

The secret history: hallucinogens in christianity

The authors' anthropological journey through European and Middle Eastern churches finds evidence—hidden in plain sight for centuries—that challenges conventional views of the origins of Judeo-Christianity. An edited excerpt from *The Psychedelic Gospels: The Secret History of Hallucinogens in Christianity*

BY JERRY B. BROWN AND JULIE M. BROWN

AS JULIE AND I TRAVELED EAST from Plaincourault Chapel, in France, we drove by fields of golden sunflowers bordered by elegant rows of poplar trees. We loved everything about being on the road. The oh-so-rare feeling of absolute freedom, untethered from televisions and telephones, from grinding cycles of bad news. The unpredictability of changing plans at a moment's notice to chase down rumors of enigmatic frescoes. But most of all, we relished the adventure of traveling with a purpose. To be sure, it is liberating to put a knapsack on your back, to be a vagabond, wandering any way the wind blows. But for us it was much more rewarding to be on a quest, ears and eyes ever alert for clues, for a glimpse of angels in the architecture. At our

next stop, we found angels and much more.

The Church of Saint Martin sat unpretentiously amid a cluster of modest two-story stone homes with pitched roofs; their terracotta tiles glistened with the light rain that had just stopped. A plaque in the small gravel parking lot described the murals as “the work of an artist of genius,” which “portrays the theme of Redemption, from the Error of Adam to the Last Judgment.” A coarse stone cross was placed randomly on the ground in front of the church doors, which were painted a drab brown.

Stepping across the threshold was like having cataracts removed from your eyes and suddenly seeing clearly again in vibrant color and high-definition. Here the rich red, ochre, and white hues of the nativity scenes in the nave were a prelude to the panoply of

powerful paintings that filled the choir in the adjoining room.

Once inside the resplendent choir, Julie and I were enchanted by the majestic visual feast of frescoes on the walls, guarded by rosy-cheeked seraphim. We found ourselves alone, enveloped in reverent silence, contemplating an illustrated Bible. The church bells began to peal, marking the hour, transporting us back to medieval times. Julie took my arm and turned me around to look at the wall-length panel of Christ's Entry into Jerusalem. “Do you see what I see?” she asked in amazement. There was no way I could miss the smooth caps of five psilocybin mushrooms. The brown-and-white caps gracefully spread out over the heads of the three joyful youth welcoming Jesus into the city for his messianic date with destiny.



GOD CREATES PLANTS, GREAT CANTERBURY PSALTER, ENGLAND

THIS PANEL FROM GENESIS SHOWS GOD CREATING SEVERAL SPECIES OF PSYCHOACTIVE MUSHROOMS.



PURIFICATION OF ISAIAH'S LIPS AND CHRIST'S ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM. FRESCO ON SOUTH CHOIR WALL, CHURCH OF SAINT MARTIN DE VICQ, FRANCE, EARLY 12TH CENTURY.

“Look how big these mushrooms are, as big as the heads of the young men,” Julie noted.

“Size matters in Romanesque art,” I replied. “At Plaincourault, the mushroom in the Temptation fresco is even larger than Eve. That’s because the painter is calling our attention to its importance.”

“Now step back and tell me exactly what you see,” I said, inviting Julie to describe the sumptuous scene laid out before us. She spoke slowly, while rapidly clicking photos. It was almost as if she were rushing to capture these images before they could disappear, even though they had been here for nearly a thousand years.

“Starting from the left,” Julie continued, “I see a man kneeling before a much larger robed figure, possibly an angel entering the scene from above, whose body is bathed in concentric circles of light. There is a hand coming out of the light. Between the thumb and index finger is a tan, roundish object, which is being offered to the man, who is looking up in awe.”

“Anything else?” I inquired.

“Yes, the robes of the angel and of the



DETAIL FROM PURIFICATION OF ISAIAH'S LIPS

JESUS ENTERS JERUSALEM

“Why do you think that’s Jesus?” I asked.

“Because he’s riding on what looks like an ass, which is how the Bible depicts his entry into Jerusalem at Passover. Walking directly behind Jesus are two men, possibly disciples, holding their arms up in the gesture of standing in awe.”

“Okay, but just stick with the facts, with what you actually see in the fresco.”

“Sure. Jesus is sitting on an ass with his arms reaching out toward the youths who are greeting him. One of the youths is leaning forward, holding on to the stem of an oblong mushroom in his left hand, while offering Jesus three stems with his right hand, whose tops have been painted over or somehow obscured”.

