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# Sacred Plants and the Gnostic Church: Speculations on Entheogen-Use in Early Christian Ritual

**Abstract:** It is the aim of this paper to establish a temporal and cultural link between entheogen-use<sup>1</sup> in Classical mystery cults and their possible use in a segment of the early Christian Gnostic Church. As early Christianity was heavily influenced by the Classical world in which it first developed, it is essential to examine the evidence of entheogen-use within Classical mystery cults, and explore their possible influence on the development of Christian ritual. We will first present textual evidence from the New Testament and Nag Hammadi Library (NHL) that indicate possible use of ritual entheogens. Next we will examine entheogen-use by some of the main religious sects of the ancient Mediterranean world as part of their liturgical practice between c. fifth century BCE and the third century CE. Then we will show that the different schools of philosophical thought examined were quite fluid, and that there was considerable overlap among schools with respect to several key philosophies and practices. Ultimately the subject of entheogen-use in the Classical world necessarily falls into the realm of plausible speculation mainly due to the lack of primary sources. However, should the entheogenic hypothesis<sup>2</sup> prove to be correct, it promises to be quite useful in future research and in the translation of original documents.

**Keywords:** Gnosticism, Entheogens, Early Christianity, Neoplatonism, Mystery Cults

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1 Entheogen as a neologism roughly translates as “God generated within,” and was first coined in 1979 by R. Gordon Wasson, and Carl A. P. Ruck as a replacement for the more widely known terms “hallucinogen” or “psychedelic.” Ruck felt that the term hallucinogen alluded to insanity, and psychedelic had been co-opted by Timothy Leary and his followers. In this paper, the terms “entheogens,” “sacred plants,” and “visionary plants” are used interchangeably.

2 We define “entheogenic hypothesis” here as the idea that visionary plants were an integral part of ancient religious practice, usually reserved for more advanced levels of initiation into local religious cults.

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Although well-documented in tribal and Classical cultures,<sup>3</sup> the use of visionary plants in early Christian religious practice has long been a controversial topic. Ever since John Marco Allegro published *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* in 1970, the topic of entheogenic influences in early Christianity has been met with a mixture of scorn and willful ignorance by mainstream academia. The scorn is not terribly surprising, given Allegro's sometimes polemical treatment of the Catholic Church in his book and careless use of key linguistic data. However, one could argue that the willful ignorance seems to stem from mainstream academics' desire to avoid the controversy that inevitably surrounds this topic.

Undertaking this type of research is reminiscent of the efforts of R. Gordon Wasson in his groundbreaking study of ancient entheogens, most notably, his assertion that the Soma plant of the *Rigveda* was in fact the hallucinogenic *Amanita Muscaria* mushroom.<sup>4</sup> Wasson later went on to claim, along with co-authors Albert Hoffman, the discoverer of LSD, and Carl A. P. Ruck, professor of classics at Boston University, that the identity of the *kykeon* used in the Eleusinian Mysteries was also a hallucinogenic substance, most probably a type of ergot parasitism.<sup>5</sup> Both of these works remain controversial today, although there has been widespread acceptance of Wasson's Soma theory in anthropological circles. A small but growing number of researchers and academics have tried to pick up where Wasson has left off with mixed results at best.<sup>6</sup> It is our contention that there is significant textual evidence that suggests the use of visionary plants throughout the ancient world in a wide variety of settings.

Our understanding of the Gnostic Church has only been illuminated by the discovery of the *Gnostic Gospels*, a collection of about 52 papyrus volumes compiled between the second and fourth centuries CE. They were found in the late 1940s outside the Upper Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi. Upon their discovery, several of the volumes were burned for fuel, so the true extent of the library may never be known for certain. They were apparently a library deemed important enough to be deliberately hidden in large earthenware vessels in a cave system, possibly indicating their holy status by a sect of Gnostic Christians living in the area.<sup>7</sup> Final translation of these works from Coptic into English was not

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3 Furst (1976).

4 Wasson (1968).

5 Wasson (1978).

6 See, for example J. R. Irvin's *The Holy Mushroom Evidence of Mushrooms in Judeo-Christianity* (2008); Carl Ruck's *The Apples of Apollo Pagan and Christian Mysteries of the Eucharist* (2001); Dan Merkur's *The Mystery of Manna* (2000); Franco Fabbo's *Did Early Christians Use Hallucinogenic Mushrooms* (1996).

