Is it possible today, in the climate of fear created by the war on drugs, to write a book on the entheogens with the informed objectivity of Aldous Huxley’s The Doors of Perception, the understanding that Albert Hofmann accorded the topic in LSD: My Problem Child, the expertise Gordon Wasson brought to it in his Soma, and the open-mindedness with which William James approached the subject in The Varieties of Religious Experience? And is the reading public ready for such a book? [preface, p. XV]

During the semester that Aldous Huxley was at M.I.T., he remarked in the course of a seminar that nothing was more curious, and to his way of thinking more important, than the role that mind-altering plants and chemicals have played in human history. Add to that William James’s point that no account of the universe in its totality can be taken as final if it ignores extraordinary experiences of the sort he himself encountered through the use of nitrous oxide. This entire book can be seen as an extended meditation on those two ideas. [preface, p. XV]

The essays in this book span almost forty years. I have edited them liberally, excising repetitions and passages I no longer consider important. Each essay is introduced by a statement that notes the occasion for which it was written and locates it on the trajectory of the book as a whole. My intent has been to produce a work that touches on the major facets of its enigmatic subject as seen through the eyes of someone (myself) who, given my age, may have thought and written more about it than anyone else alive. [preface, p. XVI] (The preface, introduction, and concluding chapter are new.)

Nomenclature has been a problem…. The word “psychedelic” is etymologically innocuous, literally meaning “mind-manifesting,” but it is dated, tagged to “the psychedelic sixties” when recreational use of drugs took over, and thus clearly inappropriate when speaking of shamans, Eleusis, and the Native American Church. We need a word that designates virtually nonaddictive mind-altering substances that are approached seriously and reverently, and the word “entheogens” does just that. [preface, pp. XVI–XVII]

Know ten things, tell nine, the Taoists say – one wonders whether it is wise even to mention the entheogens in connection with God and the Infinite. For though a connection exists, as is the case with sex in Tantra, it is next to impossible to speak of it in the West today without being misunderstood. Such potential misunderstanding may be the reason that the identity of the Eleusinian sacrament is one of history’s best-kept secrets, and why Brahmins came eventually to conceal (and then deliberately forget) the identity of Soma. [p. 80]

Some theophanies seem to occur spontaneously, while others are facilitated by ways that seekers have discovered – one thinks of the place of fasting in the vision quest, the nightlong dancing of the Kalahari bushmen, prolonged intoning of sacred mantras, and the way peyote figures in the vigils of the Native American Church. [pp. 114–5]

The conclusion to which the evidence seems currently to point is that it is indeed possible for chemicals to enhance the religious life, but only when they are set within the context of faith (conviction that what they disclose is true) and discipline (exercise of the will toward fulfilling what the disclosures ask of us). [p. 31]

If the only thing to say about the entheogens were that they seem on occasion to disclose higher planes of consciousness and perhaps the Infinite itself, I would hold my peace. For though such experiences may be veridical in ways, the goal (it cannot be stressed too often) is not religious experiences, but the religious life. And with respect to the latter, chemically occasioned “theophanies” can abort a quest as readily as they can further it. [p. 80]
The [Good Friday Experiment] was powerful for me, and it left a permanent mark on my experienced worldview…. For as long as I can remember I have believed in God, and I have experienced his presence both within the world and when the world was transcendentally eclipsed. But until the Good Friday Experiment, I had had no direct personal encounter with God of the sort that bhakti yogis, Pentecostals, and born-again Christians describe. [pp. 100–101]

Why, when I count several of my entheogen experiences as being among the most important in my life, have I no desire to repeat them? On occasion I have gone so far as to rank them with family and world travel in what they have contributed to my understanding of things, yet – with the exception of peyote, which I took in the line of duty while working with the Native Americans as described in chapter 8 – it has been decades since I have taken an entheogen, and if someone were to offer me today a substance that (with no risk of producing a bummer) was guaranteed to carry me into the Clear Light of the Void and within fifteen minutes return me to normal with no adverse side effects, I would decline. Why? Half my answer lies in the healthy respect I have for the awe entheogens engender; in Gordon Wasson’s blunt assertion in the frontpiece to this book, “awe is not fun.” I understand Meister Eckhart completely when he says that “in joy and terror the Son is born” (emphasis mine)…. I will take them again if need be, as I did with peyote, but the reasons would have to be compelling. The second half of my answer is that I have other things to do. This may sound like a limp excuse for foregoing ecstasy, so I will invoke the Buddhist doctrine of the Six Realms of Existence to explain the force it has for me. [p. 130]

The Sufis speak of three ways to know fire: through hearsay, by seeing its flames, and by being burned by those flames. Had I not been burned by the totally Real, I would still be seeking it as knights sought the Grail and moths seek flame. As it is, it seems prudent to “work for the night is coming,” as a familiar hymn advises. Alan Watts put the point more directly:

“When you get the message, hang up the phone.” The downside of swaying off is, of course, the danger that the Reality that trumps everything while it is in full view will fade into a memory and become like Northern Lights – beautiful, but cold and far away…. The question comes down to which experiences we should try to keep in place as beacon lights to guide us and which we should let lapse. [p. 131]

In the effort to see what the entheogens have to teach us about what we human beings are (human nature), about the inclusive context in which we live our lives (the world), and about the connection between the two (religion), the essays in this book approach those interlocking issues from various angles. This chapter [9] touches on two instances where they produced full-fledged religions. [p. 113]

Can humanity survive godlessness, which is to say, the lack of ennobling vision – a convincing, inspiring view of the nature of things and life’s place in it? Second, have modern secularism, scientism, materialism, and consumerism conspired to form a carapace that Transcendence now has difficulty piercing? If the answer to that second question is affirmative, a third one follows hard on its heels. Is there need, perhaps an urgent need, to devise something like the Eleusinian Mysteries to get us out of Plato’s cave and into the light of day? Finally, can a way be found to legitimize, as the Greeks did, the constructive, life-giving use of entheogenic heaven-and-hell drugs without aggravating our serious drug problem? The Road to Eleusis does not answer (or even directly address) these important, possibly fateful questions. What it does do is to raise them by clear implication, elegantly and responsibly. [p. 115]

Religious institutions, though they are indispensable, are a mixed bag, but the basic claim they put forward is true. And what that claim asserts – I’m paraphrasing William James here – is that the best things are the eternal things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word. [p. 158]