“While the youth holding the mushroom is wearing a cape, the two youths below have taken off their capes, unfolding them to welcome Jesus as if rolling out a royal carpet. The furls in the capes extend all the way below the figure of Jesus and are repeated in the robes of the disciples, as well as in the robes of the kneeling man and the angel, visually tying both scenes together.”

Julie turned to the right and stared transfixed at the panel on the facing wall. “Jesus and his disciples are traveling toward the gates of Jerusalem, where a rotund man on top of the tower is using a long knife to cut through the stem of a mushroom.

kneeling man and the border below them are painted sky blue, one of the few places where the artist uses this color in the church. This color also tints the robes of Jesus’ disciple. Look how it stands out, glowing iridescently in the light coming in from the window.”

It’s the same shape and color as the mushrooms in the last scene. Fascinating ... These towers are adjacent to the scene of the Last Supper, where Jesus and 11 of his disciples are gathered behind the table, while the 12th disciple, probably Judas, is kneeling on the other side.”

“Jesus is extending a very long arm toward Judas’ mouth, holding something in his fingers out to Judas, similar to the way the angel is holding something out to Isaiah. I can’t tell what it is. But, look, there are four long knives on the table, just like the one used to cut down the mushrooms in the adjoining tower scene!”

“Isn’t the Last Supper supposed to be a Passover meal?” I asked.

“This is definitely not a Passover seder, because there is no paschal lamb or wine goblets on the table, only bowls and round objects,” Julie pointed out. “In fact, the



LAST SUPPER, WEST CHOIR WALL

mushroom caps being cut on top of the tower and the objects on the table share the same round form, size and coloration. This repetition of mushroom caps and knives connects the scenes visually, and also suggests a sequence from the cutting of the mushroom caps to their later appearance on the table. On the table, the pairing of the knives and the round objects suggests that these objects have been cut, which is significant, because if these were loaves of bread, they would have been torn apart by hand. And look at the way in which the table itself is rotated forward so that it’s parallel with the plane of the entire picture. In combining scale—the large size of the mushroom caps—and perspective, the artist is calling attention to the objects on the table.”

A RED-AND-GOLD *AMANITA MUSCARIA* CAP SERVES AS THE BACKDROP FOR THE TEMPTATION IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN. TREE OF JESSE, SAINT MICHAEL'S CHURCH, HILDESHEIM, GERMANY.

Before I could comment, Julie grabbed her camera, zoomed in on the Last Supper and then passed the camera to me, telling me to look closely at the robes of the disciples seated to the left of Jesus. To my surprise, neatly drawn into the folds of their hems were four umbrella-shaped psilocybin mushroom caps whose stems were all linked together.

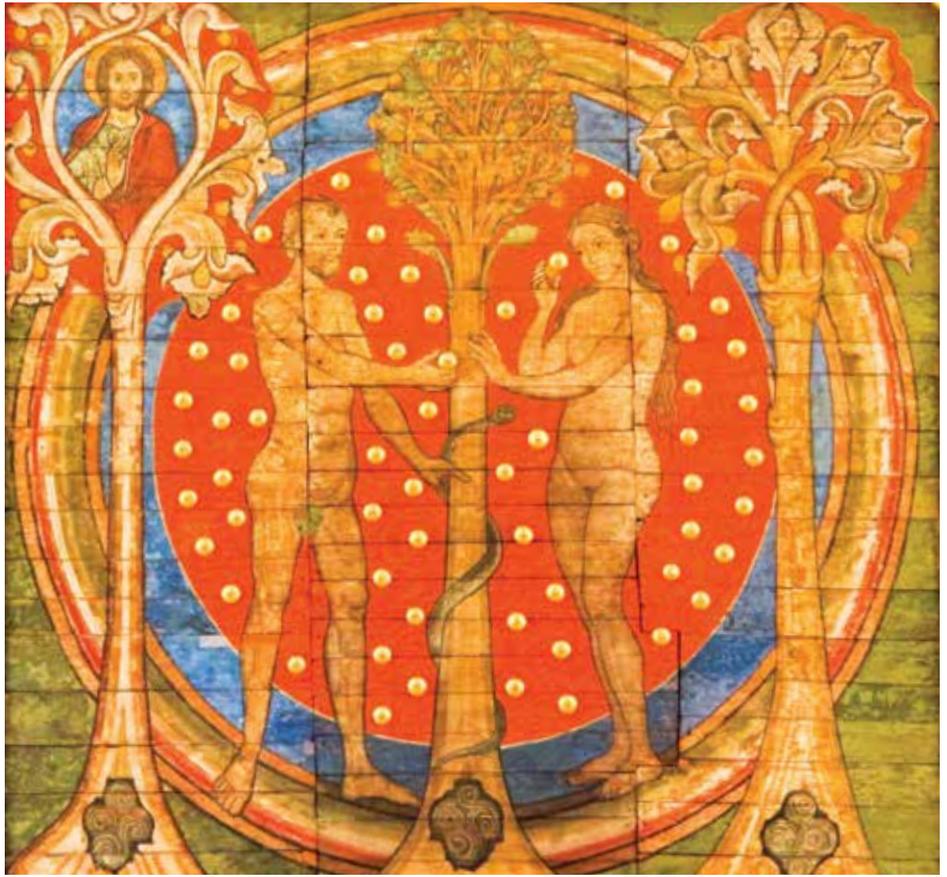
"Look!" I said. "There's also a mushroom in the hem of the disciple directly to the right of Jesus, as well as two more at the tip of Judas' robe. The artist had painted the mushrooms into the folds as if trying to disguise them. Just like the dots on the amanita at Plaincourault, these mushroom hems are neatly aligned because the artist is telling us how important they are. This is clearly a way of informing initiates thatentheogens were present at the Last Supper."