7 Robinson (1978), 1.

completed until 1977.<sup>8</sup> It must be noted that work on these texts is ongoing, and that many volumes within the NHL exist only as fragments.

While the contention that entheogen-use predated the compilation of the NHL is backed in part by the archaeological record,<sup>9</sup> establishing the veracity of any of the multiple entheogenic theories is problematic, because they are inherently unknowable or impossible to document. While we may never find definitive proof for any of the entheogenic theories, we certainly can analyze the extant texts and draw inferences when appropriate, which is what leading scholars in this field have done.

## I Textual Clues from the Gnostic Gospels and Old Testament

Before the discovery of the NHL, Gnosticism was seen as a highly esoteric field of study relegated to students of divinity or to Christian heresiologists. That was because most evidence relating to a “Gnostic School” was preserved in the form of condemnations issued against it by early Christian leaders.<sup>10</sup> With the discovery of the NHL, researchers finally had access to Gnostic philosophy written by the original proponents of this worldview. While these documents are invaluable to our understanding of Gnosticism, their evidentiary value is inherently limited. We have no extant contemporary commentary on Gnosticism written by Gnostics. All we have are modern interpretations and ancient invectives.

According to modern research, the path to Gnostic enlightenment apparently revolved around gaining otherwise hidden spiritual knowledge, or *Pleroma*, trapped inside all human souls, along with personal insights into certain esoteric levels of the cosmos.<sup>11</sup> This acquisition of cosmic knowledge appears to have taken many different forms. Some Gnostic adherents are known to have participated in not just one baptism, but several baptisms, as a form of initiation into the church.<sup>12</sup> These baptismal rituals are referenced in several of the NHL tractates. Take for example, *Allogenes* 52:

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**8** Robinson (1978), IX.

**9** Merlin (2003).

**10** Pagels (1979), XVII.

**11** Pagels (1979), 144.

**12** Turner (1994).

“... my soul went slack and I fled and was very disturbed. And I turned to myself and saw the light that surrounded me and the Good that was in me, I became divine. And the all glorious One, Youel anointed me again and she gave power to me. She said ‘Since your instruction has become complete and you have known the Good that is within you, hear concerning the Triple-Powered One those things that you will guard in great silence and great mystery, because they are not spoken to anyone except those who are worthy, those who are able to hear; nor is it fitting to speak to an uninstructed generation concerning the Universal One that is higher than perfect. But you have these because of the Triple-Powered One, the One who exists in blessedness and goodness, the One who is responsible for all these.’”<sup>13</sup>

Following baptism, Gnostics participated in a ritual investiture, chrismation with oils, a Eucharist, and a sacral marriage.<sup>14</sup> Some of these rituals appear to be connected to more advanced initiation into the church, and thus are reserved for only the few deemed spiritually ready for advanced teaching.<sup>15</sup> The common theme to most of these rituals appears to be the acquisition of divine knowledge through visionary experience.

Also of interest is the apparent call for secrecy that follows the spiritual experience of Allogenes. This call for secrecy is reminiscent of the similar secret nature of Mystery Cult indoctrination. For example, Tertullian (*Adversus Valentinianos* 1.1–2), goes so far as to compare directly the Gnostic Church ritual to the Eleusinian mysteries:

“They [Valentinian Gnostics] preach confusion while (seemingly) asserting their piety. In just the same way concerning the Eleusinian mysteries, itself a heresy of Athenian paganism; the fact that they keep silent about these mysteries makes them an object of shame. Consequently the ‘mystagogues’ make entry difficult and perform long initiation rites before they accept the devotee; they put him on probation for five years in order to increase his anticipation by suspense and in this manner cause the awesomeness of their rites to match the desire which has been elicited. Their duty of secrecy is a natural consequence ...”<sup>16</sup>

One thing that is clear from modern scholarship on the NHL is that the Gnostics saw themselves as being a part of mainstream Christianity. For example, Valentinus, the founder of the eponymous school of Gnosticism, likely started his career in the Orthodox Church before founding his own school. In fact Valentinian Gnostics considered themselves to be full members of the Orthodox Church and resisted attempts to be expelled.<sup>17</sup> Based on this close relationship between

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<sup>13</sup> Robinson (1978), 494. All translations from NHL are Robinson’s.

