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The entheogenic origins of Mormonism: A working hypothesis*

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Historical documents relating to early Mormonism suggest that Joseph Smith (1805–1844) employed entheogen-infused sacraments to fulfill his promise that every Mormon convert would experience visions of God and spiritual ecstasies. Early Mormon scriptures and Smith’s teachings contain descriptions consistent with using entheogenic material. Compiled descriptions of Joseph Smith’s earliest visions and early Mormon convert visions reveal the internal symptomology and outward bodily manifestations consistent with using an anticholinergic entheogen. Due to embarrassing symptomology associated with these manifestations, Smith sought for psychoactives with fewer associated outward manifestations. The visionary period of early Mormonism fueled by entheogens played a significant role in the spectacular rise of this American-born religion. The death of Joseph Smith marked the end of visionary Mormonism and the failure or refusal of his successor to utilize entheogens as a part of religious worship. The implications of an entheogenic origin of Mormonism may contribute to the broader discussion of the major world religions with evidence of entheogen use at their foundation and illustrate the value of entheogens in religious experience.

Keywords: Joseph Smith, Mormonism, entheogen, psychedelic, spirituality

INTRODUCTION

The number and quality of spiritual experiences reported by participants in early Mormonism (Welch & Carlson, 2005) far exceeded the daily background frequency reported in today’s general population (Underwood, 2006, 2011). Multiple supernatural and naturalistic explanations have been suggested to account for the sheer number of early Mormon visions and ecstasies, including rational supernaturalism (Erying, 1989; Park, 2008; Widtsoe, 1915), out-of-body experiences (Bushman, 2006; Fillerup, 1996), animal magnetism or Mesmerism (Bunker & Bitton, 1975), prophetic charisma (Foster, 2005), dissociation secondary to childhood trauma (Morain, 1998), enthusiasm associated with the Second Great Awakening (Staker, 2009, pp. 19–26; Taves, 1999), apparent materialization of the sacred during trance (Taves, 2014), pious fraud (Vogel, 2004, p. vii), and automatic writing (Dunn, 2002). However, no single explanation has to date successfully accounted for the number and quality of visions in early Mormonism. Nor can these modalities explain the “on-demand” visions that were neither spontaneous nor the result of prolonged austerities. To date, Joseph Smith’s and early Mormon converts’ visionary experience are neither easily defined nor understood (Waterman, 1999).

Against this background, we present compelling evidence suggesting that many early Mormon visionary experiences were facilitated by entheogenic substances that resulted in mood elevation and heightened spiritual awareness among

early Mormon converts. In this entheogenic working hypothesis of early Mormonism, we consider the supernatural as natural (Taves, 2014; Winkelman & Baker, 2015) and entheogens as medical therapy (Rucker, Jelen, Flynn, Frowde, & Young, 2016; Winkelman, 2001; Winkelman & Sessa, 2019). Because the two largest factions of Mormonism have opened their libraries to everyone (Spencer, 2009) and “primary source materials are so abundant and available, far more so than for more ancient religions” (Mason, 2015, p. 22), Mormonism may provide insight into the role entheogens played in the early success of traditional religions (see Richards, 2016; Winkelman, 2010, 2013).

Visionary experience as veridical

Converts who reported angelic visitations, ecstasies, and visions of God in 19th-century Mormonism regarded their experiences as veridical and not as imaginary constructs of the mind. The 19th-century publication, *The Essential Guide to Datura* (“Essential,” n.d.), describes the subjective visionary experience of datura intoxication as “widely perceived to be real.” In reviewing firsthand reports of early Mormon visionary experience, we find overlaps of these

*The authors have made minor spelling and grammatical corrections to some quotations to clarify writing errors.

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