TO REMAIN BLIND

"To see works of medieval art solely with the naked eye is to remain blind," writes art historian Marcia Kupfer. Nowhere is this more evident than in viewing the striking frescoes of Saint Martin. Ironically, Kupfer overlooks one of the most astounding features of these frescoes: the mushroom icons, which even her discerning eye could not see without a knowledge of ethnomycology.

The history of the small parish church of Saint Martin has been extensively documented. It houses one of the three sets of Romanesque religious frescoes analyzed in depth by Kupfer in her erudite study *Romanesque Wall Painting in Central France*, which is why Julie and I chose to visit this church, despite its remote location well off the main roads. Saint Martin is located in the Indre district of central France, in the village of Nohant-Vic, which has a population of fewer than 500 people. In the 11th century, the church belonged to the Benedictine abbey of Déols. At that time it consisted of a simple nave and choir. At the beginning of the 12th century, a semicircular apse was built and an exceptional set of murals was painted, first uncovered in 1849. Restoration began in 1987 and was completed in 1991.

The interior is decorated with vivid murals depicting the life of Jesus—a visual Christology. Typical of the fresco cycles observed in the medieval diocese of Bourges, the paintings at Saint Martin are the unique creation of a single workshop,



usually consisting of a lone painter perhaps with an assistant to help with the plastering and preparation of pigments. Consequently, there are no artistic or religious reasons why images of sacred mushrooms found in one house of worship, such as Plaincourault or Saint-Savin, would be present in others throughout the region. But here they were, in living color.

THE PROPHET HAS SPOKEN

As Julie and I were contemplating the mural of the Last Supper, a middle-aged couple entered the choir through the arched passageway underneath the painting. As the only four people in the church on this damp afternoon, we nodded to one another in a gesture of friendliness, acknowledging our mutual interest in medieval churches. The couple quietly crossed the choir and turned to look at the mural. I realized they were speaking softly in German, and I strained to listen in on what they were saying, wondering if they could throw any light on what we were seeing. But to no avail.

Just then, Julie linked her arm with mine and guided me to the left of the passageway, where we came face to face with a robed and bearded figure holding a scroll. The painting was located on a side panel directly under the towers of Jerusalem.

"I haven't been able to take my eyes off

"There was no way I could miss the smooth caps of five psilocybin mushrooms ... spread out over the heads of the three joyful youth welcoming Jesus into the city for his messianic date with destiny."



ST EUSTACE, CHARTRES CATHEDRAL, CHARTRES, FRANCE. FLANKED BY SACRED MUSHROOMS, PLACIDAS KNEELS DURING HIS CONVERSION TO ST. EUSTACE.

of this man or the scroll he's holding," Julie said. "We've got to find out what it says."

"They may know," I replied tilting my head toward the couple.

"What makes you think that?" Julie inquired.

"Because educated Germans of their generation were required to study Greek or

Latin. But I don't want to bother them."

"I think it would be okay," Julie said. Turning to the couple, she politely inquired, "Excuse me, do either of you know Latin? We're trying to figure out what this inscription says."

Fortunately, both the man, Johann, and the woman, Cristina, had taken nine years

of Latin, which immediately precipitated a spat. Johann studied the fresco for a moment and confidently declared that it read, DIXIT PROPHETA, which he translates as "The Prophet Has Spoken."

