

PSYCHEDELIC SCIENCE 2017

APRIL 19-24, 2017 • OAKLAND MARRIOTT CITY CENTER • CALIFORNIA

Spirituality & psychoactive substances: A perspective from the 21st century

Greeting:

Good afternoon to everyone, I'm the Reverend Martin Diaz of the [Evangelical Protestant Church of El Salvador](#). Our Church is a member of IDPC and VNGOC, and I am also part of the Cops and Clergy program run by the Law Enforcement Action Partnership.

We are a **Jesuanism** community that works for the essential rights of all. We seek to contribute to the peace process, and we advocate for the end of the war drugs whose violence has spilled so much blood, claimed so many young lives, and caused such serious human rights violations worldwide.

Our specialized team offers advice to organizations, individuals and private institutions and churches on drug policies, alternatives to prohibition and overcoming the war on drugs.

First I will share some elements of ethnobotany and how human beings and drugs have had an intimate and important relationship throughout history.

Then I will tell you about the outlawing of sacred plants, how Pope Innocent VIII ("Pope Innocent The Eighth") was the first to ban Cannabis and how the birth of Hippocratic medicine began increasing the distance between plants and humans. The nascent science of medicine stated that consuming plants instead of pills or medicines from the pharmacy or doctor was a "sanitary fallacy."

Today we see examples such as ayahuasca and Peyote, sacred plants that have passed from the jungle and the desert to the global village, and which allow a form of ancestral spirituality in a hyperconnected world.

Finally, I will outline a couple of possible systems that would allow us to responsibly regulate controlled substances.

It is a fascinating subject, I will tell you what I can in these 15 minutes and I hope to contribute in this "global meeting" that is emerging around, and together with, power plants.

THE ETHNOBOTANY

As many of you already know, ethnobotany studies the relationships between human groups and their plant environment, including what uses are given to the plants, and why different plants are used in different cultural spaces and at different times.

The spiritual use of "sacred plants or power plants" was not invented recently; for millennia, humans have used psychoactive substances in a spiritual / ritual / therapeutic framework. (When I say "Sacred plants" in general I also include fungi and truffles.)

Even today we find religious evidence in the different religious praxis of this close link between spirituality and psychoactive substances that were used in order to access a state of consciousness sensitive to the Transcendent.

This is repeated in almost all religions and throughout human history. There are testimonies in various literary sources, both religious and medicinal. On this topic, I recommend reading the "General History of Drugs" by the Spanish philosopher Antonio Escohotado.

Priests and religious figures of virtually all religions and cultures and at all times have used natural or synthetic substances for spiritual exercises and / or healing rituals. In many cases the substances accompany initiation rituals.

I give an example of the context from which I come: in Christianity, the first communion or confirmation is accompanied by the taking of bread and wine. It is a rite of initiation and a rite of transition from childhood to adulthood. In some contexts it is the moment from which the individual can access intoxicating drinks, for example.

How important is the presence of wine (one of the psychoactive substances present in these rites, along with incense and others)? It symbolizes the blood of Jesus Christ himself, the Liberator. And this rite of ingesting the psycho-activating substance that recalls Jesus, according to his own testimony of the Gospels, is repeated every time the Holy Supper / Eucharist is shared. Let us remember that Jesus himself asks this to be done in his memory.

Other communities with very different cosmovisions use psychoactive substances as well. Among the best known are: the Amanita muscaria. Iboga, a plant used by people from Central Africa. Species of Datura used by the early peoples of the Mediterranean. Cannabis originating in the Near East. Opium has been used since time immemorial in India and China. In the Americas there is a large group of plants recognized as Sacred Plants: Coca, peyote, San Pedro, yage/ayahuasca, Don Diego, varieties of Datura, virola, tobacco, yopo, and psilocybin among many other Plant species and fungus. Each species, each variety, is adapted to specific climatic and geographical conditions and different cultures. These plants have been used for thousands of years as a sacred and medicinal resource, as ceremonial psychoactive elements used by ancestral peoples in community relations and to understand the cosmic dynamics of life and the planet.

These sacred plants not only enrich social solidarity but facilitate ritual communication with spirits and divinities. The ritual use of these plants allows the integration of the individual with his family, his community, his culture and his environment. In many cases they were used to recover health, to receive orientation before some important decision, and practically in all rites of initiation. Further, psychoactive substances appear in almost every culture. In some traditions the use is reserved for the religious leaders, in others it is shared with the whole community, always on a special occasion and while giving a conducive use to the plant.

In all the ancient rites of initiation and religious systems, there is a sacred plant that has a special symbolism and is venerated by the devotees as a Sacred Emblem. Some examples: in the Dionysius mysteries Ivy was used; In those of Ceres, Myrtle; In those of Osiris, the Erica; In those of Adonis, lettuce; In those of Jesus Christ, the Vine. In several, cannabis was used, and still used, as in Rastafarianism of the Judeo-Christian tradition or in Hindu purification rituals, to name a few.

