

THE MESSAGE OF THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES FOR TODAY'S WORLD

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Albert Hofmann (1906–2008) was a Swiss chemist best known for having been the first to synthesize, and learn of the psychedelic effects of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD). Never an advocate of the recreational use of such drugs, throughout his life, he worked to discover how such substances (Entheogens) were used ritualistically in many cultures, and also for use in psychology. We present this seminal article as another perspective on the impact of the Mysteries on our world, and on the legacy bequeathed to us, today achieved by spiritual and mystical means in the Order.

The Mystery of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis, which was initially only of local significance, soon became an important part of Athenian citizenship, and it eventually developed into a pan-Hellenic institution,



Albert Hofmann, Lugano, Switzerland. Photo © 1993 by Philip H. Bailey.

becoming of universal importance at the time of the Roman Empire. Its pan-Hellenic character was signaled in 760 BCE, at the time of the fifth Olympiad, when the Oracle of Delphi called upon all Greeks to make communal sacrifice in honor of Demeter of Eleusis in order to banish a famine which was then affecting all of Greece.

What was the message conveyed at Eleusis, a message which transformed the cult into the most influential and spiritually significant Mystery of antiquity? This question cannot be answered in detail, for the veil of mystery, maintained by a severe commandment of secrecy, was never lifted through the millennia. It is only by examining the testimony of great initiates that we may gain an idea of the fundamentals and the spiritual significance which the teachings of Eleusis had for the individual. There is no question of any new religion having been promulgated in Eleusis; this can be ruled out because the initiates, when they returned to their homelands after the Mysteries, remained faithful to their autochthonous religions.

Instead, revelations about the essence of human existence and about the meaning of life and death must have been imparted to the initiates. Prayers are known from the Mysteries, offered by initiates to Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, imploring her to awaken and vividly maintain the memory of the holy initiation, [and] that the initiation might persist as an experience illuminating all of life and transforming existence.



Remains of the Telesterion of Eleusis. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

Participating in the Mysteries was an experience which cannot be understood by examining only their external appearance, for it evoked alterations in the soul of the initiate. This is evident from the testimony of the most famous initiates. Thus wrote Pindar of the Eleusinian blessing:

*Blessed is he who, having seen these rites,
undertakes the way beneath the Earth.
He knows the end of life, as well as its
divinely granted beginning.*

Cicero also attested to the splendor which illuminated his life from Eleusis:

*Though Athens brought forth numerous
divine things, yet she never created
anything nobler than those sublime
Mysteries through which we became
gentler and have advanced from a
barbarous and rustic life to a more
civilized one, so that we not only live
more joyfully but also die with a better
hope.*

The initiates often experienced in vision the congruity of the beginning and the end, of birth and death, the totality and the eternal generative ground of being. It must have been an encounter with the ineffable, an encounter with the divine, that could only be described through metaphor. It is striking that the Eleusinian experience is described again and again in antitheses: darkness and light; terror and

beatitude. This ambivalence is also evident in other descriptions, such as that of Aelius Aristides, who stated that Eleusis was:

*Both the most awesome and the most
luminous of all the divine things that
exist among men.*

*Emperor Marcus Aurelius counted the
Mysteries among those endowments
which manifest the solicitude of the
gods for humankind.*

This brings us to a problem of our own time. This involves the question—much discussed today—of whether it is ethically and religiously defensible to use consciousness-altering drugs under specific circumstances to gain new insights into the spiritual world.

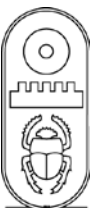
If the hypothesis that an LSD-like consciousness-altering drug was present in the kykeon is correct—and there are good arguments in its favor—then the Eleusinian Mysteries have a relevance for our time not only in a spiritual-existential sense, but also with respect to the question of the controversial use of consciousness-altering compounds to attain mystical insights into the riddle of life.

Separation of Individual and Environment

The great importance and long duration of the Mysteries indicate that they answered a profound spiritual necessity, a yearning



Bust (possibly of Emperor Marcus Aurelius) from the north section of the pediment of the Greater Propylaea at Eleusis.





Simone Pignoni, *The Rape of Proserpine*. ca. 1650. Museum of the Art schools of Nancy. Photo © 2008 by Vassil, Wikimedia Commons

of the soul. If we adopt the viewpoint of Nietzsche, the Greek spirit was characterized by a consciousness of reality divided from its origin. Greece was the cradle of an experience of reality in which the ego felt itself separated from the exterior world. Here, the conscious separation of the individual from the environment developed earlier than in other cultures. This dualistic world view, which the German physician and writer Gottfried Benn has characterized as the European destiny neurosis, has figured decisively in the course of European spiritual history, and is still fully operative in the Western world.

