Liquid Light is an important addition to the growing number of published accounts that discuss the use of ayahuasca (known by the name, Daime), and its role within Santo Daime, a fundamentally Christian though highly syncretic new religious movement founded in 1930 in the Amazonian state of Acre by an Afro-Brazilian rubber tapper known to followers as Mestre Irineu. The text is a richly descriptive account of Barnard’s own evolution as a fardado (Santo Daime initiate) and includes first-hand accounts of his participation in many kinds and types of Santo Daime worship services in both the United States (Chapters 1 and 3) and during his four-month visit (Chapters 4–10) to the Amazonian village of Céu do Mapiá, an intentional community founded in 1983 by one of Irineu’s followers known as Padrinho Sabastião.

Barnard’s text is really three texts in one. It reads, at times, like a traditional ethnography that describes and explores the geographic, economic, social, and emotional spaces of villagers who inhabit both Céu do Mapiá and this particular lineage of the Santo Daime religion. It is also informed by his lens as a philosopher of religion with interludes (especially in Chapters 2, 7, 8, and 11) that delve into such topics as: a) phenomenological questions about the origin and location of Consciousness (Chapter 2); b) ruminations on how to interpret the miraçôes or visions (Chapter 7) as well as the viscerally-experienced “visitations” of spiritual energies, forces and beings that are common to those who imbibe ayahuasca in a ritual context (Chapter 8); c) theological considerations of transcendent versus immanent encounters with a Divine “Other” (Chapter 8); d) ethical considerations of how to account for immoral or amoral actions of Daimista mediums who blame bad behavior on visiting spirits rather than taking responsibility for their own failings (Chapter 8); and e) ponderings about the spiritual goals of the Santo Daime path, and perhaps of religion more generally (Chapter 11).

Third, and perhaps most controversially, Barnard’s text is explicitly experiential, located, and autobiographical. It is the tale of a spiritual seeker and a religious adherent who paints an exquisite picture of what Santo Daime feels like from the inside-out. Just one example of this interweaving of the ethnographic and the auto-ethnographic is the way in which Barnard draws attention to the vital role played by hymns, each with their unique vibratory signature, that carry and communicate the força or energy of the Daime during ceremonies (pp. 164, 170, Chapter 8, and throughout the text). These hymns are received by followers directly from what Daimistas term the Astral (a powerful spiritual realm) when communing with the Daime (p. 22). Once given the stamp of approval as being a “real” gift from the Daime rather than emerging from a more ego-driven place to simply draw attention to oneself (p. 300), these hymns are collected into hinários (hymnals) that are learned and sung together. The communal singing of these hymns, together with the rhythmic dance steps punctuated by the rasping, percussive beat of the maracas (wood and metal rattles) that are played throughout the ceremony, provide the liturgical structure for each worship service. As Barnard recounts, during one of the early Santo Daime “works” (worship ceremonies) he participated in during his stay in Céu do Mapiá,

…More and more I began to sync with the rhythmic beats of the maracá and softened into the oscillating repetition of the dance steps. And the more that I danced and sang, the more that I could slowly feel my personal energetic boundaries softening, and I was increasingly able, with periodic stops and starts, to sink into something bigger, until…my consciousness encompassed and then merged with the whole room…over and over again, I felt myself almost bodily uplifted by the sounds of the hymns…as hundreds of us were swept up in the surge of the Current as it
circulated round and round and round the salão [communal worship space]...moving as if we were unified parts of one organic bodily whole... (p. 164).

