or the idea that there is a secret tradition of Christian psychedelic communion.

“You are never going to find a scholar of early Christianity who will agree with that,” he said. “You can’t base this on finding some frescoes in France. Sure, maybe some painters in France may have taken psychedelics and smuggled some images of mushrooms into their work. But you can’t say that’s the grounds for a tradition that is clearly not there.”

Episcopal priest Hunt Priest founded Ligare, a psychedelic Christian society. He thinks the church should be open to reexamining its history, including the possibility that magic mushrooms or other sacred plant medicine may have once been an ingredient in Holy Communion. He called Muraresku’s book “an important work that’s worth considering.”

“Christianity has been influenced by every culture it has encountered, especially Greek culture and Greek mystery religions,” Priest said. “I think we should have a very expansive conversation in Christianity about exactly what Brian’s bringing up and not be afraid of it. If psychedelics were somehow part of our history, that would inform my own Christian experience.”

This article was adapted with permission from God on Psychedelics.