<sup>14</sup> Turner (1994).

<sup>15</sup> Pagels (1979), 140.

<sup>16</sup> Translation from Riley (1971), 73.

<sup>17</sup> Pagels (1979), 39.

Orthodoxy and Gnosticism, one can infer that Gnostic Christians would have readily accepted the Old Testament.

There has been some recent speculation over references to entheogen-use within the Old Testament.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the most convincing quotation suggesting Old Testament entheogen-use comes from 2 Esdras<sup>19</sup> which is classified among the *Apocrypha* in most Christian traditions.

“And the next day, behold, a voice called me, saying, Esdras, open thy mouth, and drink that I give thee to drink. Then opened I my mouth, and behold, he reached me a full cup, which was full as it were with water, but the color of it was like fire. And I took it, and drank: and when I had drunk of it, my heart uttered understanding, and wisdom grew in my breast, for my spirit strengthened my memory: And my mouth was opened, and shut no more. The Highest gave understanding unto the five men, and they wrote the wonderful visions of the night that were told, which they knew not: and they sat forty days, and they wrote in the day, and at night they ate bread. As for me I spake in the day, and I held not my tongue by night. In forty days they wrote two hundred and four books. And it came to pass, when the forty days were fulfilled, that the Highest spake, saying, The first thou hast written publish openly, that the worthy and unworthy may read it: But keep the seventy last that thou mayest deliver them only to such as be wise among the people: For in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the stream of knowledge. And I did so.”<sup>20</sup>

It is most interesting to note yet again the call for secrecy at the end of the passage. The original date of composition for 2 Esdras is thought to be between 100 and 120 CE, which would make it contemporaneous to several different Gnostic factions.<sup>21</sup> The overall theme of the book is one of an imminent apocalypse which is very much in keeping with the eschatological nature of both Orthodox and Gnostic Christianity, and to a lesser extent Judaism of the time.

But the references to entheogenic substances do not end with the apocrypha. Of the many plants mentioned within the Old Testament, one deserves special attention. The Mandrake plant has been known to have psychoactive properties going back to its recommended use as a surgical anesthetic by Dioscorides in the first century CE.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the Middle Ages, Mandrake became associated with magic and witchcraft because of its anthropomorphic root, and its narcotic

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**18** See Shanon (2008); Merkur (2000).

**19** We are using the naming convention found in the KJV Bible as opposed to the original name found in the Latin manuscripts: *Esdrae Liber IV*. As a result some scholarly literature refers to this same passage as Ezra 4.

**20** 2 Esdras 14:36–48 (KJV).

**21** Metzger (1983).

**22** *De Materia Medica* 4.

and hallucinogenic properties.<sup>23</sup> Presumably it is this same Mandrake that appears in the book of Genesis:

And Reuben went in the days of wheat harvest, and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them unto his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, Give me, I pray thee, of thy son's mandrakes. And she said unto her, is it a small matter that thou hast taken my husband? And wouldest thou take away my son's mandrakes also? And Rachel said, Therefore he shall lie with thee to night for thy son's mandrakes. And Jacob came out of the field in the evening, and Leah went out to meet him, and said, Thou must come in unto me; for surely I have hired thee with my son's mandrakes. And he lay with her that night.<sup>24</sup>

It remains unclear as to whether this Mandrake refers to the same Mandrake known to cause hallucinations by modern science, or some other plant with fertility properties. At any rate, it is certainly intriguing to note that a direct reference to a potentially psychoactive plant makes an open appearance in the document most fundamental to the Abrahamic religions.

