

BOOK REVIEW

Persephone's Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion. R. Gordon Wasson, Stella Kramrisch, Jonathan Ott & Carl A. P. Ruck. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986. Pp. 257, paper. Price: \$14.00. ISBN: 0-300-05266-9.

The word "entheogen," literally "god generated within," is defined as a psychoactive drug capable of producing awe-inspiring visions and emotions. This book contains a series of essays discussing the purported role various enthogenic plants and fungi have played in religious rituals of Eurasia and Mesoamerica.

Only the first chapter, by R. Gordon Wasson, is previously unpublished. It reads more like a rambling, folksy autobiography than a serious piece of scientific research. It concerns the author's ethnomycological experiences in Mesoamerica and South Asia. Wasson's amateur status is betrayed by such statements as "mushrooms are a lower order of plant life," and "*Amanita muscaria* . . . carries no name today in English" (fly agaric?). He surveys the purported use of fly agaric in several parts of the world. He then postulates that use of this mushroom represented the first religion of the human race. This is quite a tenuous conclusion to draw from controversial evidence. Even Wasson's identifications of this fungus as the organism involved are not universally accepted.

I believe the book's major shortcoming, beyond a tendency toward inductive reasoning and unsubstantiated speculation, is a narrow view of religion. Anthropologists have devoted considerable debate to defining and characterizing religion, but Wasson et al. prefer to accept common Western assumptions, even when discussing non-Western cultures. Their view is that religion necessarily involves adoration of mystical and powerful phenomena. They thus overlook a great portion of the human religious experience. They discuss ancient Sanskrit texts as if these represent the first dawning of human consciousness. Religion has a much longer history, albeit largely unwritten. They are discussing not the origins of religion, but rather one particular manifestation of it.

The book does contain a useful and fascinating discussion of the use of psychoactive substances in human rituals in many parts of the world. It is definitely worth reading, even if some of the basic assumptions are unscientific.

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