An ego that is capable of confronting the exterior world and of regarding the world objectively as matter—a spirit capable of objectivizing the external world—was a precondition for the appearance of Western scientific research. This objective world view is evident even in the earliest documents of scientific thought, in the cosmological theories of the Greek pre-Socratic philosophers. The perspective of man in opposition to nature, which has made possible a vigorous domination of nature, was given its first clear philosophical formulation by Descartes in the seventeenth century. Thus, in Europe, a wholly objective, quantitative scientific investigation of nature has developed which has made it possible to explain the physical and chemical laws of the composition of the material world. Its

findings also made possible a hitherto non-existent exploitation of nature and her forces.

It has led to the industrialization and technification of nearly all aspects of modern life. It has brought a small portion of humankind a level of comfort and material well-being hitherto scarcely imaginable. It has also resulted in the catastrophic destruction of the natural environment, and now has produced a global ecological crisis.

Even more serious than the material consequences is the spiritual damage of this evolution, which has led to a materialistic world view. The individual has lost the connection with the spiritual, divine ground of all being. Unprotected, without shelter, and alone with oneself, the human individual confronts in solitude a soulless, chaotic, materialistic, and menacing universe. The seeds of this dualistic world view, which has manifested itself so catastrophically in our time, were, as previously mentioned, already evident in Greek antiquity. The Greek genius sought the cure, so that the external, material world, under Apollo's protection, could be seen in its sublime beauty. The colorful, joyous, sensual, but also painful Apollonian world was complemented by the Dionysian world of experience, in which the subject/object cleavage was dissolved in ecstatic inebriation.

Nietzsche wrote of the Dionysian world view in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

It is either through the influence of narcotic potions, of which all primitive peoples and races speak in hymns, or through the powerful approach of spring, penetrating all of nature with joy, that those Dionysian stirrings arise, which in their intensification lead the individual to forget himself completely... Not only does the bond between person and person come to be forged once again by the magic of the Dionysian rite, but alienated, hostile, or subjugated nature again celebrates her reconciliation with her prodigal son, mankind.

The Eleusinian Mysteries were closely connected with the rites and festivities in honor of the god Dionysus. They led essentially to healing, to the transcendence of the division between humankind and nature—one might say to the abolition of the separation between creator and creation. This was the real, greater proposition of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Their historical, cultural significance, their influence on European spiritual history, can scarcely be overestimated. Here, suffering humanity, split by its rational, objective spirit, found healing in a mystical experience of totality that made it possible for the individual to believe in the immortality of an eternal being.

This belief persisted in early Christianity, albeit with different symbols. It is found as a promise in certain passages of the Gospels, most clearly in the Gospel of John, Chapter 14:16-20. There, Jesus addresses his disciples as he takes leave of them:

And I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another comforter, that He may abide with you forever in the Truth... At that day ye shall know that I am in the Father, and ye in me, and I in you.

But ecclesiastical Christianity, defined by the duality of creation and with a religiosity estranged from Nature, has completely obliterated the Eleusinian-Dionysian heritage of antiquity. In the Christian sphere of belief, only specially blessed people testify to a timeless, comforting reality attained in spontaneous visionary experience; an experience which untold numbers of people could attain in antiquity through the Eleusinian Initiation. The *unio mystica* of the Catholic saints and the visionary ecstasy described in the writings of Jakob Boehme, Meister Eckhart, Angelus Silesius, Teresa of Avila, Juan de la Cruz, Thomas Traherne, William Blake, and others are obviously closely related to the “enlightenment” attained by the initiates to the Eleusinian Mysteries.

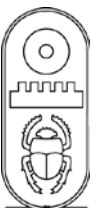


Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, 1652, Cornaro chapel, Santa Maria Della Vittoria church, Rome.

Transcending the Dualistic World View

Today the fundamental importance which a mystical experience of totality can have for healing a humanity afflicted by a one-sided, rational, materialistic world view is emphasized not only by adherents to such Eastern religious currents as Zen Buddhism, but also by leading representatives of psychology and psychiatry. Even more significant is that not just in medicine, but in ever-wider circles of our society, even ecclesiastical circles, overcoming the dualistic world view is considered to be a pre-requisite and fundamental step in the healing and spiritual renewal of Occidental civilization and culture.

The official Christian churches, whose dogmas correspond to an expressly dualistic conception of the world, offer no room for such a renewal. Rather, it is private groups and associations who are attempting to satisfy the need and the longing for an all-encompassing experience of the world appropriate to our present level of knowledge and consciousness. Great numbers of all sorts of workshops and courses in yoga, meditation, and self-discovery are being offered, all with the goal of an alteration or



expansion of consciousness. A new direction, transpersonal psychology, has branched off from academic psychiatry and psychology, which are based on a dualistic conception of reality. In this new discipline, various means are sought to aid the individual to attain a healing experience of totality. More and more, individuals seek security and shelter through meditation, pressing onward into deeper levels of experience of reality.