Several other passages of note appear in the NHL that, to this day, are not well understood at all. However, the entheogenic theory promises to provide a simple and elegant solution to their exact meaning. For example, in several of the NHL tractates there appear long strings of vowels and consonants that seem to represent either chanting or hissing. One of these strings of repetitive consonants and vowels appears in *Allogenes* 53:33:

"... and the power appeared by means of an activity that is at rest and silent, although it uttered a sound thus: zza zza zza. But when she heard the power and she was filled [...] thou art [...] Solmis! [...] according to the Vitality, that is thine, and the first activity which derives from divinity."<sup>25</sup>

But this is not the only time that "chants" appear within the NHL. In fact longer strings of consonants and vowels appear within *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* 56:11–21:

"Let us pray, my father ... He is the one who [...] the aeon among spirits. He created everything. He who is self-contained cares for everything. He is perfect, the invisible God to whom one speaks in silence – his image is moved when it is directed, and it governs – the one mighty power, who is exalted above majesty, who is better than the honored ones, Zoxathazo a oo ee ooo eee oooo ee oooooo oooooo oooooo uuuuuu oooooooooooooo ooo Zozazoth."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Carter (2003).

<sup>24</sup> KJV, Genesis 30:14–16.

<sup>25</sup> Robinson (1978), 495.

<sup>26</sup> Robinson (1978), 324.

And another odd “chant” appears in the same book:

“Grace! After these things I give thanks by singing a hymn to you. For I have received life from you, when you made me wise I praise you. I call your name that is hidden within me: a o ee o eee ooo iii oooo ooooo ooo oo uuuuuu oo ooooooooooooooooooooo oo. You are the one who exists with the spirit. I sing a hymn to you reverently.”<sup>27</sup>

Pagels has speculated that these strings of consonants and vowels are kinds of “meditative technique”<sup>28</sup> which formed components of a “program of [spiritual] discipline, like the higher levels of Buddhist teaching.”<sup>29</sup> While these consonant and vowel strings could be interpreted as chants analogous to those used in Buddhist practice, a much simpler explanation would be that these curious chants are a result of the influence of common Mediterranean mystery cult practice which used a combination of chanting, music, and entheogens to induce a state of religious ecstasy.

## II Gnosticism and Neoplatonism in the Third Century CE

Platonist thought at the time of the writings of the NHL has been categorized by modern scholars as being part of the Middle and Neoplatonist schools.<sup>30</sup> Neoplatonism as a philosophical framework was based on the works of Plato, but differed slightly in its interpretation of Plato’s original works. It began to rise to prominence in the second and third centuries CE, and shares much in common with Gnosticism. In fact we know from Plotinus, a Neoplatonist philosopher, that Gnostics at one point attended his school.<sup>31</sup> Not only did Gnosticism and Neoplatonism share students, but they also had a markedly similar cosmology, and probably shared teachers as well. The noted Platonist philosopher Ammonius Saccas very well might have started his life as a pagan, converted to Christianity, only to renounce it and revert back to paganism.<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that this man went on to teach Porphyry, one of the founders of the Neoplatonist movement. Both Neoplatonism and Gnosticism seem to be derived from Middle-Plato-

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<sup>27</sup> Robinson (1978), 326.

<sup>28</sup> Pagels (1979), 138.

<sup>29</sup> Pagels (1979), 140.

<sup>30</sup> Gerson (2008).

<sup>31</sup> Robinson (1978), 9.

<sup>32</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, 6.19.9.

nist schools of thought. However, there are several major differences between the two schools in that the Neoplatonist cosmology has no place for Jesus Christ or an afterlife, but it does affirm the inherent “goodness” of the Demiurge, who was seen as more of a craftsman than a supreme being.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to influencing Gnosticism, Platonist thought also influenced Orthodox Christianity, as well as several of the contemporary pagan mystery cults. Neoplatonism in particular had a lasting influence on Orthodox Christianity through the writings of Augustine of Hippo.<sup>34</sup> One such influence was the idea of salvation through good works or proper behavior.<sup>35</sup> This worldly path to salvation is common to Gnostics, the Orthodox Church, and the cult of Serapis. For a brief side-by-side comparison of each philosophical school, see Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Contemporaneous Religious Sects in the Mediterranean c. First to Fourth Centuries CE.<sup>36</sup>