"Wait a minute, my dear," Cristina spoke up in crisp, flawless English. "You are mistaken. I think it's time you started wearing your glasses."

"What do you mean?" Johann asked indignantly.

"In the first place, that's not a letter D at the beginning, but simply a curlicue painted into the parchment on which the letters are written. And, second, the next two letters are not an I and an X, but an A and a V. Therefore, the scroll actually reads, AVIT: PROPHETA."

At that, a vigorous discussion erupted between Johann and Cristina. They spoke rapidly, much too quickly for me to catch more than a word here or there. Finally, Johann turned toward us and conceded, "Go ahead, Cristina. You figured it out, so you tell them."

"At first," Cristina began, "I thought it meant 'He went with the prophet.' But then

Q&A

Jerry Brown, coauthor with Julie M. Brown of *The Psychedelic Gospels*, speaks with *The Optimist* about the book's discoveries and relevance.

What was the biggest discovery for you while researching and writing your book?

In the summer of 2012, we visited the small parish church of Saint Martin de Vic, in central France. The distinct psilocybin mushrooms painted in the magnificent early-12th-century frescoes in this church, depicting scenes from the Old and New Testament, inspired the "aha" moment in which Julie and I first formulated the "theory of the psychedelic gospels"—as an alternative history of Christianity, one dramatically different from the master story told in the canon Gospels. These frescoes confirmed our initial hypothesis that we would find evidence of "entheogens"—God-generating-within sacred plants—in Christian art. Afterwards, we continued to uncover evidence in the churches and cathedrals we visited in Europe and the Middle East. At this point in the journey, we knew we were on to something of great significance. In time this discovery could reopen

this ancient pathway to the divine, not only for the world's two billion Christians but also for the growing number of people who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious."

Your book shows that psychedelic experiences were a part of early Christianity. Do you think that states of higher consciousness are a necessary element in the "discovery" of religion?

Yes. An expanded awareness of the spiritual realms is integral to the origins of religion. That said, psychedelics are not the only portal to the divine. For example, in his beautiful book *God: A Story of Revelation*, Deepak Chopra describes four pathways open to those "eager for God": the paths of devotion, of understanding, of service and of meditation. We propose a fifth pathway: the path of entheogens.

Christianity is thought to be a more profound, rational religion than ancient shamanistic traditions. Doesn't your book show that the roots and inspiration are the same?

If we accept anthropologist Mircea Eliade's classic definition of shamanism as "archaic techniques of ecstasy" (ancient techniques of inducing the "flight of the soul"), we have a broad theological framework that can encompass both the pagan supernatural world of the spirits and the Christian concept of the immortality of the soul. Both are mythological realms that exist outside of historical time. Both require faith in an unseen God or in invisible gods and goddesses who control events in the natural world. Our book traces the role of psychedelics in shamanism, humanity's first religion, as well as in the origins of Christianity and, by implication, in the life of Jesus.

I realized that the verb *avit* is actually in the present tense, and if we take it as a nominative, which means that the prophet is the only one moving, then the scroll says, ‘The Prophet Goes Forth.’”

I was just about to inquire about Latin verb declensions when Julie interrupted by asking a more important question: “If Jesus is the messiah who came to fulfill the prophecy, then who is the prophet?”

“Oh, Johann can tell you that,” Cristina said. “He’s a professor of theology and an expert on biblical prophets. I think he’s memorized half the passages in the Old Testament.”

“This is quite clear,” said Johann, who pointed to the scene with the angel and recited a passage from Isaiah 6:6–7: “Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar. And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.”

“The prophet is definitely Isaiah,” Johann concluded. “But I am perplexed, because what the seraphim is holding out to him is round and beige, not the fiery red nor even

the glowing black one would expect of a burning coal. And he’s not holding it with tongs, but between his fingers.”

Julie and I shared a knowing look. “But why Isaiah?” I asked, my curiosity piqued. “What does an Old Testament prophet know about the coming of Christ?”

“Isaiah foresaw more clearly than any of the other prophets the coming new religion of the Gospels,” Johann explained. “In many ways he was more an evangelist than a prophet, because Isaiah described the mysteries of Christ so vividly you would think he was reporting the past rather than prophesying the future.”

When Johann finished speaking, I asked him and Cristina if they noticed anything unusual in this panel depicting Isaiah’s purification and Jesus’s entry.