A fundamental detail to take into account is that prior to the initiation rituals, the candidate receives an intellectual and emotional preparation in which he learns respect for the substance and its symbolic value, which should be of the greatest interest to the neophyte ; Not only because of the peculiar significance, but because it opens a vast and beautiful field of research: the one that embraces the symbolism of sacred plants.

There isn't enough time to go deeper in depth about specific cases, but the truth is that: In our planet each culture, each ethnic group or social group within its process of evolution and historical development, has identified, selected and used different medicinal and sacred plants that produce a passing state of euphoria and comfort, a feeling of increased subjective well-being.

Let us go on to other key moments for our subject:

By the middle of the eighteenth century the knowledge of the practical nature of antidotes, wound treatments and diseases from the magico-religious world of each cultural area began to be rejected by empirical medicine as a "sanitary fallacy." Indeed, even the most empirical medicine is always tied to ancient teachings, as described by Escotado.

During the fourth century BC. -in full expansion of Greek rationalism- Plato makes Socrates say that the pharmakon will return health "if its use is pronounced timely". Hence, the evolutionary order in the history of medicine tends to be reversed, assuming that rituals of purification and other cathartic elements came first, and that afterwards therapeutically secularized notions appeared.

Until the emergence of Hippocratic (allopathic) medicine, it can be said that curative resources were quite similar at different times and places (within what is available for each botanical area), and that the true differences correspond to the mythic-ritual frames of each cultural group.

We recognize that psychoactive substances and religion have been linked from the beginning of humanity. We must accept the theological importance of the same and the need for theories about their relationship and current spiritual life.

In addition, there is a need to reconceptualize obsolete and exclusionary terms to initiate a long and urgent path towards concrete public policies that use methodologies such as harm reduction and risk management; Urging the authorities from civil society to change the approach to people who use drugs (PWUD) from a criminal, repressive and coercive perspective to a preventive Socio-health approach that respects individual rights and freedoms and the essential rights of individuals .

We have all participated more than once, in a liturgical or social rite, ceremony or celebration that has included at least one plant (fruit or derivative), as a sacred bond with nature / creation and in turn with The divine, the transcendent.

It is elementary and necessary to teach and practice respect for nature and the beings with whom we share this ecological niche that is the earth. And it is also fundamental to speak out against the conventions that seek to eliminate from the face of the earth plant species that existed millions of years ago.

Today, thanks to the current ban, many people suffer serious violations of their essential rights due to a lack of knowledge about the use of substances that modify the state of consciousness.

2. SAGRED, ILLEGAL PLANTS.

There are data and extensive literature on the prohibitions of different substances around the planet: For example, coffee and yerba mate were banned for religious reasons.

Cannabis was first prohibited and demonized by Pope Innocent VIII, who declared the plant's consumption "sacrilege" in 1484. (Recall that "sacrilege" is for the Roman Catholic Church the only sin that has no forgiveness, putting cannabis consumption on the same level as insult and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit).

The treatises of the sixteenth century collected the formulas or recipes of doctors and witches who used their knowledge in herbal medicine to heal the sick. Cannabis was a substance used by these wise women.

Scribal Monks in medieval monasteries wrote on hemp paper in the light of lamps that worked with oil of this plant and Gutenberg printed the first bible on hemp paper. There are even historical witnesses who have tested the use of hemp for 3,000 years. There are archaeological remains where seeds were found among the belongings of mummies, fabrics and strings of hemp fibers, ancient artistic relieves where the harvest of this plant is observed, considered useful as a raw material for textiles, medicines and ritual use.

Now we can glimpse a little better the world of the Sacred Plants. We speak of plant and fungus species that have been used by humans for thousands of years, sometimes as medicines, other times to prepare utensils or for meditative, religious and spiritual purposes; In other words, to connect with the Transcendent.

These plants are considered sacred, and it is for this reason that it is more appropriate to adopt this definition, over other terms such as "psychoactive, psychotropic, psychedelic or entheogenic plants", which are based on Western categories to make them toxic, damned, forbidden, or even diabolical. It is also necessary to revise and even discard the denomination of hallucinogenic plants, used professionally in means of communication, by the connotation of pathological state (illness or madness) that carries this word, and that at the same time, adventurously associates these plants with the idea of "Hazardous substances". While there are multiple elements that clearly distinguish sacred plants from substances that generate physical and psychological dependence, this intentionally has not been sufficiently clarified.

To dig deeper, I suggest reading "Plants of the Gods" by the distinguished Swiss chemist who died in 2008, Dr. Albert Hofmann.

To give a vision from Latin America and the twentieth century, mention should be made of the liberation theologian and martyr Jesuit Martín Baró, who acknowledged in a 1972 text that drug use was very frequent among the pre-Columbian tribes, regulated by customs and traditions. Martín Baró says that it is society that causes abusive and problematic consumption of substances such as alcohol and that even the use of cannabis would be less harmful than that of alcoholic beverages.