	<b>Gnostics</b> c. 1 <sup>st</sup> –3 <sup>rd</sup> CE	<b>Neoplatonists</b> c. 2 <sup>nd</sup> –4 <sup>th</sup> CE	<b>Mystery Cults</b> (e.g. Serapis) c. 5 <sup>th</sup> BCE–4 <sup>th</sup> CE	<b>Orthodox Christians</b> c. 1 <sup>st</sup> CE–present
Basic Philosophy	There are several categories of cosmic beings, the highest level is known as the <i>Monad</i> (the one), or the <i>Pleroma</i> (the totality), or the <i>Bythos</i> (the deep). Understanding the nature of these cosmic beings would lead to ultimate salvation and reunion with a “universal consciousness” in the afterlife	The same as the Gnostics, with the exception that Neoplatonists did not believe in an afterlife, and sought human perfection on earth through the performance of different levels of virtuous deeds. This philosophy could work in concert with another religion.	The multiple gods worshiped by the greater Mediterranean world. There is at least some evidence that worshipers felt all their gods were equivalent in some ways to the other gods worshiped in the Mediterranean contemporaneously.	There is only one god who created the world, and is all powerful. There are no other cosmic godly figures other than this one god. Obeying this god’s laws on earth will lead directly to a person’s salvation and ascension to heaven after death.

<sup>33</sup> Turner (1980).

<sup>34</sup> Cross (2005).

<sup>35</sup> Gerson (2008).

<sup>36</sup> The “Gnostics” and “Neoplatonist” sections of this chart are indebted to Turner (1980).



	<b>Gnostics</b> c. 1 <sup>st</sup> –3 <sup>rd</sup> CE	<b>Neoplatonists</b> c. 2 <sup>nd</sup> –4 <sup>th</sup> CE	<b>Mystery Cults</b> (e.g. Serapis) c. 5 <sup>th</sup> BCE–4 <sup>th</sup> CE	<b>Orthodox Christians</b> c. 1 <sup>st</sup> CE–present
Initiation	Initiation into the Gnostic Church was an essential feature. After baptism and Eucharist (i.e. initiation into the proto-orthodox church), the Gnostics offered further secret initiation as necessary to understand the religion fully.	There was no known initiation practice for Neoplatonists. All that was required was a study of the philosophy, which was not kept secret.	Initiation was broken into levels. Basic level initiates into the cult of Serapis underwent baptism as their only initiation. Advanced level initiation involved mystical experiences culminating with direct interaction with the gods.	Initiation was dependent on baptism, and partaking of the Eucharist only.

In the context of this paper the most important aspect of Neoplatonist thought is that it provided a broad framework for the common exchange of cultural and religious ideas across the classical world. Several Jewish scholars (Philo of Alexandria), Gnostic writers (Valentinian), mystery cultists (Iamblichus), and Orthodox Christians (Tertullian) were all well versed in Platonist thought, if not outright Neoplatonist thinkers themselves. The ubiquity of Neoplatonism in late antiquity allowed for a level of religious syncretism that would have otherwise been impossible. It was this common language of religious and philosophical discourse that generated many of the similarities in belief and customs that existed in diverse religions of this time.

In order to provide a mechanism for the spread of entheogenic ritual, one must also consider similarities between the ancient mystery cults of the Mediterranean world and Proto-Orthodox Christianity. Specifically, it is the similarities between the cult of Serapis and early Christianity that provide the most tantalizing clues. In fact, the Roman emperor Hadrian reports in a letter that contemporary Christians freely worshiped in Serapea, or temples dedicated specifically to this cult, as well as in their own Christian churches:

From Hadrian Augustus to Servianus the consul, greeting. The land of Egypt, the praises of which you have been recounting to me, my dear Servianus, I have found to be wholly light-minded, unstable, and blown about by every breath of rumor. There those who worship Serapis are, in fact, Christians, and those who call themselves bishops of Christ are, in fact, devotees of Serapis. There is no chief of the Jewish synagogue, no Samaritan, no Christian

presbyter, who is not an astrologer, a soothsayer, or an anointer. Even the Patriarch himself, when he comes to Egypt, is forced by some to worship Serapis, by others to worship Christ. ...<sup>37</sup>

