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# “The Words of McKenna”: Healing, Political Critique, and the Evolution of Psychonaut Religion since the 1960s Counterculture

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Terence McKenna (1946–2000) spent thirty years advocating for the religious use of hallucinogenic substances. Picking up where Timothy Leary left off, McKenna inspired later generations of Psychonauts (“consciousness explorers”) and continues to do so even today. McKennan religion treats humanity as in flux, with imminent evolutionary milestones rapidly approaching. These metamorphoses will occur in conjunction with substance use and the help of other entities. American Psychonaut religion developed alongside the Drug War, which has had far-reaching consequences for its evolution. In establishing an enforced state opposition to substances that Psychonauts consider sacraments, the American legal system catalyzed the development of countercultural religion. Psychonauts following McKenna’s philosophy have embraced anarchism and anticapitalism, adhering to an ideology that presents “archaic” society as an ideal set against America’s current “dominator” society. Beyond the Psychonauts themselves, the Drug War also appears to have inhibited scholarly inquiry into how substance use can function as a religious practice.

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IN 1964, HUSTON SMITH rebuked academics for dismissing the importance of the psychedelics that were then in vogue, claiming that “drugs have light to throw on the history of religion, the phenomenology of religion, the philosophy of religion, and the practice of the religious life itself” (1964: 517–518). It has been slightly over fifty years since Smith urged such a correction, yet the intersection of substance use and religion remains largely unexplored. More recently, historian Wouter Hanegraaff identified issues similar to Smith’s, arguing that scholars of religion share the same “ingrained prejudices rooted in Western intellectual culture” in viewing substance use as “magical” rather than “truly religious” (2012: 393). Many examples could be presented to validate Smith and Hanegraaff’s critiques: to begin, there is Mircea Eliade’s assertion that “narcotics are only a vulgar substitute for ‘pure’ trance” (1964: 401). There is also an entire body of literature emphasizing how religion can help decrease drug use, in which “religion” generally seems to mean church and synagogue attendance (Nemoytin and Downing-Matibag 2013: 550–552). Not only does this literature assume *a priori* the inadvisability of all illegal substances, but it entirely bypasses the possibility that some religions might actually *encourage* substance use. Of course, this may also be due to the fact that nearly everyone writing about religion and substance use is writing from outside the discipline of religious studies, most often from the perspectives of health or criminology—perspectives in which religion often serves as a tool to further antidrug goals rather than as an area of genuine inquiry in and of itself. With some exceptions, scholars of religion generally ceased investigating American religious substance use after the early 1970s.

The late Terence McKenna (1946–2000) is an ideal starting place for such a project. Although he has gone largely unnoticed by academics, for present-day Psychonauts, McKenna is a subcultural icon, guru, and something akin to a utopian forerunner. “Psychonaut” is a term used by religious substance users and is built from the Greek roots *psycho*, meaning mind, and *naut*, meaning sailor. Because the term refers to a religious group (albeit one with unclear borders), I have capitalized it the way one does “Buddhist” or “Presbyterian.” McKenna presents an optimal point of focus for the following reasons: (1) his presentation of a coherent and influential cosmology, (2) his blending of religious ideology with an appealing sociopolitical ideology (acknowledging that these may not even be separate things), and (3) the framework he offered for interpreting psychedelic phenomena as healthy, beneficial, productive, and necessary for the completion of humanness.

This study consists of three parts. First, McKenna cannot be understood apart from the cultural trajectory of drug discourse and legislation.

An exhaustive genealogy of social attitudes toward substance use would reach back across centuries and national borders, overshadowing the more specific arguments that I wish to make. I have thus been very selective in retelling this history. Though much of McKenna's ideology formed in conversation with this wider antidrug discourse, making a discussion of it indispensable, I have omitted huge swaths of American drug-related social and legislative history as nonessential for an adequate understanding of McKenna.

Second, I will discuss McKenna himself, along with his religious views. McKenna has played diverse roles for Psychonauts, but he was also a human individual. Understanding his ideology (not to mention the significances that Psychonauts have ascribed to him) requires some understanding of him as a person. The bulk of McKenna's writing and recorded lectures come from the 1980s and 1990s, but the life he lived in the 1960s and 1970s is relevant to these works.

Third, McKenna has left a legacy, and it is this legacy that demands the most attention. McKenna's ideas have permeated Psychonaut culture, influencing cosmologies, ethics, politics, and even religious experiences themselves. Although an ethnography might allow for examining McKenna's role in one specific social locale, I have cast the net wider for two reasons: the first is that substance use has an ambiguous legal status, even in a religious context. Hypothetically, possessing identifying knowledge of who is distributing what substances could put a researcher in a troublesome position if called upon to testify in court. Second, rather than tread into what is typically a private world in order to make it public, I have chosen to use the accounts that Psychonauts have already elected to share. A great deal of Psychonaut conversation occurs online with varying levels of anonymity. Some use their real names when offering their perspective, others use pseudonyms. In both cases, McKenna's importance emerges in these public discussions.

Finally, I have largely used the term "substances" instead of "drugs" to refer to this broad category, because "substances" was McKenna's preferred alternative to what he saw as the stigmatizing term "drugs." Following Hanegraaff's argument, I have also chosen to use "entheogens" instead of "psychedelics" or "hallucinogens" when the use of hallucinogenic substances seems to be religious in nature.<sup>1</sup> As Hanegraaff observes,

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<sup>1</sup>Hanegraaff defines the term *entheogens* in this way: "As suggested by its roots in Greek etymology ( $\epsilon'v\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ ), natural or artificial substances can be called *entheogens* (adjective: *entheogenic*) if they generate, or bring about, unusual states of consciousness in which those who use them are believed to be 'filled,' 'possessed' or 'inspired' by some kind of divine entity, presence or force" (Hanegraaff 2012: 392).

a group of scholars coined the term in 1979 to denote the religious use of psychoactive plants without invoking the cultural baggage attached to the synonyms then in circulation. Although I am not advocating for McKenna or entheogens, neither is it my intent to denigrate them—both routes are beyond the pale of critical analysis.

## THE DRUG WAR

Crime in the US is not very different from other industrialized countries. Fear of crime, however, is much higher. The same is true of drugs: a problem in other societies, an imminent danger to our very existence in the US.

