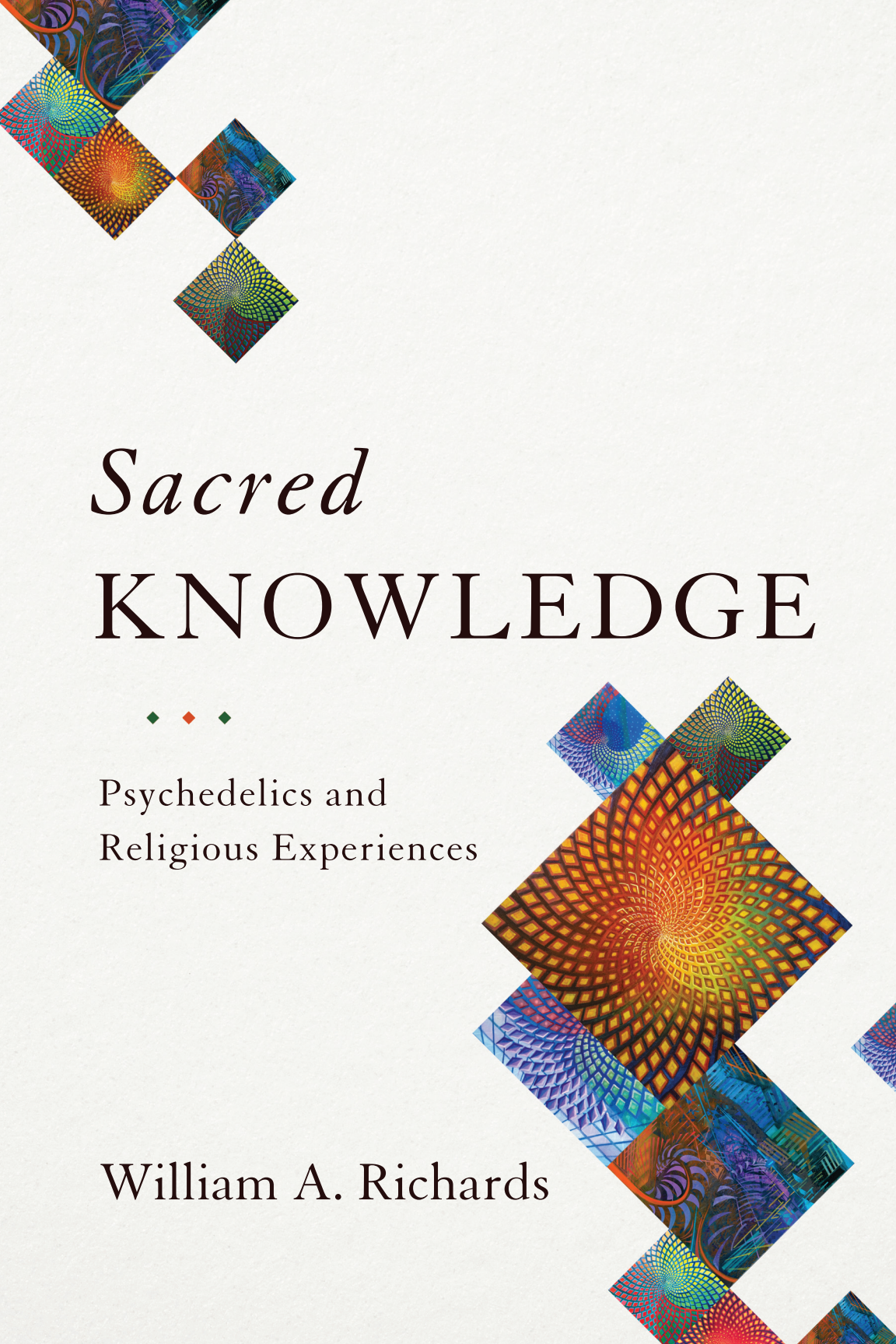


Sacred KNOWLEDGE

Psychedelics and Religious Experiences

William A. Richards

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PSYCHEDELICS AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

William A. Richards

Foreword by G. William Barnard



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To my sons, Daniel and Brian

One must say that revelatory experiences are universally human. Religions are based on something that is given to man wherever he lives, namely, revelation, a particular kind of experience which always implies saving powers. You can never separate revelation and salvation. God has not left Himself unwitnessed.