In order to examine clearly the extent of the syncretism of the cult of Serapis with Christianity, some background on the cult is necessary. Serapis was a god introduced by Ptolemy I of Egypt in the third century BCE.<sup>38</sup> As one of Alexander the Great's generals, Ptolemy I inherited the territory of Egypt upon Alexander's death. The creation of the cult of the god Serapis based on that of the earlier Egyptian God Osiris was orchestrated specifically to unite the disparate peoples of the new Macedonian-Egyptian kingdom.<sup>39</sup>

In the Egyptian pantheon, Osiris was married to his sister Isis. He impregnated her and she gave birth to a child named Horus. It has been noted in scholarly literature that the images of Isis and Horus very closely resemble those of Jesus and Mary.<sup>40</sup> Horus goes on later to be killed and resurrected. It has been suggested that this similar imagery and the idea of Horus' resurrection from the dead might explain why early Christians felt no qualms about practicing their new religion in one of the many older Serapia located throughout the Roman Empire.<sup>41</sup> Interestingly enough, at the very same time that Christianity in all its varied forms was spreading through the Roman world, so was the cult of Serapis, with its temples found as far away as Italy and Asia Minor.

While there was some overlap between the worship of Serapis and Jesus, there was also quite a bit of overlap between Neoplatonist philosophy and the worship of Serapis. Iamblichus, a Neoplatonist philosopher, was indoctrinated into the highest levels of Serapis cult worship. Scholars have suggested that Iamblichus specifically related the theurgist rituals found within the Serapis cult to the Neoplatonist philosophy that he studied.<sup>42</sup> With a ready framework connecting at least one Pagan cult, and most likely more, to early Christianity, one wonders what other ritual or philosophical teaching might have migrated from pagan practice?

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**37** SHA, Firmus et al. 8 (text and translation from Loeb Classical Library).

**38** Pausanias 1.18.4.

**39** Bevan (1927), 45.

**40** Wilkinson (2003).

**41** Budge (1956).

**42** Wilder (1911), 10 n. 1.

### III Entheogens and Ancient Mystery Cults

Central to several of the ancient mystery cults of the eastern Mediterranean dating from the sixth century BCE on to the rise of Orthodox Christianity in the fourth century CE, was the idea of a secret practice or ceremony that culminated in a direct personal experience of the gods. This appears to be the case with the mysteries of Eleusis, Mithra, Serapis and Dionysus. Iamblichus himself wrote extensively on the mysterious elements of several other contemporary mystery cults:

“So, also, certain others of these ecstasies become entheist or inspired when they hear cymbals, drums, or some choral chant; as for example, those who are engaged in the Korybantic Rites, those who are possessed at the Sabazian festivals, and those who are celebrating the Rites of the Divine Mother. Others, also, are inspired when drinking water, like the priest of the Klarian Apollo at Kolophon; others when sitting over cavities in the earth, like the women who deliver oracles at Delphi ... Others who understand themselves in other respects become inspired through the Fancy: some taking darkness as accessory, others employing certain potions, and others depending on singing and magic figures.”<sup>43</sup>

Certainly, as an adept member in a contemporary mystery cult, Iamblichus would be in a position to know about the inner workings of not only his own cult, but other cults that shared a similar Neoplatonist philosophy. Research into the Oracle of Delphi lends credence to Iamblichus’ description. After first being dismissed as wholly fictitious in 1950 by Pierre Amandry, who stated that the inhalation of an intoxicating gas at Delphi could never have existed, the subject has been revisited by de Boer and Hale who led a multidisciplinary team to re-examine the physical remains of the site and the surrounding geology. Their conclusion, albeit speculative, was that ethylene gas, produced by a fault in the earth’s crust that runs underneath the site of the temple, was most likely the entheogen that induced the Oracle to prophesy.<sup>44</sup>

While the specific nature of the “certain potions” employed by these mystery cults is still not known, several hypotheses have been offered. Examination of the archaeological record in Egypt has suggested hallucinogenic plants such as *Mandragora officinarum* (Mandrake) and *Nymphaea nouchali* (the blue water lily) were possibly used in shamanistic healing practice dating back to the Fourth Dynasty (ca. 2613–2494 BCE).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Wilder (1911), 14.

<sup>44</sup> De Boer and Hale (2002).

<sup>45</sup> Merlin (2003).