Noam [Chomsky \(2003: 117\)](#)

Noam Chomsky is known for his controversial polemics, yet his assertion that drugs are seen as an existential danger in the American context is both well founded and well documented. Roughly a century ago, narcotics prohibition emerged as a political cause alongside other moral crusades of the day such as antipolygamy, opposition to lotteries, etc.<sup>2</sup> Alcohol prohibition preceded substance prohibition by some decades and shaped the development of antidrug discourse. One of the earliest and most influential moral crusaders was Admiral Richmond Hobson, who framed substance prohibition in exactly the terms Chomsky identifies. When lobbying Congress in the 1920s for stricter regulations, Hobson wrote that “narcotics addiction [is] a grave peril to America and the human race,” that addicts were slaves to narcotics, and that they were the “living dead” who had “an insane desire to convert others into addiction” ([Hobson n.d.: 1–2](#)). Such rhetoric was typical for him and other early antidrug activists, and from the 1930s onward, it formed the platform for substance prohibition. Harry Anslinger carried Hobson’s message into the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, which Anslinger led until 1962 ([Speaker 2001: 592–593](#)). This interpretation of narcotics as an existential threat has not only persisted but has also influenced attitudes toward entheogens.

Apart from peyote (which Congress debated prohibiting to Native Americans during the 1910s on the grounds that it undid Christian missionizing efforts, led Native Americans to sexual immorality, and

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<sup>2</sup>One might object that I am ignoring American opposition to the opium trade in the nineteenth century. A case could be made for pushing antidrug reforms back to an earlier era, but I have identified the beginning of the twentieth century because this was when federal legislators began to push for tighter controls.

functioned as a replacement for alcohol), entheogens did not occupy a primary role in antidrug discourse until midcentury (U.S. House of Representatives 1918: 11–13). In 1938, Albert Hofmann first synthesized LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) at a Swiss pharmaceutical laboratory (Versluis 2014: 111). LSD entered the United States in 1948, and for a brief period it was identified as a psychiatric “wonder drug.” Its departure from the confines of medical supervision has been credited with its shifting reputation (Henderson and Glass 1994: 3). Beyond the prescribed medical use of LSD, the 1950s also witnessed a flourishing of entheogenic interests. Media such as *Time Magazine* began covering psilocybin-containing “magic mushrooms,” and controversial figures such as Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs traveled to Mexico and South America to partake of ayahuasca (Hanegraaff 2012: 402). Substances like LSD, psilocybin, and ayahuasca can produce the effects of “visual and auditory alterations, synaesthesia and ego dissolution,” and produce effects that are “similar” or “indistinguishable” from each other (Ott 1993: 82, 89, 282). These explorations in the 1950s established the groundwork for the popularization of entheogens in the 1960s as well as the prohibition movement that developed alongside it.

Aldous Huxley and Timothy Leary figure prominently in what author Jonathan Ott called the entheogenic “*cause célèbre* of the sixties,” and both are critical for understanding McKenna (Ott 1993: 276). Leary began as a Harvard psychologist, whose experiments with psilocybin served to both alienate him from the university as well as catalyze his transformation into an entheogenic evangelist (Lander 2011: 65–68). Leary’s attempt to bridge accepted science with religious experimentation is what makes him significant to this discussion. He was not merely toying with altered states of consciousness for amusement but actively seeking (and encouraging others) to treat them religiously. In 1965, Leary phrased it thus: “I believe psychedelic drugs and their effects should be viewed in the context of the emergent philosophy of the evolution of intelligence,” then proceeded to describe them as a tool for destabilizing established norms—norms that he identified as “the mythos” of Protestantism and industrial capitalism (2008: 55–57). Leary further claimed that the religious, political, and economic status quos had led humanity into ecological and psychological catastrophes but that these old ways of thinking were “coming to an agonizing end-point.” Given Leary’s popularity, his “messianic energy,” his “psychedelic millenarianism,” and his anticapitalist rhetoric, it is little wonder that Richard Nixon criticized him as “the most dangerous man in America” (Versluis 2014: 120).

Subtler than Leary, yet just as influential, the author Aldous Huxley also helped popularize entheogens as beneficial substances in the second

half of the twentieth century. *The Doors of Perception* is a lucid idyll describing Huxley's personal experiences with mescaline and remains a widely read book even to the present day. In it, Huxley explains how mescaline helped him transcend the world itself, framing this transcendence in Buddhist terms. Indeed, *The Doors of Perception* is mainly a religious text, drawing upon *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, poetry, and a theological argument urging Christians to embrace peyote-fueled visions (Huxley 1954: 18, 35–38, 42, 45–47, 56–57, 59, 68–71). Huxley did not proselytize with the same fervor and celebrity that Leary did, but his entheogenic writings were among those circulated in the 1960s counterculture and were influential for McKenna.

In 1971, Richard Nixon declared a “War on Drugs,” which he also called “America’s second civil war.” The “War on Drugs” referred to the legal prohibition of a diverse array of substances as well as the enforcement of those prohibitions, both domestically and internationally (Chouvy 2010: 103, 105). This “War on Drugs” was hardly new; Admiral Hobson had already declared the war begun almost fifty years earlier, and Anslinger had certainly kept the battle going. What was new, however, was the role of entheogens in this war as well as the outspoken rejection of the “War on Drugs” from the counterculture. If anything, Nixon’s war was merely the continued escalation of 1960s prohibitionism.

The sociopolitical backlash to 1960s substance use was multifaceted. Prominent doctors and lawmakers considered marijuana and entheogens to be mutagenic compounds that damaged the human body and bolstered an antiestablishment, criminal element that was intent on undermining society. In 1965, the House Committee on Public Health, in concert with the New York Academy of Medicine, advocated outlawing a range of substances on the grounds that they led not only to addiction and sometimes fatal health complications but also caused “unrest” and led youths to commit “antisocial and immoral acts.” They furthermore agreed that “there should be initiated immediately an educational campaign designed to teach the public that both the goal of ‘happiness’ and the use of psychoactive drugs to achieve that goal are illusory” (U.S. House of Representatives 1965: 61). A few years later, in 1968, Lyndon Johnson explicitly linked LSD and the general category of “narcotics” to uncontrollable crime, rioting, and youth delinquency, pressing Congress to grant greater authority to the FBI and other enforcement agencies (Johnson 1968). The most far-reaching legislative opinions, however, came from the House debates preceding the passage of the Controlled Substances Act of 1970. Discussion focused not on whether a broad array of substances should be federally controlled items (for which there was agreement) but rather to what extent prohibition violations should be

punished. Some representatives suggested that perhaps mere possession should be exempt from penalty, but this idea was dismissed on the grounds that being able to charge drug users for possession would allow law enforcement to ferret out the names of distributors ([U.S. House of Representatives 1968](#): 66). Although members of Congress considered substance users addicts who were mentally compromised and physically jeopardized, as Paul Rogers (D-FL) put it, these users had also become "partners in crime." The motivation for these laws becomes clear in the fear articulated by John Murphy (D-NY), who warned that "the whole fabric of our society can be eroded" by LSD and marijuana users ([U.S. House of Representatives 1968](#): 66).

