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Citation

Breau, Jeffrey. "What Makes Psychedelic Experiences Sacred?". Research Reflections Series. Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2026. © License: CC BY NC.

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What Makes Psychedelic Experiences Sacred?

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Edited by Aaron Michael Ullrey.

Published in October 2025

The following Research Reflection is part of an ongoing series spotlighting the academic study of religions.

In my research on novel psychedelic spiritual communities (NPSCs) in North America, my interlocutors regularly describe their psychedelic experiences as sacred—and offer diverse explanations for what makes it so. NPSCs are heterogenous new religious movements; they have distinct theologies, a range of ritual practices, and varied approaches to community. Despite these differences, conversations about the sacredness of psychedelics happen frequently in the NPSCs I study. In online worship services, weekend retreats, informal dinners, dance parties, in the hours before a ceremony, and in the light of dawn after, it is common to hear people exploring, even debating, what makes their psychedelic experiences sacred. Rather than looking at specific answers people provide, I want to consider what it means that these conversations are so ubiquitous and what this reveals about how the sacred is understood and enacted in these communities.

David is a 44-year-old carpenter with a full, dirty-blond beard and a gentle demeanor. He is a longstanding member of the Church of Direct Experience (CODE), an NPSC founded in 2018 in Virginia. CODE's psychedelic sacraments are psilocybin mushrooms, "Rosa Divina" (a smoked, plant blend that contains DMT), and *yagé*. *Yagé* is an ayahuasca-like brew originating from Colombia, and I met David during a weekend of *yagé* ceremonies. Although CODE's mushroom and Rosa Divina ceremonies are not conducted in accordance with an Indigenous tradition, these *yagé* ceremonies were led by a Colombian *taita*, or healer, which CODE considers essential for its proper and respectful use.

Like many of my interlocutors, David grew up Christian, but he wasn't particularly religious. He was a "doubting skeptic." David had many psychedelic experiences in his youth that he did not view as particularly sacred. Reflecting on these earlier experiences, David told me that he would occasionally "touch those [mystical] experiences," but he was able to "explain them away or compartmentalize them, because we have to go on with our life."

David's understanding of spirituality, psychedelics, and the psychedelic experience changed as he became more connected with CODE. He no longer considers himself an atheist or agnostic, which he attributes to his psychedelic experiences with CODE. He does not like to label his spirituality, but he describes it as awareness of and relationship to "something bigger." He now understands psychedelic ceremonies to be a "communion with the plant or fungi" and a "sacred moment."

This change did not happen immediately. “These experiences being big . . . they take time to unfold—to be comfortable with, to explain, to be validated too,” he told me. He points to community as an essential catalyst for this transformation: “The more stories I heard, it validates what's taking place and what's taking place is this bigger thing.”

NPSCs that I observe encourage this inquiry, curiosity, and storytelling. Conversations about the nature of psychedelics and their sacrality bind members together and become a kind of hermeneutic practice. The psychedelic experience serves as a text that is discussed, interpreted, challenged, and reinterpreted. These conversations are almost never about advancing a single interpretation of the experience. Instead, they are a dynamic exploration of many possible interpretations.

At first, David approached such conversations with reservations: “I'm the first to admit when I first came to the community, I heard a lot of people's stories. I don't wanna say I disbelieved them, but I was a lot more skeptical. And I'm like . . . these people are kind of crazy.” By “crazy,” David clarified that he does not mean psychotic, but that their stories seemed too weird or “far out” to be real. However, David's time with CODE has shifted his perspective. He now holds beliefs that he knows others may view as weird or far out: “At first, when I would talk about the medicine, I probably sounded half crazy. I [still] might sound half crazy to somebody that doesn't understand.”

David has become someone who understands. Stories he originally viewed as “crazy” feel not only real but are confirmation of spiritual truths. “You can't deny the obvious...there are bigger things out there that we're connected to, that we're part of.” David learned to “understand” by discussing and interpreting psychedelic experiences with the CODE community. And I believe this is key to understanding what makes these experiences sacred in NPSCs.

In the concluding chapter of *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press, 2013), author-sociologist Nancy Ammerman writes that “‘the sacred’ may be carried in individual minds, but it becomes real in conversations.” NPSCs are communities where people ask and re-ask “what makes a psychedelic experience sacred.” Through these conversations, the sacred becomes real. It can become real in different ways for different people, because what makes psychedelic experiences sacred in these communities is not about answering the question but asking it.

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Bio: Jeffrey Breau (Program Lead, Psychedelics and Spirituality, CSWR, 2024-26) is a social science researcher focusing on contemporary psychedelic churches and psychedelic chaplaincy. Jeffrey is currently conducting a multiyear ethnography of novel psychedelic churches in the United States.

The study explores these communities' ritual practices, theologies, social structures, and approaches to safety. Jeffrey also researches psychedelic chaplaincy. In that capacity he is a member of the ketamine chaplaincy advisory group at Brigham and Women's Faulkner Hospital, where he formerly completed an internship providing ketamine integration chaplaincy. Jeffrey is also a Project Affiliated Researcher of PULSE (Psychedelic Use, Law, and Spiritual Experience) at the Petrie-Flom Center for Health Law Policy, Biotechnology, and Bioethics at Harvard Law School. He received his MDiv. from Harvard Divinity School in 2024.

Jeffrey co-founded the annual Psychedelic Intersections conference and organizes, among other programs, two workshop series at CSWR: Psychedelics and Ethics; and Psychedelics and Future of Religion. He has published on intention-setting rituals in new psychedelic communities and on the Hindu origins of the Mystical Experience Questionnaire. He is now working on a monograph, tentatively titled *Altering the Sacred*, about emerging psychedelic traditions.