–Paul Tillich (1886–1965), *The Future of Religions*

Man is always more than he knows about himself.

–Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*

Religiously conceived, the human opportunity is to transform flashes of illumination into abiding light.

–Huston Smith (b. 1919), *Cleansing the Doors of Perception*

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FOREWORD

G. WILLIAM BARNARD

The book that you are about to read is a treasure.

But before I describe what awaits you within this text, I want to say a few words about the book's author, Bill Richards, a crucially important figure in the tradition of psychedelic researchers and therapists.

I vividly remember the first time that I had the good fortune to meet Dr. Richards, when he came to visit me in Dallas a few years ago on his way to south Texas. When I went to pick him up at the DFW airport, I knew the bare basics about his background, but I didn't know what he looked like. So, as I was scanning the people who were streaming into the baggage claim area to pick up their luggage, I wondered how I would ever recognize him.

I shouldn't have worried. It was immediately clear to me: "that's him," the tall man with a shock of white hair and glasses who was standing there with a huge elfin grin on his face and (almost literal) twinkles in his eyes, the man who clearly was enjoying every moment of that crowded, noisy baggage claim area.

I immediately knew that we were going to hit it off.

I wasn't mistaken.

Dr. Richards is that rare example of a scientifically rigorous, tremendously learned intellectual who, nonetheless, is genuinely lit up

from within. He is someone who, instead of just talking about sacred knowledge, psychedelics, and religious experiences, has clearly taken his own advice and has somehow managed to become, if I may be so bold, a shining example of a living mystic, a walking, talking, genuine, real-deal sage–all the while remaining extremely down-to-earth, witty, and warm.

As you begin to read *Sacred Knowledge*, I am sure that it will quickly become clear that the author is someone who has mulled over a whole host of complex and profound issues for quite a long time, and has something to say that he believes is deeply worthwhile. This book is not only extremely timely and relevant; it also addresses, with seemingly effortless ease, many of the subtler metaphysical implications of psychedelics–that is, it doesn't just deal with the enormous therapeutic potential of these substances, but also their tremendous spiritual potential as well. These aren't topics that are easy to address, but with his lucid prose, his gentle, self-effacing humor, and his distinctive voice (genial yet learned, heartfelt yet straightforward), Dr. Richards makes articulating such difficult topics look easy.

As an elder of the psychedelic movement, Dr. Richards offers his readers something precious: his own decades-long, deeply hands-on experience with psychedelic research. He was there during the early 1960s, a time in which he, along with numerous friends and colleagues, first began (with enormous hope and optimism) to research the potential psychological and spiritual benefits of psychedelics. (Dr. Richards was a close friend with Walter Pahnke, the lead researcher for the famous "Good Friday Experiment" that took place on April 20, 1962, in Boston University's Marsh Chapel, when twenty students from the Andover-Newton Theological School took part in a double-blind study that was designed to ascertain whether psilocybin could reliably induce mystical experiences.) Dr. Richards was also there in 1977, when (as he puts it) he had the "dubious distinction" of acting as the last researcher and clinician to administer psilocybin to a patient at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center–the only institution at that time in the United States that was legally allowed to conduct research on psychedelic substances. Then, in 1999, when the tide increasingly began to shift toward a more sane and nuanced response to psychedelic substances, Dr. Richards was at the forefront of the reinitiation of responsible,

careful research on psychedelics. This first began with Rich Strassman's groundbreaking research on DMT at the University of New Mexico from 1990–1995; continued, with different foci and research protocols, at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine; and eventually expanded to other centers of study in North America and Europe, maintaining its vitality to this day.

Throughout this book, Dr. Richards draws upon this enormous wealth of experience as he (rather adroitly) switches between, on the one hand, skillfully discussing the high points of decades of scientific research on psychedelics and, on the other hand, discussing with subtlety and care a wide range of profound religious and metaphysical topics. I will admit that, for myself at least, it is refreshing to see, in our current intellectual climate, which often values disengagement, skepticism, and irony, how Dr. Richards is willing to speak passionately and clearly from his heart about subjects that many (if not most) academics shy away from, such as healing, finding meaning, and spiritual awakening.