The crackdown on substance use also partly stemmed from cultural angst associated with the Vietnam War. During the sixties, both politicians and mass media averred that the United States army was facing a drug crisis, with soldiers murdering each other in LSD-induced frenzies and military units being overrun while stoned on inexpensive marijuana. Significantly, this "myth of the addicted army," as historian Jeremy Kuzmarov calls it, was employed by Democrats and Republicans alike. Although Democrats and Republicans employed antidrug rhetoric for different political purposes, the end result was to conceptually connect abolishing substance use with saving American soldiers. Second, given the number of soldiers drafted into the army, elements of the counterculture also existed among the troops. For soldiers sympathetic to the movement, substance use became symbolic, "an emblem of their collective defiance" ([Kuzmarov 2009](#): 3, 12, 30–31, 55–56).

Thus, by 1970, federal legislators had prohibited a broad category of drugs that included all of the common entheogens on the grounds that these substances fed users false realities and false happiness, while simultaneously leading them to undermine American stability, safety (both military and domestic), and prosperity. Much of this legislation occurred during the 1960s, but it was Nixon's inauguration of the Drug Enforcement Agency that created the means to wage the Drug War at home. Between 1969 and 1974, funding for antidrug surveillance and controls ballooned from \$65 million to \$716 million ([Kuzmarov 2009](#): 113).

The social status of substance users only diminished in years to come. Armed with a stronger authority to enforce compliance and a well-funded propaganda campaign, the United States government aggressively pursued the capture of drug users and distributors and promoted the abstinence from drugs via programs such as Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign, and the D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) programs in schools. The 1980s also birthed the "prison boom," in which the War on Drugs filled America's jails and gave rise to the "megaprison."

Prisons in the 1980s also abandoned rehabilitation as a goal and replaced it with “a model of corrections that emphasized . . . punishment, deterrence and incapacitation” (Bosworth 2010: 27–31). “Just Say No” also had the effect of further emphasizing not only the wrongness of substance use but the moral culpability and bankruptcy of any youth who chose to partake (Davis 1998: 57). It is important to recognize that the result of antidrug politics has been not just one of demarcating permissible and impermissible acts but also of demarcating permissible and impermissible moralities.

One more aspect to consider here is the intersection of drug legislation and religion. Although entheogens have had religious uses for millennia, there is an ambiguous relationship between substance use and religion in the United States. In 1879, the Supreme Court held in *Reynolds v. United States* that religious opinions are constitutionally protected but that the government is free to regulate or prohibit religious acts without violating the first amendment’s free exercise clause. The *Reynolds* opinion/act distinction was affirmed in *Employment Division of Oregon v. Smith* (1990). Smith had worked for the state of Oregon as a drug counselor but had been fired after his peyote use became known. He was subsequently denied unemployment benefits. He contended that because his peyote use had occurred in the context of his participation in the Native American Church (in which peyote use is common and exempted from prohibition), it was protected by the free exercise clause, and Oregon therefore had no right to fire him (1990: 873). The Supreme Court disagreed, with Justice Scalia writing that “an individual’s religious beliefs [do not] excuse him from compliance with an otherwise valid law” (1990: 878–879).

This decision was surprising to many, as it dismissed the requirement for a “compelling state interest” that had been applied in cases ever since the 1963 ruling in *Sherbert v. Verner* (Eason 2003: 332). The “*Sherbert* test” requires that any laws that might limit religious liberties be both generally applicable and demonstrably necessary. Congress reacted sharply to the *Oregon v. Smith* decision by passing in 1993 the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), which was intended to require courts to apply the *Sherbert* test. The Supreme Court ruled in 1997 that Congress had overstepped its authority in passing the RFRA, as the RFRA attempted to regulate matters reserved for the individual states (Eason 2003: 333).

However, more recent decisions have affirmed the RFRA in regards to prohibitions of ayahuasca (a psychoactive substance used in some Brazilian religions), at least insofar as federal law is concerned. Two recent cases are those of *Gonzales v. O Centro Espirita Beneficente Uniao do Vegetal* and *Church of the Holy Light of the Queen v. Michael B. Mukasey*. In the former, the Supreme Court upheld the decision of a



lower court. Applying the RFRA, The Tenth Circuit decided in favor of the Uniao do Vegetal on the grounds that ayahuasca was a central, highly ritualized part of the Uniao do Vegetal's religious practices; that ayahuasca had a long tradition of use in indigenous Amazon religions; that the Uniao do Vegetal considered recreational use of ayahuasca to be sacrilegious; and that the digestive side effects were so unpleasant as to discourage its abuse outside of ceremonial environments (Eason 2003: 333, 337–338). In affirming this earlier decision, the Supreme Court agreed that ayahuasca was indeed comparable to the peyote exception and that "there is no evidence that it has 'undercut' the government's ability to enforce the ban on peyote use among non-Indians" (*Gonzales v. O Centro Espirita Beneficente Uniao do Vegetal* 2006: 4).

In *Church of the Holy Light of the Queen*, very similar reasons were given for allowing ayahuasca to Oregonian members of the Santo Daime religion. Citing the Uniao do Vegetal case, a federal court agreed that ayahuasca's use in Santo Daime was legitimately religious and that it should be protected (*Church of the Holy Light of the Queen v. Mukasey* 2009: 1211–1212). However, what is notable about these cases is that indigeneity is a prominent feature in the court opinions. These cases do not offer blanket freedom for the use of entheogens in religious practice. They allow the use of ayahuasca only to identifiable, South American sects with indigenous characteristics, while explicitly analogizing this to peyote exceptions for Native Americans.

