Brian C. Muraresku. *The Immortality Key: The Secret History of the Religion with No Name*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020. xx + 460 pp. ISBN 9781250207142 (hardcover). $29.99 / $39.99 Canadian.

Brian C. Muraresku's *The Immortality Key* begins and ends embedded in the current wave of scientific research on psychedelics, associated most prominently with ongoing psilocybin experiments at Johns Hopkins Medical Center. It was the hype around this research that first aroused Muraresku's interest in the subject of psychedelic spirituality, by way of a 2007 article in *The Economist* called "The God Pill." The framing is apt, as *The Immortality Key* never really leaves the ideological field of reference maintained by modern psychedelic science. Thus, while *The Immortality Key* is an engaging and adventuresome read—thoroughly and intelligently researched, passionately pursued, and skillfully woven together—it serves mainly as a projection into ancient history of the very modern idea that psychedelics open the door to a one-size-fits-all "mystical experience," and that this experience is the true essence of all religion. Perhaps "The God Pill" sums it up.

Muraresku's book has enjoyed widespread appeal, inside and outside of academia. It carries an aura of finality and mystification, and its theses resonate with prevailing cultural trends and agendas. It is therefore important that the conceptual strategies and normative assumptions defining the book's orientation be carefully examined. Ostensibly, *The Immortality Key*'s guiding project is a historical one, presented in two ambitious parts. Part One seeks to trace the diffusion of a Proto-Indo-European psychedelic ur-culture at the end of the last Ice Age, from Göbekli Tepe westward to Greece and eastward to Iran and India, thus seeding both the rites at Eleusis and the Vedic *soma* tradition, and providing the "secret inspiration behind European civilization" (119). Part Two offers fragmentary evidence that this psychedelic lineage extended through the central practices of early Christianity. Specifically, Muraresku views the

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eucharistic sacrament as the result of direct influence from the Eleusinian mysteries—which, following classicist Carl A. P. Ruck and others, he understands as a secret tradition maintained with near continuity from 1500 B.C.E. to 392 C.E., involving the communal ingestion of an ergot-infused psychedelic potion.

The motivation and conception of this historical project are deeply shaped by Muraresku's own personal spiritual quest. Raised Catholic and educated at a Jesuit prep school—before going on to study classics at Brown University and law at Georgetown University—he is disappointed by a perceived lack of spiritual power in present-day Catholic ritual. Having never experienced psychedelics directly, he hopes that a historical study of ancient Greco-Roman practices will confirm the availability of legitimate means for restoring the psychedelic potency his tradition has lost. With such historical grounding, he hopes that the path might be cleared for a "third Reformation," in which the Catholic Church embraces a psychedelic-assisted "return to its mystical roots" (14).

Moreover—inspired by the enthusiastic accounts of ancient initiates, such as the 4th-century Roman aristocrat Vettius Agorius Praetextatus—Muraresku looks upon this restoration as a possible key to the survival of the human species on Earth. Not only would the psychedelic sacrament reawaken humanity spiritually by revealing "the mystery of death and rebirth"; it would renew the planet ecologically, promote gender balance by restoring the spiritual leadership of women, and nurture equality by democratizing access to divinity and exalted states of consciousness (73).

These are not just empty claims or vain fantasies. Muraresku's quest is sincere and emblematic of a familiar modern sense of multileveled crisis. Distrust of organized religion and the longing to reclaim authentic spirituality are core modernist themes. Today, Muraresku is far from alone in hoping psychedelics will help fulfill this longing. To equate such imagined fulfillment with discovering the secret behind all religion is also a conspicuous modernist trope. Here, the problem is not so much perennialism as the assumption that "religion" can be defined generically in terms of a modern scientific, Eurocentric,

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monotheistic construct of mystical noesis. By turning his personal quest into a grand historical thesis, Muraresku reduces all forms of religion, and all varieties of psychedelic practice, to a post-Catholic interpretation of an alleged Proto-Indo-European sacrament: "The God Pill." Psychedelics are assimilated to religion (Eurocentrically defined); religion is reduced to its "mystical core" (modernistically defined); mysticism is reduced to the "unitive" experience (monotheistically defined); and the unitive experience is wholly attributable to psychedelics (scientifically defined). What will come of this formula—either spiritually or as a mode of historical discourse—now that it is loose in the world? At the very least, it has the virtue of pointing to the possibility of an experience that completely removes the fear of death.