These crucially significant topics are addressed from three distinct perspectives. First, Dr. Richards speaks from his decades of clinical work, as someone who has legally and openly, for over twenty-five years, utilized and researched the effects of a variety of psychedelics within a therapeutic context and is therefore able to include numerous riveting first-person accounts of his patients' experiences with these substances and the subsequent transformative effects on their lives. Second, Dr. Richards writes out of his (again) decades-long immersion in, and lively engagement with, the religious and philosophical literature that focuses on the study of mysticism and other "nonordinary" states of consciousness. Third, Dr. Richards offers us a few judiciously chosen and clearly described accounts of his own experiences with psychedelics. In a straightforward, completely nonironic (but not in any way naïve) way, he is willing to make the bold and perhaps (at least to many people) rather startling claim that psychedelic substances, if taken in the proper context and with a specific mind-set or intentionality, can and do reliably catalyze genuine mystical and visionary experiences.

I think that this deeply courageous claim needs to be taken seriously. Speaking personally, as someone who has dedicated his entire profes-

sional career to a careful examination of the psychological and philosophical implications of mystical experiences and other "nonordinary" states of consciousness, and as someone who has spent numerous years studying the Santo Daime tradition, a religion that centers on the sacramental ingestion of the psychedelic substance ayahuasca, I am persuaded that powerful psychedelic experiences are far from being pathological hallucinatory misfirings of our brain circuitry. They are instead, at least potentially, genuine encounters with not only typically hidden strata of our psyche, but also levels of reality that deserve, if anything does, to be called "sacred." As a scholar of mysticism, what is so striking to me about this text is that Dr. Richards, after having clearly immersed himself in the literature that surrounds this rather arcane (yet important) topic, is able to demonstrate, thoroughly and compellingly, the striking correspondence between the key qualities of classical mystical states of awareness and the states of consciousness that arise when, for example, a volunteer in one of his research studies is given a powerful dose of psilocybin. (Perhaps equally, if not more, impressive are the accounts of the transformative effects of such experiences in the daily lives of those who took part in these studies.)

Again, speaking personally, it is my hope that this book will help to dispel the decades of deeply distorted misinformation (if not outright falsehoods) that has characterized our nation's decades-long repressive attack on psychedelics. Here, at last, are words of moderation, words of clarity, words of sanity, on this highly sensationalized topic. As this text so clearly notes, psychedelics should in no way be confused with highly addictive, often toxic drugs, such as heroin, cocaine, methamphetamines (and yes, let's say it openly, alcohol and nicotine). Unlike these often deeply destructive drugs, the substances that Dr. Richards focuses on in this text (for example, LSD, mescaline, psilocybin, and DMT) are nonaddictive and nontoxic. Furthermore, as this text so vividly shows, if taken or administered responsibly within a skilled psychotherapeutic or religious context, these substances also have the potential to have tremendous therapeutic, as well as spiritual, value.

Dr. Richards is by no means advocating psychedelics as some sort of panacea. He is keenly aware of the risks that can arise from the irresponsible, hedonistic misuse of these powerful substances. None-

theless, Dr. Richards is also cognizant of the thousands of careful studies that took place in over a decade of intensive clinical and scientific research in the late 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s that demonstrated, time and time again, that these substances have clear psychotherapeutic and medical potential (the treatment of alcoholism was particularly promising). Dr. Richards also knows, from his rich experience as a clinician, the enormous potential rewards that can arise with the carefully monitored use of these substances. The book's description of the psychotherapeutic and spiritual breakthroughs of his research subjects and clinical patients is perhaps one of the highlights of the text.

In this book, Dr. Richards devotes significant attention to the implications of some of the most crucial and startling findings of this research. If, as seems to be the case, the experiences that are catalyzed by these substances are indistinguishable from the mystical accounts that fill the religious literature of every major religious tradition, then scientists and scholars have been given a rare and precious opportunity: mystical experiences, which typically are extremely ephemeral and unpredictable, can actually be catalyzed in a fairly reliable and replicable way with the correct use of psychedelic substances (that is, if carefully prepared volunteers, with worthwhile goals and in a comfortable and uplifting setting, are given the right dosage). The crucial implications of this opportunity for the study of mysticism cannot be understated: these exalted states of consciousness, once so rare and difficult to study, can now be fairly reliably accessed, and hence can be carefully and respectfully investigated by scholars, scientists, clinicians, and religious professionals within safe and responsible settings.