In all of these cases, the court opinions are written with a cautionary tone. They are willing to lift particular prohibitions for indigenous religions, but these decisions come with the understanding that the substances will be carefully monitored. Writing the opinion for the Santo Daime case, Judge Owen Panner took time to note that the church abhorred drugs, alcohol, and marijuana and that the cognitive effects of ayahuasca are minor when compared with LSD (*Church of the Holy Light of the Queen v. Mukasey* 2009:1212–1213). Ultimately, he upheld that the government had a compelling interest in prohibiting drugs but decided in favor of the Church of the Holy Light of the Queen on the grounds that the government had failed to meet the requirements of the RFRA. Panner specified that the ayahuasca was consumed in a "ritual setting by church members who have been screened for physical or mental problems, and for potential drug conflicts," and reiterated that there was no evidence of the substance escaping these ritual settings for "recreational use" (*Church of the Holy Light of the Queen v. Mukasey* 2009:1226).

It is important to recognize the legal ambiguity here. Although it may appear that the courts are allowing for the religious use of entheogens, these are highly specific cases in which indigeneity plays a role. In each of

these cases, the courts are careful to separate a controlled, ritual use of these substances from recreational use as well as to identify the institutional nature of those groups seeking legal exceptions. It does not follow that an individual Psychonaut would be extended the same license as a recognized religious organization.

## TERENCE MCKENNA AND HIS WORLDVIEW

Religious studies scholar Christopher Partridge has identified Terence McKenna as “probably the most important contemporary psychedelic thinker,” which is an understatement: there is no “probably” about it (Partridge 2003: 110–111). In many ways, McKenna took on Leary’s mantle, both by promoting the use of entheogens, repeating many of Leary’s critiques of consumerism, and in rejecting the wider status quo. One of McKenna’s most often-quoted phrases has been “culture is not your friend,” a line that for McKenna meant something quite similar to Leary’s “turn on, tune in, drop out” (McKenna 1998).

McKenna was born in 1946 in Colorado, where he and his brother Dennis were raised. He attended Berkeley in 1965 as a student of ethnobotany; while a student there, he also embraced LSD and another entheogen known as DMT (dimethyltryptamine), the main psychoactive compound in ayahuasca (McKenna 1994b: 7, 20; Horgan 2012). According to McKenna’s autobiography, he had left Berkeley by 1968 and was living in exile, traveling around India, Indonesia, Nepal, Japan, Colombia, and Canada—the reason being that the United States intended to arrest him for smuggling Indian hashish into the country and had Interpol hunting him down abroad (McKenna 1994b: 20, 23, 179, 186). Given this claim, McKenna’s self-identification as “a West Coast underground figure” and his claims to have fought police at Berkeley “shoulder-to-shoulder with affinity groups like the Persian Fuckers and the Acid Anarchists,” it seems plausible that McKenna was involved with what author Ron Jacobs has called the “mythic and shadowy organization of hashish and LSD smugglers, manufacturers, and dealers from California and Nepal known in the counter-culture as the Brotherhood of Eternal Love” (Jacobs 1997: 117; McKenna 1994b: xii, 185).

McKenna returned to the United States during the early 1970s, and why the FBI chose to leave him free is a mystery that has never been answered. This enigma has at times led some Psychonauts to aver that McKenna was actually in collusion with the government. Whether or not McKenna really was a wanted criminal has not been proven. Whatever the case, by claiming to be an enemy of the state, McKenna bolstered his credibility with those who saw the established order as an oppressor.

After returning to the United States in the 1970s, McKenna began to gain in popularity as an entheogenic expert.

Much as the popularization of LSD can be attributed to Leary, the popularization of entheogenic mushrooms can be attributed to Terence and Dennis McKenna. In 1976, under the pseudonyms of O. T. Oss and O. N. Oeric, the McKenna brothers published a book called *Psilocybin: Magic Mushroom Grower's Guide*. The book explains that mushrooms had been the source not only of humanity's first religious explorations but that the contemporary resurrection of entheogenic religion placed humanity at "the threshold of the stars" and would engender "the next evolutionary step" (Oss and Oeric 1986: 17–19). The book also identified itself as a "how-to guide" for growing mushrooms cheaply and efficiently in one's own home. Previously, mushrooms had been an exotic item. In the 1950s and 1960s, devoted Psychonaut tourists traveled to Mexico in order to partake, but the McKennas' fungicultural innovations rendered travel unnecessary (Hanegraaff 2012: 402). Besides discovering a suitable method for growing tropical mushrooms in midwestern basements, the McKennas also promoted the use of DMT (an entheogen found in some plants) as well as *Salvia divinorum*, a hallucinogenic species of sage.

This cursory biography offers the context needed for understanding McKenna's complex worldview. Ideologically, McKenna could be read as a political anarchist. He could also be read as a kind of "Green" neoshaman, proselytizing for what religion scholar Bron Taylor has called "Gaian Spirituality," because McKenna argued for a sentient, animist earth/mother nature (Taylor 2010: 15–18). Both readings are correct and, in my view, inseparable. McKenna's position was that humans are not merely incomplete without entheogens but that under the yoke of "untrammelled rationalism, male dominance, and attention to the visible surface of things," society itself had become "very, very sick" (McKenna 1994a). McKenna's solution was to inaugurate an "Archaic Revival," which was an ideological alloy: one part of this was to install an anarchic social structure intended to reconstruct the egalitarian world that he believed early humans enjoyed. The other part was to initiate the spiritual reconnection with the natural world for both society and the individual soul alike.

One of the clearest illustrations of this marriage between anarchic social structure and Gaian Spirituality can be found in McKenna's foreword to his book, *The Food of the Gods*:

Our culture, self-toxified by the poisonous by-products of technology and egocentric ideology, is the unhappy inheritor of the dominator attitude that alteration of consciousness by the use of plants or substances is somehow wrong, onanistic, and perversely antisocial. I will argue that

the suppression of shamanic gnosis, with its reliance and insistence on ecstatic dissolution of the ego, has robbed us of life's meaning and made us enemies of the planet, of ourselves, and our grandchildren. We are killing the planet in order to keep intact the wrongheaded assumptions of the ego-dominator cultural style (1992: xxi).