Several other possible entheogenic candidates have been proposed in recent years, aside from Wasson's ergot as *kykeon*. Notably, a DMT-like compound (DMT being the powerful hallucinogenic agent found in Ayahuasca) can be produced from native acacia species found in Egypt and the Middle East.<sup>46</sup> This is of particular interest because so many of the mysterious experiences described by Iamblichus take place after abstinence from certain foods and behaviors,<sup>47</sup> which is a similar process to what modern shamans prescribe for their own Ayahuasca rituals in South America.<sup>48</sup> The blue lotus and the *Psilocybe cubensis* have both been proposed as ritual entheogens in ancient Egypt,<sup>49</sup> as well as the most recent Ethylene candidate for the Oracle of Delphi.

One of the other clues to the entheogenic nature of Gnostic initiation comes from contemporary Gnostic criticism. Specifically, Irenaeus, a Proto-Orthodox Christian heresiologist of the second century CE, writes in no uncertain terms about the supposed "potions" of a Gnostic priest named Marcus:

"Moreover, that this Marcus compounds philters and love-potions, in order to insult the persons of some of these women, if not of all, those of them who have returned to the Church of God – a thing which frequently occurs – have acknowledged, confessing, too, that they have been defiled by him, and that they were filled with a burning passion towards him."<sup>50</sup>

That the orthodox denouncement of entheogenic ritual should come wrapped in a veil of sexual impropriety should come as no surprise, given the orthodox Christian stance on sexuality and the role of women in society.

If entheogenic rituals were a regular part of ancient mystery cult practice, then the Gnostics could certainly have known about them, and might have emulated them as well. This can be stated with something approaching confidence because, as a consequence of the fluidity of the various philosophies of interest, certain key figures were known to have migrated from one philosophical school to another during their lifetimes.

## IV Conclusion

Given the Neoplatonist emphasis on theurgy, the state of religious syncretism within the Platonist framework, and the availability of several hallucinogenic

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<sup>46</sup> Shanon (2008).

<sup>47</sup> Wilder (1911), 1.3.

<sup>48</sup> Furst (1976).

<sup>49</sup> Emboden (1978).

<sup>50</sup> *Against Heresies* 1.13.5 Translation from Roberts and Rambaut (1885).

plants and compounds in the region at the time, plus the apparently common practice of swearing initiates to secrecy, it is not unreasonable to surmise that the Gnostics, who were clearly influenced by the Neoplatonists, used entheogens. In most, if not all of the cases examined here, entheogenic compounds may have been used as a means of initiation into a new spiritual level and elevated status within a group. This remains true today in modern shamanistic cultures.<sup>51</sup> With Gnosticism's unique emphasis on revelation and ascension through subsequent levels of spiritual enlightenment, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the Gnostics borrowed this entheogenic initiation tradition from other Neoplatonist mystery cults.

In fact, other scholars have noted the Gnostic reliance on visionary experience and its similarity to pagan groups, stopping just short of the entheogenic hypothesis. For example, Turner states that Gnostics,

“... conceive the baptismal rite as a series of visionary experiences resulting in complete enlightenment and therefore total salvation. In spite of the allusions to ritual acts that could indeed be enacted by ordinary human beings, the importance of the rite lay primarily in the spiritual plane, an emphasis characteristic of Christian and probably non-Christian baptizing circles throughout the first century.”<sup>52</sup>

In the face of the textual evidence, it is at the very least an educated guess to propose that, if Pagan mystery practice involved the use of mind-altering substances, then possibly so did Gnostic mystery practice. If correct, this theory on the role of visionary plants in the early Christian Gnostic Church has broad implications for our understanding of the evolution of religion in the western world.

The entheogenic theory also directly impacts the evolution of Christianity as we know it. Whether Orthodox Christianity emerged as a reaction to a pre-Christian form of Gnosticism, and Gnostic Christianity emerged as a reaction to that, remains unknown. What is clear is that Gnostic Christianity's influence on the modern forms of Christianity practiced today seems not to have been terribly long lasting, beyond the possible veiled references to entheogen-use possibly buried in canonical or apocryphal texts. Hopefully further investigation along these lines can shed more light onto this complex and fascinating history.

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51 Furst (1976).

52 Turner (1994), 141.

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