“No, nothing at all, except what I’ve already mentioned about the coal and the angel,” Johann concluded, completely oblivious to the mushrooms in the upper right-hand corner of the fresco. I thanked Johann and Cristina and, after getting their phone number, bid them *Auf wiedersehen* as they left the church.

PURIFICATION OF ISAIAH’S LIPS

Pope Gregory (540–604), known as “the Father of Christian Worship,” believed that paintings of Bible stories were an essential tool for the education of the faithful who could not read. In this way, Christian art and images became “the Bible of the illiterate.” In the case of medieval paintings, they were directed at two audiences: the educated, mainly royal patrons and men of the church, and the uneducated believers.

It is in this context that Kupfer, who has studied Saint Martin extensively, points out that “the vital presence of rotund, ponderous figures, their exaggerated posturing, and their animated interaction brings events to life.” But at Saint Martin, the juxtaposition of events from different historical periods in the Old Testament and the New Testament life of Christ does not focus on a simple chronological retelling of biblical history. Rather, according to Kupfer, “repeated breaks in narrative continuity disrupt the literal surface of the story to make available the spiritual lessons concealed within.”

This is graphically illustrated in the placement of the Old Testament scene

Do psychedelic experiences “convert” people to religious belief or significantly enhance what people may already believe?

Not necessarily. Psychedelic explorers through the ages have reported a wide range of experiences that include both “heaven and hell,” the diverse outcomes that, to cite the title of Aldous Huxley’s essay, can occur once we open the doors of perception.

Nevertheless, it has been scientifically demonstrated, now repeatedly, that entheogens can generate powerful and life-changing religious experiences. In 1962, a carefully controlled, double-blind psychedelic research experiment was conducted where half of the Protestant divinity students were given capsules containing psilocybin and the other half were given a placebo. Almost everyone who received the entheogen reported profound mystical experiences, which one of the participants, religious scholar Huston Smith, described as “the most powerful cosmic homecoming I have ever experienced.”

Religious (and political) leaders are fierce opponents of any consciousness-enhancing drug use. Have these leaders forgotten where Christianity came from? Or what is it that they fear?

Certainly, since biblical times, the use of mind-expanding substances has posed great challenges to religious and political communities alike. Challenges so great that, with the coming of monotheism, entheogens were suppressed in the Bible as the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden; demonized as tools of satanic witches during the Inquisition; and banned as dangerous drugs during the 1960s. However, not all religious leaders object to the prospect of effortless beatific vision. As Catholic Brother David Steindl-Rast asks, “If we can encounter God through a sunrise seen from a mountaintop, why not through a mushroom prayerfully ingested?”

Your book describes many places that show or refer to the use of psychedelics. What, for you, is the main message of these discoveries?

Our book invites readers to travel along with us as we discover and provide an in-depth analysis of the psychedelic images found in nine churches, chapels and cathedrals in Europe and the Middle East. These images are found in a variety of religious artworks, including frescoes, mosaics, paintings, illuminated manuscripts, sculptures and stained-glass windows. Our findings, along with the growing gallery of similar images being rediscovered throughout early and medieval Christendom, prove that there is a secret history of hallucinogens in Christianity and strongly suggest that entheogens played a role in the origins of Christianity. If these findings are confirmed, this means that our cultural heritage of exploring higher consciousness, cosmic consciousness and Christ consciousness has been lost in the sands of time, or suppressed with the coming of the Inquisition in the Middle Ages. From a religious perspective, current U.S. laws making entheogens illegal should be viewed as a violation of the First Amendment of the Constitution, which states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . .” | JURRIAN KAMP

It was much more rewarding to be on a quest, ears and eyes ever alert for clues, for a glimpse of angels in the architecture.

of the Purification of Isaiah's Lips side by side with Christ's Entry into Jerusalem. Although these two scenes have no historical connection, they collide pictorially. According to Kupfer, the Entry is split into two stages. In the first, as Christ rides the ass, followed by his disciples, "several youths excitedly clamor up trees to break off branches, while others unfurl their mantles at his feet. The second phase of the episode, on the west wall, isolates the walled city of Jerusalem ... Youths, their mouths open in song, crowd the gates; others within the city drape the walls or cut away at the treetops."

The essential themes of this visual sequence are purification and prophecy as preconditions for spiritual passage and entry into the kingdom of heaven. Kupfer sees the luminous coal as a manifestation of Christ, which reveals the inner spiritual meaning of the Entry. "If the radiance of the coal symbolizes the mystery of the Incarnation, its perfectly round shape may further suggest the form in which this mystery is materially embodied on earth. The particular gesture with which the angel displays the coal appears visually to identify the small disk with the Eucharistic host." In other words, just as Isaiah feels the coal's purifying touch on his lips, so the Christian believer receives the sacred host of the Eucharist in his mouth.