Dr. Richards also does not shy away from the implications of this research for fundamental questions about the nature of selfhood and even about the nature of reality itself. Dr. Richards, with his calm and lucid prose, approaches these topics in a subtle and yet systematic manner. Page by page he unfolds his vision of the wondrous depths of the psyche and the equally wondrous underlying beauty of this world–a vision that, in his case, is not simply lofty yet unsubstantiated metaphysical speculation, but rather buttressed by the compelling and detailed accounts of the experiences and insights of his patients and research volunteers (as well as by narratives of his own generously offered and lucidly written experiences).

This text also offers calm and sober advice on how to deal with psychosomatic distress while taking psychedelic substances; how (when taking these substances) to maximize the potential for safely receiving a psychologically and spiritually transformative mystical experience; how to best integrate these profound experiences into one's daily life; how these substances can potentially give meaning to both daily life and the experience of dying; how psychedelics can help survivors to cope with the grief associated with the death of a loved one; and finally, the rather astonishing potential of these substances to deal with various severe addictions as well as clinical depression. (The recent study at Johns Hopkins that found an 80 percent abstinence rate from nicotine addiction after only three psilocybin treatments combined with cognitive-behavioral therapy is, at least to me, especially intriguing.) Dr. Richards is even willing, in his incurably optimistic way, to offer several thoughtful and intriguing musings on the potential of these substances for increased creativity in the arts, sciences, and even religious life.

For any reader interested in the therapeutic and mystical implications of psychedelics, this book will be both eye-opening and richly rewarding. Enjoy!

PREFACE

One Discovery of Transcendence

When my own first intense encounter with mystical consciousness occurred, I was a twenty-three-year-old graduate student of theology and psychiatry. Studying at the University of Göttingen in Germany, formally known as the Georg-August Universität, I had volunteered to participate in a research project with a drug I had never heard about called psilocybin. Synthesized and distributed to psychiatric researchers and clinicians by the Sandoz Pharmaceutical Company in Switzerland, this new drug was the primary psychoactive substance in the *psilocybe* genus of mushrooms that indigenous peoples had called "magic" or "sacred" and appear to have used in their religious practices for at least three thousand years and perhaps since as long ago as 5000 BCE. On this date in the modern world, December 4, 1963, however, the dark ages of psychedelic research still prevailed and, in the context of Western psychopharmacological investigations, drugs like psilocybin usually were administered without preparation or guidance.

At the time, it was hoped that the radically different, sometimes disorganized or psychotic states of consciousness that often ensued, fortunately temporary in duration, would advance our understanding of schizophrenia and similar states of mind. Hanscarl Leuner, the professor of psychiatry conducting the investigations in the

Nervenklinik in Göttingen, just had published a scientific monograph on his observations titled *Die experimentelle Psychose* (The Experimental Psychoses). In those days psychedelic drugs were freely available to qualified researchers in Europe and in the United States, sent through the mail. Psilocybin was marketed as Indocybin. The distribution of LSD, known as Delysid, as stated in a 1964 Sandoz pamphlet, was simply "restricted to psychiatrists for use in mental hospitals and psychiatric clinics."

Not only did I know nothing about psilocybin, LSD, or mescaline, I had not yet even heard the term "psychedelic," though it had been coined seven years earlier by Humphrey Osmond, a British psychiatrist, in a letter to Aldous Huxley. However, two of my new friends reported to me that they had volunteered for an interesting research project in the nearby psychiatric clinic that entailed receiving an experimental drug. Its name was hard to remember, but it was reputed to provide some insights into early childhood. One friend had experienced himself sitting in his father's lap and, since his father had been killed in World War II, this was profoundly comforting and meaningful to him. The other had seen visionary imagery of Nazi SS soldiers marching in the streets that he called "a hallucination." I was intrigued and, being curious about the psychodynamic processes in my early childhood and having never seen a "real hallucination," decided to walk over to the clinic and inquire whether I also could qualify as a participant in the research project. I viewed my own mind as a psychological laboratory in those days, took myself much too seriously, and sometimes went without breakfast to write down my dreams in the morning. Somewhat pompously, I called this discipline "collecting my phenomenological data." (I was fond of big words then! In retrospect I realize that a healthy breakfast might have done me much more good.)