According to McKenna (who cited academics such as Mircea Eliade and Marija Gimbutas), early humans lived as equals. There was a time when men did not dominate women, when the rich did not dominate the poor, and when humans were free to choose for themselves how to live. The rise of "dominator culture" (a term borrowed from Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and Blade*) did not occur overnight. Rather, McKenna presents it as something that happened in stages (1991: 149). The rise of monotheism, for instance, marks the transition from gender equality into a masculine hegemony:

Monotheism exhibits what is essentially a pathological personality pattern projected onto the ideal of God: the pattern of the paranoid, possessive, power-obsessed male ego . . . Only the god of Western civilization has no mother, no sister, no female consort, and no daughter (McKenna 1992: 62).

Similarly, McKenna argues that dominator cultures abhorred entheogens, because entheogens lead to the transcendence of one's own ego; in transcending the ego, humans acquire a concern for the rights of other individuals within their social group rather than the privileges of an elite caste. These entheogens (along with group sex) also promote ideological and consciousness exploration, according to McKenna. Such "boundary-dissolving activities" and "heterodoxy" are both qualities that dominator cultures like Christianity disdain (1992: 66–67). McKenna went on to suggest that "you are not a fully matured human being . . . unless you have a psychedelic experience" (1991: 9). Entheogens are the barrier-breaker, the equalizer, and the symbiotic partner needed for spiritual wholeness.

As for the earth itself, the rise of dominator culture via Christianity shrunk "the soul of the planet" to "the dimensions of a human being" (McKenna 1992: 178–179). McKenna claimed that "nature is not mute, but modern man is deaf—made deaf because he is unwilling to hear the message of caring, balance, and cooperation that is nature's message" (1992: 178–179). "The Gaian mind is a real mind," says McKenna, and humans are able to receive correction from it via dreams and entheogens (Abraham, McKenna, and Sheldrake 1992: 16–17). The solution for repairing these damages, McKenna suggested, was a "rebirth of awareness

of the Goddess," an appreciation of nature as a partner rather than a resource, the adoption of entheogens as religious sacraments/evolutionary tools, and the acceptance of his declaration that "our choice as a planetary culture is a simple one: Go green or die" (1992: 92–94). By returning to reconstructed archaic social models, McKenna hoped that humanity could eradicate both environmental destruction and the use of other humans as exploitable resources, and that in conjunction with entheogens, society could propel human evolution forward into its next stage. According to McKenna, this evolution can only happen in concert with the Gaian mind.

This brings us to the issue of cosmology. Like many religions, McKenna's brand of neoshamanism came with its own understanding of what constitutes reality. McKenna fully embraced the concepts of human evolution and scientific discovery. As was the case with many other religious experimenters during the 1960s and 1970s, McKenna esteemed science as an important asset for unlocking the secrets of the universe (Albanese 2007: 504–509). In a sense, there was no way that he could have rejected it; his religious arguments about entheogens and archaic society are predicated on the validity of academic research. Certainly the historical narrative he offered deviates from most standard accounts, but by citing Eliade when he discusses shamanism or Gimbutas when he discusses ancient matriarchies, McKenna framed his argument as an inspired interpretation of established facts. This is not to say that these scholars would have necessarily agreed with McKenna so much as it is that McKenna saw his religious interpretations as compatible with (and in some cases arising from) scholarly research.

When it came to scientific narratives, however, McKenna did not limit himself to the mainstream. The brain, he proposed, was "a matrix" for consciousness (McKenna and McKenna 1993: 41–42). By tinkering with its functions through the use of substances, one's consciousness could access other realms of existence as well as receive "corrective tuning" from the Gaian Mind (Abraham, McKenna, and Shel Drake 1992: 16). In particular, his interpretation of quantum mechanics offered McKenna a means to understand cognition this way—the normal function of the mind could be altered with hallucinogens in ways that "polarize the base-pairs of RNA receptors," allowing for "charged ions" to create new "electromagnetic wavelengths" (McKenna and McKenna 1993: 80–81). According to McKenna, these changes are what allow Psychonauts to explore other realities.

McKenna developed significant cosmological points from this interpretation of consciousness: first, he argued, psilocybin mushrooms are sentient entities that traveled through space to earth, and they are willing to communicate with those who partake of their "bodies"; and second, DMT can project one's consciousness into another realm that is populated by entities he called "machine elves" (McKenna 1991: 10, 16). These

elves have occupied a central place in McKenna cosmology, first, by expanding the known universe beyond the material plane, and second, by offering a vision of the human future. In a 1988 workshop in San Francisco, McKenna explained that on a DMT trip, one exits one's body temporarily as a "radio wave four light-seconds wide" and is shot into a world where the machine elves eagerly welcome newcomers. He explained the experience like this:

I'm looking and I can't believe my eyes, because I'm in some kind of domed place, and the impression—don't ask me why—the impression is of being underground, even though it's a huge vaulted space, and highly colored. But what is, of course, riveting my attention are these beings [. . .] They seem partially machine-like and partially elf-like [. . .] they don't have a fixed body outline. And in fact, that's one of the things that's going on in this space that's so baffling: they come toward you, they're singing in this alien language, which you somehow understand. It cannot be translated into English, but you understand it in that moment. And what they're doing is they are using their voices to produce objects. And so song becomes thing, and there are dozens of these things, and they're coming closer and closer, and the songs they sing condense into objects, and the objects themselves can sing. And these things come and say "look, look!" [. . .]

and these things are coming toward you and then they jump through you—they can pass through your body—and they're running around chirping, and singing, and making these objects, and what they're doing is they are saying "do what we are doing, do what we are doing!" [. . .]

The implication is—and this is the mystery of my life—I'm teasing it out, trying to understand it, but the implication is, and the promise is that ahead of us in time—six months, fifty thousand years—is a visible linguistic channel of communication. That the thin channel of audio communication, composed of small mouth noises, is just a provisional kind of communication, and what is being proposed in this state is a true telepathy (McKenna 1988b).

This brings us to the matter of translinguistics, which, as McKenna employed the term, refers both to the concept of communication that occurs without the use of language as well as the acquisition of knowledge without the use of language. According to McKenna, substances aided human evolution initially and would again aid humans in the future by teaching us how to utilize translinguistics and making it a normal part of our beings (McKenna 1991: 54). This dovetails the aforementioned promise of the elves, that human evolution is ongoing and that our

collective destiny is to evolve into a kind of lifeform akin to them. For McKenna, then, entheogens serve both as a kind of interdimensional gateway and an evolutionary catalyst.

