

The High Priest of LSD

Karen Knorp

1968

There is virtually no aspect of life in America today that is not concerned in one way or another with the drug scene. Hippies and politicians, students, parents, teachers, police and revolutionaries all contribute their harsh or thoughtful or inconsistent opinions. Their voices range from the educated, flat and clinical sermons of the AMA, to the educated, maniacal sermons of Timothy Leary.

“We calculated that the critical figure for blowing the mind of the American society would be four million LSD users, and this would happen by 1969. We were wrong in our estimates. We were too conservative, By 1966 Life magazine announced that a million Americans were using LSD. In the spring of 1966, a million Americans were using LSD. In the spring of 1966, a million doses a month were being distributed by a messianic underground in California alone. By 1967 four million Americans had taken the trip.”

Timothy Leary's new book, *High Priest*, is the first of a projected “four-volume biblical account” of his experiences with hallucinogenic drugs. This first volume is concerned with the early years, his use of psilocybin and the Magic Mushrooms of Mexico, and his later introduction at Harvard to the more powerful LSD.

At what point in time did Tim Leary emerge as High Priest, complete with ceremony, mystery, persecution and mystery? How did he come to be the most recognized spokesman of that cult of serious dopesters devoted to the consciousness-expanding experience? There are other spokesmen, perhaps better qualified. There are others, more objective, more respectable, more conventionally religious.

“Then there was Walter Pahnke—a young country bumpkin, fresh-faced, gee-whiz enthusiast. He had a ministerial degree (Midwest Lutheran, I believe) and medical license and was an advanced graduate student in the Ph.D. program at Harvard Divinity School. Walter wanted to do a thesis dissertation research on the psychedelic experience. Yes Sir. A medically supervised, double-blind pre- and post-tested, controlled, scientifically up-to-date kosher experiment on the production of the objectively-defined, bona fide mystical experience as described by Christian visionaries and to be brought about by our ministrations.”

So it is Walter Pahnke's experiment that provides the only shred of “objective and scientific proof” that Leary deigns to offer in support of his claims. His methods were scientifically sound and his results clear. Twenty divinity students were given drugs in a religious setting. Ten were given psilocybin, ten, placebos containing nicotinic acid. All but one who received the hallucinogenic drug reported a profound religious experience, whereas only one of the control group reported such an experience.

Leary's own “experiments” at Harvard consisted mainly of turning on in his own living room with a lot of famous people and a lot of graduate students. He writes, “after the sessions some of his (Pahnke's) students roared over to Harvard to dedicate their lives to the psychedelic cause, but we had no way of using these unleashed spiritual energies—no turn-on, tune-in-drop-out program. We had our hands full with converted Harvard graduate students. I wonder what ever happened to those eager youngsters.”

At one time Leary turned on with a lot of prisoners at Massachusetts Correctional institution, Concord. The researchers claim to have brought down the recidivism (return to prison) rate substantially by administering LSD

to inmates. But the results were disputed because of incredibly sloppy procedures. And anyway, the scientists were all high all the time.

On the other hand, when does a religion need to be justified in logical terms, anyhow? Religion is indeed un-touchable on that ground. The basis of the psychedelic drug movement is an act of faith. Leary is not a scientist, but a prophet, a holy man. LSD is a sacrament. Our society guarantees freedom of religion.

It's clever. And it's more than that. Leary speaks with authority and with sincerity. The sense of personal conviction, of real honesty and openness is there. One cannot read this book without recognizing that.

Then there's a lot of name-dropping. The book includes testimonials from Allen Ginsberg and Cary Grant. Anyone who has a famous name and anything to say about drugs (including a lot of people who were dead long before LSD was invented) gets a paragraph or two.

Leary's story is copiously annotated with quotations from *I Ching*, the *Magus*, the Bible, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, lines of the work of Hesse, the Beatles, letters from Aldous Huxley, William Burroughs, etc., etc., etc. The margin of every page is filled with such quotations. The effect is rather that of trying to read several books at one time—a little confusing, but profoundly more effective in total impact. The book works like a grotesque and complicated collage.

"The seal of the League is a mandala—the endless circle circumscribing a four-leaf lotus blossom made by the double infinity sign. This interweaving of the infinite universe of male with infinite universe of female forms the flower symbol of seed-life—centered in the void-eye of God."

Leary borrows a lot of beautiful trappings from the religions of the East, from existentialist thinkers, and from Christianity. The method, when it works, produces beautiful synthesis of the best of all its parts. When it does not work, the seams of Leary's philosophy show through in glaring detail, and the entire book is marred; its author appears as a clever charlatan.

Whether or not you are inclined to agree with Leary, this book should be read. The methods of the high priest are not conventional, but when one is advocating the overthrow of conventionality perhaps it must be so. Perhaps, in the final analysis, only those who have committed themselves, those who have taken the trip have any right to voice an opinion.

But, then again, those who look in with respect, who seek answers to the same questions have a right to their disappointment when no answers are finally given.

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Fifth Estate #65, October 31-November 13, 1968

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