3. The paradigm shift. We lost the link with the plants.

By the middle of the eighteenth century the knowledge of the practical uses of nature, coming from the magico-religious world of each cultural area, began to be condemned by academic and empirical medicine as a "sanitary fallacy". "Archaic" therapists were ignored, though they had objectively effective methods, because their foundation was not rational for the modern sciences. Although prohibitionist policies have led to widespread ignorance of the relationship between spirituality and psychoactive substances in human history, today globalization and the information age have allowed the emergence of new practices of spirituality, a fascinating phenomenon that has mutated from the original communities and peoples until arriving into oral form and practice this knowledge to the great cities.

However, disinformation, fundamentalism and the consequences of the Westernization of knowledge remain the great challenges to overcome. This is a global problem generated by the "War on Drugs," but also by Western science and other disciplines.

Despite the obstacles, different disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, theology, medicine, ethnobotany, neuroscience, biology and chemistry have been studying, seriously and systematically, the importance of these plants. In recent years, in addition to scientific interest, a latent revaluation of the ancestral wisdom of the original peoples has emerged.

In the same way, a search has begun for a true dialogue of knowledge and forms that complement this knowledge with those of the dominant cultures.

Only in the twentieth century were some of these Sacred Plants prohibited through global policies, due to interests of the hegemonic powers of the corporatocracy of the time. These prohibitionist measures were driven by the US, which continues to invest millions of dollars in them, even as it is internally undergoing a process of local drug policy reform, and although the inefficacy of prohibitionism to fight drug trafficking has already become clear. Prohibitionism has generated wide and diverse consequences: from the thousands of deaths annually caused by the nefarious "war on drugs", to breaking with the freedom and wisdom of ancient traditions, which has caused a deterioration to the ethnosphere.

4. But where do we find ourselves and where can we go?

Research and advocacy by the scientific community and civil society has made significant progress in light of the new policy statement on drug control in 2019. Progress has included research on the therapeutic potentials of substances such as LSD, MDMA, Psilocybin, ayahuasca and cannabis to name a few.

Science and theology are increasingly complemented by neuroscience and international law. The question is no longer whether the substances currently under scrutiny will be regulated, but when? And what will be the model / formats / strategies?

The political response that breaks this circle of death created by prohibition requires the opening of political spaces where each country generates and manages knowledge by promoting an inclusive local, regional and international debate. The regions that currently suffer the greatest damage of the "War on Drugs" in the Northern Triangle of Central America and Southeast Asia are undergoing deep political crisis. This offers invaluable opportunities to address the drug policy debate and its connection to other crimes such as corruption, money laundering, financing of terrorism, etc.

I consider the relationship between international entities and civil society essential, since the latter suffers the consequences of the current model of "international drug control". From civil society, we demand advocacy for regulation of markets and the implementation of the public policies of harm reduction and risk management, as well as strengthening and democratizing spaces such as the United Nations Civil Society Working Group (CSTF). Faith-based organizations must actively engage in the defense of Sacred Plants at all levels, as they are part of the creation, intangible heritage of humanity and part of the ethnosphere that we must preserve in order to enrich postmodernity in our hyperconnected age.

This rhetoric must be reflected in concrete changes in drug policies, laws and practices. In addition, funding for drug prevention, education and research needs to be made available in order to generate spaces to analyze new alternatives to prohibitionism and to promote scientific research on the therapeutic properties of psychoactive substances.

Currently the use of Cannabis, Ayahuasca, cactuses and psilocybin has been on the rise in the world's cities. In the future we can expect a great role for sacred plants, including medically useful substances such as LSD and MDMA in mental health systems, which would also contribute to the enrichment of intercultural medicine, multidisciplinary therapies and the use of deep learning and Artificial intelligence in ethnobotanical research.

Plants and fungi are a source of food, medicine and a source of knowledge when we use them consciously and responsibly. The important thing is the link we create with the environment, which includes people, animals, plants, fungi, etc. If we lack connection, education, knowledge, information about them we can not be responsible. This is related to the stewardship of creation. In the Old Testament we are called and called to respect and care for all creation, not to destroy it and eradicate species, as we have been doing due to ignorance and greed.

Like all things, plants are neither good nor bad, it always depends on how people associate with them, whether we know and respect them, and how we consume them. Finally, it is urgent to analyze the cultural, historical and socio-economic factors that have led us to this chaotic situation, to an undeclared "Social War" that binds souls to pain and despair. It reduces and encloses sacred plants of the wise creation of God and potentially dangerous chemical substances in the same calling to him "hard drugs". This war criminalizes the people who use them and violates the essential rights guaranteed in international human rights agreements ratified by most of the American States. It imposes a single reading possible, from a narrow perspective, selfish and based on the interests of a few. I urge a change of perspective, for us to open our minds to a future without fundamentalism and fanaticism.

The 21st century needs us awake and aware of our unity, the unique possibility of rediscovering ancestral knowledge with science, philosophy and new forms of spirituality.

Blessings.

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