McKenna's 1988 assertion that our evolutionary transformation could be "six months or fifty-thousand years" did not last; in the 1990s, he settled in on an actual date. Like Leary, McKenna valued the *I Ching*, and McKenna used this book (along with other sources) to develop a software program called Timewave Zero. Using this program, McKenna calculated that the human evolutionary shift would begin in 2012 ([Whitesides and Hoopes 2012](#): 59). He described it as a "millenarian transformation" and as "an eschatological event that is casting enormous shadows backward through time over the historical landscape . . . the siren singing at the end of time, calling all humanity across the last hundred millennia toward it" ([McKenna 1991](#): 166–167). Time, for McKenna, was a dimension that could be transcended. Entheogens allowed humans to rise out of the mundane into a "higher topological manifold of temporality" (1988a).

McKenna's eschatology did what all good apocalyptic myths do: it placed the event close enough in time to be interesting to listeners but not so close as to be quickly disproven ([O'Leary 1994](#): 78–79). It also offered a light at the end of the tunnel. For McKenna, the present evil age was/is ruled by a dominator culture that seeks to control individuals and force them into a precut, Christian, capitalist mold. Ergo, one might think of this dominator culture in terms of Stephen O'Leary's "cabal," which is the locus of evil "outside of the true community" ([O'Leary 1994](#): 6). The appeal of such a view is apparent: for Psychonauts, the central sacrament is the entheogen, whether that means mescaline, psilocybin, DMT, or another substance. Entheogens are also the substances needed for humans to regain a right balance with Gaia, to become fully human in the present, and to advance into the next stage of our evolution. They give access to the other realms, worlds populated by benevolent entities unlike ourselves.

Yet from a Psychonaut perspective, all of that stands in the shadow of a draconian Drug War. Psychonauts must be secretive about their sacraments, for exposure could mean arrest, imprisonment, and the destruction of the prohibited items. Psychonauts are also aware of the mentality espoused in the aforementioned Substance Control Acts of 1970. "Dominators" explicitly view arrests as a method for gaining information that could lead to further arrests of other users—in short, the rounding up of their community. For Psychonauts, McKenna's cosmology is a compelling narrative for the following reasons: (1) although it goes beyond established science, it does not explicitly contradict it; (2) McKenna's depiction of dominator cultures matches Psychonauts' experience of American society/law; (3) the description of the other realms matches many Psychonauts' own entheogenic

experiences (more on this later); and (4) the eschatology offers hope that the future will be better (referencing Milton, McKenna even identified this future as “*Paradise Regained*”; 1992: 221).

## PSYCHONAUTS AND TERENCE MCKENNA

The other thing it said [to me] was “the words of McKenna.”

Joe Rogan, quoting an entity encountered during a DMT trip (Rogan 2013)

Joe Rogan is perhaps best known for his roles as an actor and an announcer for Ultimate Fighting Championship. However, he also hosts a radio show out of Los Angeles in which he addresses myriad topics, including his personal experiences as a Psychonaut. In reference to the quote above, Rogan explains it as a message given to him in one of the other realms by a disembodied entity; “the words of McKenna” were, for him, an intertextual reference to McKenna’s concept of maintaining a right relationship to the entheogenic experience. Rogan quoted the entity as offering the specific words “do not give in to astonishment” (Rogan 2013). Although for Rogan a DMT trip is “15 minutes in a rocket to the center of the universe, swarming with colors and geometric patterns and truth and fear,” he says it is important not to be overwhelmed by it. Apart from the fact that Rogan speaks of McKenna’s elves and DMT trips as ontologically valid, what is most interesting here is the fact that McKenna’s propositions *are themselves part of the experience*, and apparently, this is not unusual for many Psychonauts.

McKenna seems to play three related roles for many Psychonauts: he is a prophet and visionary; a scholar; and a guide or healer.<sup>3</sup> McKenna’s claims that he had become the mouthpiece for the *logos* likely play into these ideations, boosting his credibility with those who already found him compelling and who accepted mushroom animae as real entities (McKenna 1994b: xi). Although the internet existed during McKenna’s lifetime, his death in 2000 preceded the explosion of his works online. Scores of his recorded lectures have populated various sites (often distilled down into smaller parts), and many of his written works appear online in full or in part. But most importantly for our purposes here, the internet is where many Psychonauts go to discuss his ideas. Because the

<sup>3</sup>It is important to note that not all Psychonauts approve of McKenna. I have written about the ones who do, but McKenna was a controversial and, at times, polarizing figure. Some Psychonauts treat him as a charlatan.



internet offers Psychonauts a semblance of anonymity, this is where we must turn to identify McKenna's ongoing influence.<sup>4</sup>

### Prophet/Visionary

Regarding McKenna's position as a prophet, there are a number of ways to read this role. First, prior to 2012's anticlimactic end, some took the Timewave Zero prophecies quite seriously. However, McKenna's identification of "machine elves" and the other realms of consciousness might be the more important example of his prophetic role among Psychonauts. In this sense, prophecy is not the identification of future events but the revelation of cosmological and ideological realities that have not yet been recognized by others.

One major online forum where Psychonauts interact is Reddit. Reddit is a conglomeration of subforums called "subreddits," which range topically from erudite discussions of dentistry research to cute pictures of kittens. It is also one of several online forums rich in McKenna discussions. Writing in the "UFOs" subreddit, duder9000 discusses his experience with machine elves:

I met them when I smoked - I was lying down and all of a sudden they were there, surrounding a different bed I was lying on. They were super excited and were expecting me. Then before they could tell me anything I shot up into some further dimension (?) and experienced an ego death, which was the most frightening thing I've ever. Let me tell you, there is a very specific 'feeling' associated with dying, and your body KNOWS IT. Anyway, when I saw the 'elves', I had never seen artistic depictions of them before. But when I did later see machine elf art, it was exactly what I had seen.

A friend of a friend abused DMT for awhile (well, treated it as a recreational fun drug instead of a psychonautical learning experience that deserves respect), and he kept ending up in the room with the elves. They finally told him to knock it off and not to come back for awhile.