I found that I was permitted to apply and submitted myself to a cursory medical screening. I remember being asked if I got drunk very often (I didn't). Then, informed I was acceptable, I was led to a rather dim and drab basement room, just large enough for a cot, an end table, and a chair. I met Gerhard Baer, a pleasant psychiatric resident about my age who wore a spiffy white coat with a stethoscope. After a brief chat, he gave me an injection of a derivative of psilocybin in liquid form. Though periodically observed during the next three to

four hours, basically I then was left alone. Drawing on the piety of my Methodist childhood, I silently affirmed trust that God would be with me should any difficult childhood memories emerge.

To my utter amazement, I soon discovered in my visual field the emergence of an exquisitely beautiful, multidimensional network of intricate, neon-like geometric patterns, drawing my attention ever more deeply within. I could see this display with open eyes, but found that when I closed my eyes it was even more vivid and sharply focused. I recognized life within the undulating designs and began to feel as though I somehow could enter into the energy flowing within them. Soon, I felt immersed in incredibly detailed imagery best described as Islamic architecture and Arabic script, about which I knew nothing. Then (forgive the poetic license), I seemed to fully become the multidimensional patterns or to lose my usual identity within them as the eternal brilliance of mystical consciousness manifested itself. Suddenly this consciousness was experienced as outside of time, a pinnacle from which history could be viewed. My awareness was flooded with love, beauty, and peace beyond anything I ever had known or wildly imagined to be possible. "Awe," "Glory," and "Gratitude" were the only words that remained relevant.

For a few moments "back on earth," as garbage men emptied the clinic's metal cans in the alley outside the room's narrow window, I faintly registered tinkling temple bells. There were also a few minutes when Gerhard entered the room and asked me to sit on the edge of the cot with my legs crossed so he could test my knee reflexes. I recall complying with his request, silently holding my arms outstretched with open palms. Intently, he struck my patellar tendons with his little hammer and jotted down his findings while I felt what I later called "compassion for the infancy of science." I was aware that the researchers appeared to have no idea of what really was happening in my inner experiential world, of its unspeakable beauty or of its potential importance for all of us.

When left alone again, immersed in awe, eventually my ego or everyday personality reconstituted itself enough to fear that I somehow might forget the utterly convincing reality of this magnificent state of consciousness. Tentatively, I established again that my body indeed could move. Then, I stretched out my right arm to grasp a

piece of blue paper on the end table beside me, picked up a pencil, and wrote, "Realität ist. Es ist vielleicht nicht wichtig was man darüber denkt!" (Reality is. It is perhaps not important what one thinks about it!) I underlined the first "ist" three times.

After returning to normative consciousness about four hours after the injection and futilely trying to describe something of my experience to Gerhard, I walked slowly and thoughtfully back to my dormitory room in the Uhlhorn Studienkonvikt, a short distance away from the clinic. I climbed to the fourth floor, softly opened and closed the door of my room, and immediately lay prostrate on the wide, rough, highly waxed floorboards like a monk before an altar, speechless with reverence and gratitude. I was thankful for privacy, well aware that if others were observing me they might view my behavior as rather strange, if not downright crazy. Intuitively I felt that all was well and did not want well-meaning friends to worry about me.

A few days later, still in awe over what had occurred in my life, I looked at that little piece of blue paper. "What's the big deal?" I thought. "Of course, reality is! Every idiot knows that!" It felt as though I had written "water is wet" and, for some reason, thought the insight was profound. Here, for the first time, I had encountered the limitations of language in trying to express mystical forms of consciousness. I meant to capture primal, eternal being, what the Christian theologian Paul Tillich called "The Ground of Being" or perhaps what Buddhists mean by "The Pure Land," something profoundly and intensely real that underlies the entire phenomenal, temporal world that most of us experience in everyday living. The words scratched on that scrap of blue paper were only an insipid souvenir from my first deep foray into transcendental forms of awareness.