THE PSYCHEDELIC GOSPELS

As the late-afternoon sunlight filled the choir, we felt as if the frescoes were coming alive, were speaking to us. It was then that Julie and I had the "aha" moment. Here at Saint Martin, these frescoes were revealing an alternative history of Judeo-Christianity, a Psychedelic Gospel inspired by entheogenic mushrooms.

We contemplated the incontrovertible facts portrayed in the wall paintings before us: the pictorial fusion of Jesus entering Jerusalem with the purification of Isaiah; Jesus with arms outstretched toward the large psilocybin mushrooms in the Entry; the joyful youth cutting down mushrooms with a long knife on the towers of Jerusalem over the scene of the Last Supper; the otherworldly expressions of Jesus and his disciple leaning on the table; and the orderly row of mushrooms cleverly hidden in the hems of the disciples.

We reflected on our interpretation of what these frescoes were saying: that the angel was purifying Isaiah's lips with a holy mushroom, which inspired his prophetic visions and which was also the key to Christ's elevated state of consciousness; that the inscription "The Prophet Goes Forth" refers to the flight of Isaiah's soul after ingesting entheogens; that the Last Supper and the First Eucharist that Jesus was sharing with his disciples was actually a meal of sacred mushrooms, as indicated by the long knives on the table and by the expression on Jesus' face.

If our theory of the Psychedelic Gospels was right, it would lead to the far-reaching conclusion that early and medieval Christians experienced divinity and immortality by means of sacred plants.

"LIVE THE QUESTIONS NOW"

Julie and I stood silently in the fading light, reluctant to let go of this moment of illumination, moved by feelings of awe and anxiety: awe at what we had discovered, anxiety over the implications. I thought back on discovering a mushroom embedded in the forehead of the Green Man of Rosslyn Chapel, in Scotland. But this find in Saint Martin's Church in France was more significant. It was a revelation. This was evidence that spoke for itself.

It never ceases to amaze me how the answer to one question invariably opens the door to a multiplicity of other questions. Back in Scotland, the primary question was: Would we find evidence of entheogens in Christian art? Now that we'd found extraordinary evidence, the new questions were: What did these images mean? For [R. Gordon] Wasson's theories, for art history, and ethnomycology? For the origins and history of Christianity?

Kupfer suggests that, for medieval audiences, looking at these religious frescoes "engaged the entire person" at all levels—intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. In the broadest sense, "Images gathered in with the eyes, visually ingested, so to speak, demanded to be spiritually consumed and digested. Vision meant incorporation and eventual self-transformation." But when it comes to interpreting the frescoes at Saint Martin and elsewhere, the art historians are

the ones who "remain blind"—who, due to their lack of knowledge of ethnomycology, mistake psychoactive mushrooms for trees and branches, and as a result sometimes err in their interpretation of Romanesque religious paintings.

The iconic images at Saint Martin suggest that the initiates of medieval audiences were not simply transformed metaphorically, but were transformed literally through entheogens that were consumed physically.

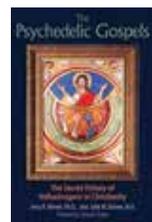
I recalled the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke: "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love *the questions themselves*, like locked rooms, like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue ... *Live the questions now*. Perhaps then you will gradually, without noticing it, live your way into the answer, one distant day in the future."

Today, all we could do was embrace the questions.

"Where does this leave us?" Julie asked. "Without more evidence, why would anyone accept our interpretation of the frescoes at Saint Martin as anything more than that, as an informed interpretation, as a plausible speculation?"

"Based on what we've seen today," I replied, "we have to keep searching in order to build a compelling case that will convince the skeptics. Because no matter what they believe, they cannot ignore these paintings of sacred plants in Christian art."

Reflecting on our recent visits to Plaincourault and Saint-Savin and now to Saint Martin, we wondered if these mushroom icons could simply be the eccentric creations of a heretical religious cult living deep in the forests of central France, far from the control of church and king. With this in mind, we decided to travel north to the grand cathedrals of Canterbury in England and Chartres in France to see what we would find in the high places of medieval Christendom. ■



This is an excerpt from The Psychedelic Gospels: The Secret History of Hallucinogens in Christianity, by Jerry B. Brown and Julie M. Brown (Park Street Press, September 2016).

For more information and to buy this book, please visit psychedelicgospels.com.