In the fuller discussion of that topic (there are 291 posts for this thread alone), other users dialogue with duder9000 about his experience, some with questions, some with their own corroborating evidence. At one point, the question of whether all of the elves are benevolent arises, because another user felt that he had been once approached by a

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<sup>4</sup>On many forums and websites, individuals choose pseudonyms or usernames to mask their identity. While some choose to use their legal names, pseudonyms are more common. This presents some unique challenges to academic citation. I considered putting quotation marks around the handles but finally decided that it appears condescending and judgmental, as though their pseudonyms were illegitimate in my eyes. I have thus let their online names stand as they are.

succubus (a kind of predatory sexual spirit) and wondered if succubi and machine elves might be the same thing. Some users were reading about machine elves for the first time and concluding that they had also previously met them but never realized that they had a name. What is most important here is that McKenna's concept of elves has taken hold and become a commonplace interpretation of DMT trips.

McKenna's connection with the machine elf experience has not gone unnoticed by Psychonauts. Some Psychonauts believe that McKenna has influenced others' experiences rather than having discovered a real existential alterity. At any rate, these experiences appear to contain extremely similar content, and the framing of this content, as well as the mythology surrounding it, are recognizably McKenna. The perception of alien entities and the perception of having traveled into another plane of existence are commonly framed in elfin terms, demonstrating McKenna's influence on the experiential interpretation itself. Additionally, the ego death (which McKenna almost certainly borrowed from Huxley) also figures prominently in many of these accounts, as it did in *duder9000's*.

Regarding the broader "visionary" role that McKenna played, it is common to find lists of pithy McKenna quotes that have been compiled by his followers, which when taken together as a whole document, make an argument for reshaping the world socially, biologically, and psychically. For example,

You are an explorer, and you represent our species, and the greatest good you can do is to bring back a new idea, because our world is endangered by the absence of good ideas. Our world is in crisis because of the absence of consciousness.

This is a society, a world, a planet dying because there is not enough consciousness, because there is not enough awareness, enough coordination of intent-to-problem. And yet, we spend vast amounts of money stigmatizing people and substances that are part of this effort to expand consciousness, see things in different ways, unleash creativity. Isn't it perfectly clear that business as usual is a bullet through the head?

Psychedelics are illegal not because a loving government is concerned that you may jump out of a third story window. Psychedelics are illegal because they dissolve opinion structures and culturally laid down models of behaviour and information processing. They open you up to the possibility that everything you know is wrong.

The message of psychedelics is that culture can be re-engineered as a set of emotional and spiritual values rather than products. This is terrifying news. ("[End All Disease](#)" n.d.)

Out of the myriad thoughts McKenna espoused in lectures, books, videos, and so forth, why is it that quotes like these emerge as primary? The author deliberately arranged these sociopolitical memoranda, selecting those that seemed apropos, and thus this list is intended to reflect a Psychonautic critique of the world as desperately sick and in need of healing. McKenna's words have been shaped into a vision of a healthy globe.

## Scholar

After several graduate degrees I can still say that Terence McKenna is perhaps one of the most underappreciated intellectuals of our time.

Adam [Elenbaas](#) Psychonaut (2009)

Although McKenna is upheld as a visionary who was ahead of his time, another function he plays in entheogenic discourse is that of the learned scholar. His theories engender discussion about everything from fungiculture to evolution. For example, one blogger's discussion of McKenna's proposition that mushrooms arrived on earth by spores travelling through interstellar space focuses not on a political critique nor on healing but on the scientific plausibility of McKenna's hypothesis ([Suede 2012](#)). Indeed, McKenna's evolutionary theory is one point of discussion among Psychonauts. McKenna suggested that not only were humanity's first religious overtures the result of entheogens but that the evolution of human consciousness *itself* was a product of simian mushroom consumption, an idea that has become colloquially known as "The Stoned Ape Theory." Contrasting it with the dominant scientific narrative, one blogger argued that "it's just as plausible as many of the other evolutionary theories, especially when considering superior higher level of consciousness and language development" ([Arnold 2014](#)). The rationale for this is that humans exhibit a high capacity for abstract thought, and the Stoned Ape Theory accounts for this in ways that many Psychonauts find convincing because it dovetails with their own experiences with entheogen-prompted abstractions.

Such treatments of McKenna are common, and, although some of his more esoteric theories might seem wild to mainstream scientists, many of McKenna's theories are footnoted with widely accepted academic sources—assorted medical, chemical, and cultural theory texts. Often these discussions are embedded within religious narratives: for instance, McKenna's theories about the Spacetime Continuum can feed into discussions about the eschaton ([Trismegistus 2014](#)). All this to say that although more conventional scientists might scoff at the notion of entheogens allowing one to briefly escape temporality or that entheogens

catalyzed an ancient evolutionary shift, Psychonaut readers take him seriously on points like these.

## Guide/Healer

Listening to Terence talk was like watching somebody do a slow motion magic trick right in front of my eyes while simultaneously describing and correctly analyzing a recurring childhood dream that I'd never told anybody about . . . And for the very first time in my life, I suddenly realized that I had a mission.

[The Teafaerie \(2012\)](#).

Many Psychonauts speak similarly of McKenna, claiming that he had a profound impact in the course of their self-realization. In the case of *The Teafaerie*, she seems to view her mission as something along the lines of entheogenic experimentation, writing, and assisting in a communal effort to create a knowledge base for other “entheogenic explorers” like herself (2008). McKenna is presented in this case and others as a guide, not in the sense of an intellectual or a visionary, but as an interlocutor capable of helping the individual attain their own *raison d'être*, what might be described as a soul awakening. In this capacity, his guidance is viewed as useful for attaining spiritual completeness.

One of the more intriguing roles McKenna has played as a Psychonaut guide (or more accurately, the role that has been thrust upon him postmortem) is that of the literal icon. Because entheogens often produce vivid visual alterities, and because these alterities are considered a prized part of the event, Psychonauts frequently use art to stimulate the visual aspects of the experience ([Rubin 2010](#): 16, 23, 27, 36). Thus, Psychonaut art is filled with bright colors, often clashing, and typically involves intricate patterns; these qualities are thought to aid the attainment of those visual alterities. A surprising amount of Psychonaut art features either portraits of McKenna or quotes of his words. Given that these types of paintings are intended to provoke a religious experience (or to reflect one that has already occurred), the presence of McKenna's face and words necessitate that we consider these as something akin to hagiographic iconography.