It is no accident that drugs are employed by some of these groups and in the private sphere as pharmacological aids in the production of altered states of consciousness. And, of course, this involves the same sort of drugs hypothesized at Eleusis and still used by certain Indian tribes. These are the *psychopharmaka* of the hallucinogenic class, which have also been described as psychedelics or entheogens, whose most important modern representative is LSD. The Greeks used the term *pharmactheon*, or “divine drug.” This sort of psychotropic compound differs from the opiates, such

as morphine and heroin, and from such stimulants as cocaine, in that it does not produce addiction and acts specifically on human consciousness.

Psychedelics and Expansion of Consciousness

LSD in particular played an important role in the sixties movement, which addressed war and materialism, and whose adherents sought to expand consciousness. As a matter of fact, under specific internal and external conditions, this class of drugs, whether called hallucinogens, psychedelics, or entheogens, is capable of producing a totality experience, the *unio mystica*. Before the use of these substances was prohibited worldwide, this effect was applied in academic psychiatry to assist psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic treatment from the pharmacological side.

A prerequisite for meaningful use and a propitious psychic experience of these compounds—which can be described as Sacred Drugs—is the external environment and the spiritual preparation of those experimenting with them. The Mexican Indians believe that were the LSD-like *ololiuhqui* taken by an impure person, that is, anybody who had not prepared for the ceremony with fasts and prayers, then the drug might provoke insanity or even death. This wise and prudent manner of use, based on millennia of experience, was regrettably not heeded when many members of our society began to use psychedelics. Accordingly, the results sometimes took the form of psychotic breakdowns and severe accidents. In the 1960s, this led to the prohibition of any use of this type of drug, even in formal psychiatry.

In Eleusis, where the preparations and the associated ceremonies were optimal (as is still the case among some Indian groups in Mexico where their use is still in the control of shamans), this sort of drug has found a meaningful and propitious application. From



Yamamoto Jakurin, *Leaders of Zen Buddhism*. Edo period, seventeenth century, Kofukuji-ji Temple, Nagasaki Prefecture. Photo by Yamamoto Jakurin, Wikimedia Commons.

this perspective, Eleusis and these Indian groups can indeed serve as a model for our society.



Persephone purifying a candidate, Archaeological Museum of Eleusis, Greece. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

In conclusion, I wish once more to raise the fundamental question: why were such drugs probably used in Eleusis, and why are they still used by certain Indian tribes even today in the course of religious ceremonies? And why is such use scarcely conceivable in the Christian liturgy, as though it were not significant? The answer is that the Christian liturgy worships a godly power enthroned in heaven, that is a power outside of the individual. At Eleusis, on the contrary, an alteration in the innermost being of the individual was striven for, a visionary experience of the ground of being which converted the subjects into *Mystai*, *Epotetai*, *Initiates*.

Eleusis as Model for Today

Alteration within the individual is again underway today. The requisite transformations in the direction of an all-encompassing consciousness, as a precondition for overcoming materialism and for a renewed relationship with Nature, cannot be relegated to society or to the state.

The change must and can only take place in each individual person.

Only a few blessed people spontaneously attain the mystical vision which can affect this transformation. As a result, mankind has repeatedly sought paths and evolved methods to evoke deeper perception and experience. First among these are the different techniques of meditation. Meditation can be assisted by such external means as isolation and solitude, a path the hermits and desert saints followed; and by such physical practices as fasting and breath control. An especially important aid in the induction of mystical-ecstatic states of consciousness, discovered in the earliest times, is decidedly the use of certain plant drugs. In the preceding discussion, I have made it quite clear that their use must proceed within the scope of religious ceremony.

The fact that extraordinary states of awareness can be induced with various means and in various ways shows us that capacity for mystical experience is innate to every person. It is part of the essence of human spirituality. It is unrelated to the external, social status of the individual. Thus, in Eleusis, both free men and women, as well as slaves, could be initiated.

Eleusis can be a model for today. Eleusis-like centers could unite and strengthen the many spiritual currents of our time, all of which have the same goal—the goal of creating, by transforming consciousness in individual people, the conditions for a better world, a world without war and without environmental damage, a world of happy people.

ENDNOTE

¹ Previously published in Robert Forte, ed., *Entheogens and the Future of Religion* (San Francisco: Committee on Spiritual Practices, 1997. www.csp.org/EFR; *The Road to Eleusis* (Twentieth Anniversary Edition) (Los Angeles: William Dailey Rare Books Ltd, 1998), 141-149; *The Road to Eleusis* (Thirtieth Anniversary Edition) (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2008).