So the words in this book, much as they are intended to communicate as comprehensively and accurately as my literary skills allow, sometimes demand patience and poetic license from you, the reader. I offer you my best as we explore the edges of an incredibly fascinating and important frontier, even though a voice within me would prefer simply to play music for you instead–perhaps Chopin Nocturnes with their many subtle nuances of emotional expression, or the profoundly powerful yet joyful and playful Fantasia and Fugue in G Minor by Johann Sebastian Bach.

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With gratitude, I acknowledge the primary mentors in my professional life: Huston Smith, Walter Houston Clark, Hanscarl Leuner, and Abraham Maslow, plus two whom I never had the honor to meet in person, Paul Tillich and Karl Jaspers.

Many colleagues have provided support over the years, sharing their own visions and dedication to fostering the responsible use of psychedelic substances. I especially acknowledge Charles Savage, Walter Pahnke, Stanislav Grof, Helen Bonny, Richard Yensen, and John Rhead from the days of research at the Spring Grove Hospital and the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, and my current colleagues, Roland Griffiths, Mary Cosimano, Matthew Johnson, Margaret Kleindinst, Albert Garcia-Romeu, Frederick Barrett, Theresa Carbonaro, and Annie Umbricht from the States of Consciousness Research team at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. Robert Jesse, convener of the Council on Spiritual Practices, merits special recognition for his many skillfully orchestrated contributions to the rebirth of scientific investigations with these sacred substances.

On a personal level, I am thankful for the steady support of my primary companion in this phase of my life, the artist Edna Kurtz Emmet, and her two adult children, Nadav and Danielle. I honor my

own two sons, Daniel and Brian, and their mother, Ilse, who for two decades prior to her death not only was my wife, but often also served as the psychiatric nurse who worked beside me in the implementation of various projects of psychedelic research. I am grateful for my parents, Ruth and Robert Richards, and my two brothers, Robert and John, who, even when they were rather bewildered by what I found of importance in my academic pursuits, continued to trust me as I followed my unique life trajectory.

The brilliant new generation of psychedelic researchers inspires me, including Stephen Ross, Anthony Bossis, Jeffrey Guss, Michael Bogenschutz, Paul Hutson, Karen Cooper, Randall Brown, Peter Hendricks, Michael and Annie Mithoefer, James Grigsby, Franz Vollenweider, Torsten Passie, Jordi Riba, José Carlos Bouso, Peter Gasser, Peter Oehen, Robin Carhart-Harris, David Nutt, David Erritzoe, and many others. Also, I express my gratitude and indebtedness to those who have provided private funding in support of ongoing research through the Heffter Research Institute and the Council on Spiritual Practices, and also the Fetzer Institute, and the Betsy Gordon Foundation, Beckley Foundation, and Riverstyx Foundation.

With profound appreciation, I recognize the hundreds of research volunteers and psychotherapy clients who have invited me into the depths of their lives and shared their unique struggles and transformative experiences. Each of them has influenced my life and thought.

There are many inspiring and innovative friends and companions in the steadily expanding psychedelic research community who contribute in their own ways. Luis Eduardo Luna, James Fadiman, Thomas Roberts, Charles Grob, Alicia Danforth, Rick Doblin, Neal Goldsmith, Iker Puente, Ben Sessa, David Nichols, George Greer, Dennis McKenna, Julie Holland, Amanda Feilding, Gabor Maté, Joshua Wickerham, and my son, Brian Richards, immediately come to mind. Authors who have combined scholarship and courageous creativity, such as Jeremy Narby, Michael Pollan, and Simon Powell, deserve explicit appreciation. Bimonthly lunches with my friend Allan Gold, complete with sushi or Nepalese cuisine, also have been enriching. My late friend Wayne Teasdale, who loved to meditate more than anyone I have ever met, merits special acknowledgment. And to Wendy Lochner, my editor from Columbia University Press,

who intuited that I had a book within me that needed birthing and who has provided skilled guidance in its formation and composition, I offer profound appreciation. With her encouragement I have endeavored to write in a style that will be comprehensible to a wide readership, rather than to address the book in a traditional academic format to professional colleagues in either the mental health or religious communities.

Finally, since this book is about encountering the sacred and the discovery of eternal realms in consciousness, it also is appropriate to acknowledge that creative source that brought all of us into being, sustains our lives, and perhaps takes delight in the adventures of our ideas and our continuing evolution, here and now.