Whether any of this can save humanity from patriarchal violence, ecocide, and political instability is another question. Even the scientific data on personal transformation through psychedelics is mixed. What Muraresku says on this topic—again, picking up a thread from Praetextatus—is intriguing. In 364 C.E., as the Christian emperor Valentinian I was threatening to outlaw the two-thousand-year-old rites at Eleusis, Praetextatus dissuaded him, insisting that such prohibition "would make the life of the Greeks unlivable" (72). Praetextatus went on to declare that the annual mysteries are what "hold the whole human race together" (72).

Muraresku links these comments to the delicate balance sustained by the Greek "biotechnology" of the psychedelic *kukeon*. Closely following Ruck, he regards the process of harvesting, preparing, and partaking of the *kukeon* as "the origin of all human science," which upholds a necessary harmony of *chaos* and *cosmos*, wild and civilized (73). Indeed, the potential for this balancing is inherent in the *kukeon* recipe itself. Just as essential to the *kukeon's* life-sustaining force was the role of women in its production and administration. "The job of the priestesses," Ruck contends, "would have been to monitor closely the growth of the darnel and ergot so that neither got out of control. Too much, and the deadly weed and fungus can ruin the entire crop, threatening life itself. Too little, and there's no active ingredient for the *kukeon*" (73–74).

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According to Muraresku, all of this came to an end with the ascendancy of imperial, patriarchal Christianity and its "campaign to rid the world of pagan influence" (76). Even if elements of the primordial psychedelic sacrament were preserved in early Christianity, it would not be long before the potent mix was replaced by a lame placebo. For Muraresku, as for Praetextatus, the implications have been grave. Removing psychedelics from the eucharist has tipped humanity's balance too far toward civilizing discipline and away from nature. Again, Muraresku appeals to modern scientific research, claiming that psychedelics unlock a genetically coded natural morality "by tapping directly into what the mystics have been trying to mine over the history of Christianity with all their chanting, meditation, fasting, and prayer. And what the religious authorities try to beat into young children" (75). The history of Christian practices (and, by extension, those of other mystical traditions) is no more than a testament to what has been lost. Muraresku weighs the situation, delivering his thesis in a series of *Ancient Aliens*-style leading questions:

> Is this what Praetextatus meant by holding 'the whole human race together'? . . . Did the transformational inner journey unleashed by the *kukeon* remind us how to care for one another and the planet? Was this the true technology on which Western civilization was built? Is a society that fails to incorporate this mystical experience fundamentally flawed, its institutions empty of the shared vision that made the world's first democracy actually work? (75).

The zeal and conviction animating these statements are what give *The Immortality Key* its propagandistic force. It makes for a compelling narrative—again, very much in tune with the contemporary zeitgeist. However, there are many ways to tune in to these matters, intellectually and otherwise. By now, it is no secret that psychedelics have been demonized and repressed throughout history, and their promise as spiritual catalysts has been amply demonstrated. However, neither the repression nor the spiritual power of psychedelics is adequately addressed by Muraresku's analysis. Did the "Indo-Europeans" invent psychedelic ritual? Muraresku gestures towards a common psychedelic tradition, inherited at Eleusis, "that seems at least as old as Raqefet Cave and Göbekli Tepe, and likely much, much older," but

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the specific routes he traces are all geographically and culturally circumscribed by narratives of Proto-Indo-European migration (306). What of Africa, East and Southeast Asia, the Americas, or Aboriginal Australia? What of the myriad visionary healing and divining practices—which have nothing to do with "God" or "mysticism"—so often studied under the sprawling rubric of "shamanism"?

At its best, *The Immortality Key* is a much-needed reminder that attention to psychedelics can activate a basic rethinking of prehistory and of humanity's place on Earth. At its worst, it is a repetitive 460-page advertisement for the elitist schemes of the modern psychedelic establishment. We must consider that the awakening and recovery needed by the Earth at this moment might not be found in psychedelics. However, to the extent that psychedelics do offer gifts and lessons for humanity, these will continue to play out through diverse, ungovernably complex interrelationships that are in no way reducible to a single eucharistic sacrament or "immortality key."

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