“Dear Lord and Master of Mankind”. In Praise of the *Amanita* Hallucinogenic Soma: An Intertwining of American Poetry, a Hymn and a Hallucinogen

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Disclosures

D. Eveleigh: None. D. Davis: None.

Abstract

The study of mycological hallucinogens is broad, even fanciful including proposals that Santa’s reindeer feed on psychedelic magic mushrooms to aid their flight on Christmas Eve. Underlying support are the hallucinogenic properties of *Amanita muscaria*, the fly agaric. The amateur mycological ethnobotanist (and New York banker) Gordon Wasson with his wife Valentina, brought focus to psychedelic mushrooms through a Mexican cult that used them (Life Magazine, 1957). This practice is alluded to from the 16th century. Later they focused on the hallucinogenic mushroom, *Amanita muscaria* – the fly agaric (Wasson “Soma: The Divine Mushroom of Immortality”, 1968), noting the well documented ritualistic taking of “Soma” in Siberia and Finland. However, the Wassons also drew on comments that Soma had basic roots to the Vedic religion ritual drink in the Proto-Indo-Iranian era, ca. 2000 BC. Vedic priests drank themselves into a stupor to find deep religious connections. John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892) American poet brought this to attention in his narrative poem “The Brewing of Soma” (Atlantic Monthly, April 1872). Whittier is critical of such human frailties but comes forth with his final six stanzas - (of seventeen) to reflect on his uplifting Quaker views, including that drugs are not necessary for religious experience. It was the latter stanzas that were first used in a hymn (Horder’s Congregational Hymns, 1884) and later co-opted into Episcopalian hymnals. And what success. A recent review showed the hymn is currently published in 424 diverse hymnals: Episcopalian, Baptist, Congregational, Lutheran, Methodist, Moravian and Presbyterian. It is incongruous that though Quaker Whittier’s poetry, addresses human frailties through consideration of the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms, his words became one of the all-time great hymns, “Dear Lord, and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways…”. This perhaps bizarre association between mushroom hallucinogens and uplifting religious songs of praise is generally unknown to the religious congregations and public in general. This linkage of microbiology and religion merits far greater understanding and dissemination.