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## Do mushrooms have mystic role?

Study of ingredient in plant found it induced spiritual experiences

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A recent Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine study suggests "sacred mushrooms" can provide a religious experience that makes one see the world from a different, more positive perspective.

The study tested psilocybin, the active agent in so-called "sacred mushrooms," to determine whether it could induce "mystical experiences" in a group of 36 adults who come from religious backgrounds.

The answer, the study says, is an emphatic yes.

Except for scientific research, however, possession of the substance is illegal in every state.

More than 60 percent of the study subjects said psilocybin produced a "full mystical experience," and one-third said they enjoyed "the single most spiritually significant experience of their lifetimes."

Some likened the occasion to the birth of their first child.

According to scientists who did the study, the results were lasting. Two months after taking psilocybin, 79 percent of the subjects reported a moderate or greatly increased sense of well-being or life satisfaction.

"Many of the volunteers in our study reported, in one way or another, a direct, personal experience of the 'Beyond,' " said study leader Roland Griffiths, a professor with Hopkins' departments of neuroscience and psychiatry.

The psilocybin did no apparent harm to the Hopkins test subjects and produced mild side effects, according to researchers. Hopkins scientists stressed the importance of proper supervision when taking psilocybin. Subjects were not aware what substance they took, but were warned as to the possible negative effects of hallucinogens.

National Institute on Drug Abuse director Dr. Nora Volkow cautioned, "Although there is no evidence that psilocybin is addictive, its adverse effects are well known."

"Psilocybin can trigger psychosis in susceptible individuals and cause other deleterious psychological effects, such as paranoia and extreme anxiety," Volkow said in a written statement.

The Hopkins scientists were quick to dismiss the notion of psilocybin as "God in a pill," and suggested that organized religion should hardly feel threatened.

"Far from being threatened, the only thing we can imagine being of greater interest to religions is whether people live more wholesome, compassionate ... lives in consequence of such experiences," Griffiths said.

Certain types of mushrooms have historically played a role in religious ceremony in ancient societies across the world.

Some contemporary clergy suggest that the use of mind-altering substances to enhance religious experiences shouldn't necessarily be dismissed.

"Mystery is at the core of the religious experience for the individual," said retired United Church of Christ pastor Brad Bunnin, a board member on the Council on Spiritual Practices.

"There are a lot of different pathways to reaching towards God," he said. "Different Christians have used a variety of means throughout history: flagellation, fasting, unceasing prayer ... I'm not saying people should all go out and find mushrooms, but there are different ways to the ... religious experience."

"If a person approaches the use of mushrooms leading to the sense of connection with God, it ought to be supported. It's not a shortcut," Burris said.