For one example, we might consider a painting which features McKenna dressed in monastic robes and holding a yin-yang in his hands. Surrounding him are multiple entheogens: morning glories, mushrooms, and ayahuasca vines.<sup>5</sup> On one level, whoever created this may have simply

<sup>5</sup>I do not know who painted this. These types of images circulate widely on the internet, being reposted from site to site. It is often difficult or impossible to identify authorship because of these

intended it to be aesthetically pleasing. However, the intent behind its creation may be irrelevant for its use. Given the typical religious function of entheogenic art, I am suggesting that these types of paintings are, in fact, frequently used devotionally. McKenna is, after all, a religious figure, and if we were to see a painting like this that featured St. Mary or the Amida Buddha, the painting would immediately be seen in a devotional light. There are scores of entheogenic paintings of McKenna. These should be seen partly as an homage, but given the function of entheogenic art in the actual Psychonaut experience, they should also be categorized as icons meant to mediate a substance-spurred moment of transcendence.

Similarly, the words of McKenna often appear attached to entheogenic art. For instance, we might consider an image that is a modification of one of Alex Grey's psychedelic paintings. The painting features two brightly colored entities set against a black background filled with translucent orbs, possibly planets. The entities' gaze is fixed upon an intricately designed object of unknown meaning; Grey's painting has been edited, however, to include the words "There is a transcendental dimension beyond language[.] It's just hard as hell to talk about! – Terence McKenna"<sup>6</sup> Why edit? The original painting is characteristic of Grey's work: ornate and intended to inspire a mystical experience, both with and without substances (Grey 2012: 47, 101, 110; Rubin 2010: 27). The attachment of McKenna's quote may be intended to add to the experience and indirectly aid the individual's personal completion. Recall that McKenna claimed that translinguistics would be an evolutionary milestone for humanity and that through substance use, humans could acquire information that could not be transmitted with words as well as learn to communicate without them. The addition of this particular McKenna quote to the Grey painting overtly invokes this translinguistic narrative, and by placing it in plain view of the Psychonaut, it may be intended to trigger such a translinguistic experience.

## CONCLUSIONS

In thinking through the broader significance of McKenna and Psychonauts for the academic study of religion, there seem to be two key features that are worth serious consideration. The first is this: What is most at stake for Psychonauts is the right to use their minds as they see

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circulation patterns. I accessed it at <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/8c/14/7e/8c147e520885b8dfd5c6567b71d03329.jpg>.

<sup>6</sup>[http://www.consciousness-evolution.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/wp-id-Screenshot\\_2013-04-22-22-00-06-1.png](http://www.consciousness-evolution.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/wp-id-Screenshot_2013-04-22-22-00-06-1.png)

fit, a right they view dominator culture as abrogating. What this amounts to is a contest over normative consciousness. The 1960s prohibitions on entheogens were intended to clamp down not just on crime and social instability but on the use of “illusionary” substances as a means to happiness. “Illusionary” is a key term here, as is “hallucination”: these terms identify the entheogenic experience as something that is not real, something illegitimate, a mere chemical reaction triggered by toxins. Psychonauts challenge this position by claiming that although entheogens produce measurable neurochemical reactions, their experiences are not reducible to this. Let us recall McKenna’s claim that humans are incomplete without entheogens: this is the Psychonaut model of normative consciousness, one that treats the majority’s neural state as something in need of healing. Additionally, this normativity is deeply embedded in American culture, for the entire basis of psychiatry is that human brains should and should not operate in specific ways. Psychonauts challenge this medical model as conceptually nonneutral in that if we think of entheogens as producing illusions contrary to normal brain states, we are segregating their spirituality into the realm of the illegitimate.

The second major stake is legal. American courts have allowed for certain entheogens in certain contexts; namely, peyote for Native Americans and ayahuasca for some sects whose practices originate from South American indigenous groups. The explicit reasonings in these cases were that ayahuasca and peyote were traditional, had controlled ritual contexts, and were used in “sincere” religious settings rather than for “recreational use.” Psychonauts present multiple challenges to this. There is currently no Psychonaut institution comparable to that of Santo Daime or the Native American Church.<sup>7</sup> There is no ritual context, except in the vaguest sense of “ritual”: Psychonaut religion is so individualized, personal, and exploratory, that any rituals that may exist are individually selected rather than institutionally prescribed. Furthermore, only some Psychonauts can claim indigenous ancestry, which the courts seem to be using as a justification for selectively lifting substance use prohibitions based on racial criteria. What this means is that although entheogen use among Psychonauts is religious, it does not fit the understanding of what “religion” is supposed to look like to the courts (never mind the false dichotomy of “recreation” and “sincere,” as though pleasure were somehow antithetical to religion).

Huston Smith’s advice about taking substance use seriously bears repeating. I have endeavored to show that we ought not to dismiss entheogen use as a criminal act of drug abuse that is unworthy of scholarly attention

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<sup>7</sup>Leary attempted to create acid churches in the 1960s, but law enforcement shut them down.

but that the consumption of entheogens can be an act that, though illegal, is a central part of a religious and sociopolitical counternarrative. McKenna's role in this intervention is meant to be both illuminating and complicating at the same time. It is meant to be illuminating in the sense that it reveals his role as a guru guiding Psychonauts into a holistic cosmology that subsumes humans to Gaia and to a wider universe of other advanced sentient beings, simultaneously celebrating what humans might become through entheogenic use: translinguistic beings who can regain an ancient unity with Mother Earth, conquer the ego, and return society to an egalitarianism that was lost with the now-distant birth of hierarchies. It is meant to be complicating in the sense that taking McKenna and Psychonauts seriously requires a reappraisal of what it means to be religious in contemporary America, a reassessment of terminology, and a recognition that we may have unintentionally surrendered scholarship to political agendas by either depicting substance use as a bad decision that is not properly religious or by ignoring its existence altogether.

Psychonauts are diverse, and McKenna's worldview can be spun both positively and negatively. Psychonaut critiques of the current social order can be harsh and angry or sad and mournful. They can be jeremiads against the Drug War, or against Christians who dismiss the McKennan pantheon as evil. Their vision of the future, though sometimes apocalyptic, can also be optimistic and celebratory. Though 2012 has come and gone, some Psychonauts still hold to the idea that humanity stands at the brink of a spiritual revolution, one in which nature will be healed, society will be repaired, and humans will step into their evolutionary destiny. For better or for worse, Terence McKenna altered the American religious landscape and continues to do so even after his death.

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