This interweaving of the ethnographic with the auto-ethnographic, together with the frequent philosophical interludes described above, make the text a spellbinding (if sometimes meandering and occasionally downright dizzying) read that is often hard to put down. The text also has a laudable objective, which is to reclaim the sanctity of this entheogen as a legitimate sacrament that goes far beyond the ways in which some researchers, psychonauts, spiritual "seekers," and even psychedelic assisted therapists are approaching it. As Barnard notes in the introduction, "this book is my attempt to describe, in a way that is as highly personal and vivid as possible, some of what I have encountered during the more than fifteen years that I’ve been drinking Daime...[and] it is my hope that after reading this book, readers will come away with the understanding that... psychedelics can be used reverently, as genuine sacraments" (pp. 1–2). Through the rich descriptions of his own experiences, Barnard intends to provide an (albeit idiosyncratic) understanding of how use of an entheogenic sacrament in a ritual (and in his case a formal/religious context) can be part of a life-long quest towards spiritual awakening.

In a pre-emptive response to colleagues (particularly those in his own discipline) who might “shake their heads sadly, convinced that I’ve become some sort of unthinking convert, or worse, an advocate for some (doubtless nefarious) cause simply because I’m open about my ongoing participation in the Santo Daime Tradition,” (p. 7) he counters that, “everyone possesses some, often tacit, set of assumptions about how everything hangs together, about what really matters; about who we are underneath it all; about the purpose, if any, of life” (p. 7–8). As someone in a very similar boat, I very much appreciated his statement that "I’m currently a sixty-six-year-old full professor of religious studies. If I can’t speak freely, creatively and from my heart; if I can’t say what really matters in a way that is as enlivened, juicy, multi-perspectival, intellectually rich, and heartfelt as I know how, then who in God’s name will? If tenure is not for this, then what is it for?" (p. 6).

All of this would be more than enough to make this text a valuable addition to the growing literature on entheogens and psychedelic assisted therapies. But what really sets this book apart from other texts in anthropology, psychology, psychedelic studies and, most especially in Barnard’s own discipline of religious studies, is the highly unusual and intentionally unapologetic stance he takes about ontological questions like the transpersonal nature of intentionality unapologetic stance he takes about ontological discipline of religious studies, is the highly unusual and transparently post-positivistic) in their accounts of personal encounters with what shamanism scholars often term “non-ordinary states” of reality.

Because, as Barnard points out, in-spite of the impacts of Jamesian and Bergsonian theories of consciousness on the evolution of the social sciences, and in spite of the findings of consciousness-researchers like the Nobel-laureate George Wald (p. 60), many scholars in the social, behavioral, and biological sciences still privilege discussions of consciousness that focus on the personal (rather than the transpersonal) and the human (rather than the pan-human) dimensions of this. Barnard’s willingness to challenge these academic norms, vulnerably, transparently, and confidently, is, at least to my mind, long overdue.

I admit that Barnard’s approach sometimes seemed too uncrirical, and even starry-eyed. I found his overuse of Capital Letters when attempting to describe mystical/ineffable insights or states to be somewhat off-putting. I also found frustrating his decision to notice, but then to claim the right to consciously ignore, some of the patriarchal and even militaristic aspects of Santo Daime. I occasionally got lost in the frequent (and often unheralded) segues between the experiential and the theoretical, the descriptive and the inferential. I found myself confused by the periodic insertions of greyed-out text boxes that seemed superfluous to the flow of his narrative. While I appreciated his all-too-brief nod to the need for much more discussion of the difference between severe mental illness and visionary experiences and his plea that we not pathologize mystical states (p. 202), I would have liked to see a deeper-dive into these distinctions. And while I appreciated his repeated assertions that he was speaking as an individual, from a particular cultural background, context, and life-history about his specific experiences with the Daime, there were overtones, throughout, that he was building a case for something that far exceeded those qualifications.

However, the strengths of this text far outweigh these criticisms. It is nuanced, complex, ambitious, and mostly successful in its attempts to balance head and heart, theory and personal experience, scholarship and practice. Liquid Light: Ayahuasca Spirituality and the Santo Daime Tradition (and the author’s accompanying website) deserves to be widely read by scholars and seekers alike. It is my sincere hope that this text will become an important addition to the conversations currently swirling around how to navigate the “Third Wave” of the Psychedelic Renaissance that is currently upon us.

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