H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert C. Fuller. *Stairways to Heaven: Drugs in American Religious History.* Boulder, Col: Westview Press, 2000. ix + 237 pp. $27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-6612-8.

Reviewed by Jon Pahl (The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia)
Published on H-AmRel (March, 2001)

"No Reefer Madness Here, Only "'the Academic Waking State'"

One way to suggest both the strengths and the weaknesses of Robert C. Fuller's *Stairways to Heaven* is to point out that while reading it I did not often find myself wondering whether his historically-based narratives about coffee, wine, tobacco, marijuana, LSD, and peyote were actually autobiographical reflections. Like the essays from college sophomores that I came to dread on the religious significance of "Phish" or "The Grateful Dead," the potential exists with this topic to produce little more than a thinly veiled apologia pro rebellion sua. Fuller, a professor of Religious Studies at Bradley University, and prolific writer best-known for his studies of American alternative medicine, avoids this trap. The author is no simple-minded devotee or critic of reefer madness; he knows well the theoretical and rhetorical conventions of scholarly ambivalence.

Fuller's guide through the minefield (it is a war-zone, after all) of drug-induced religion in America is William James. Unfortunately, Fuller's work lacks the contextual richness, intellectual courage, or (perhaps) the nitrous oxide that animated James' classic explorations. Fuller claims, like James, to move beyond what he calls any "a priori bias toward the normal waking state" (171), but in its place Fuller depends heavily on the a priori biases of what we might call the "academic waking state." This brackets the question of whether that state is appropriately labeled "normal." In any event, Fuller depends so thoroughly on the well-worn distinction between the "sacred" and the "profane" that he may have missed many of the most interesting and provocative examples of "alternative spiritualities" from the historical borderlands of religious experience he somewhat timidly traverses here.

Fuller's thesis develops Durkheim's dichotomy. He writes, "The major thesis of this book is that in addition to all the ways in which drugs have factored into the pursuit of profane intoxication, they have also been intimately associated with Americans' desire to participate in the sacred."(9) This distinction between "sacred" and "profane" drug use leads Fuller into some strange choices. I have few arguments with his reasonable (if conventional) discussions of alcohol, marijuana, or LSD, (although Prohibition receives surprisingly short shrift). But when the author treats coffee at length and all but ignores MDMA (Ecstasy) I wonder about the reasons for the emphasis. "The coffeehouse," Fuller claims, "was the symbolic meeting center of the countercultural movement [in the sixties]." Here, "initiates" met to ponder "life's mysteries." Fuller admits that "commercial forces" took over the consumption of coffee sometime after 1980, but still reasons that "coffee drinking often becomes an ecstatic form of nature religion; it imparts a heightened sense of power and well-being." (132-9) I guess my experience is simply more profane. I'm a caffeine junkie. I get a headache if I don't consume some every morning. Of course I enjoy my jones, but I'm not sure I'd call the experience "ecstatic."

If Fuller thus considers coffee worthy of discussion as a drug used for the sacred purpose of seeking ecstasy, Ecstasy itself – a drug of choice among adolescents at clubs and concerts – Fuller dismisses in a terse paragraph which concludes: "MDMA did not retain a close connection with New Age subculture and instead gradually became known as a "dancing drug" due to its use at bars and nightclubs."(146) One night of ethnographic field work on Fuller's part might have led him to rethink this dismissal. MDMA has its close-knit subculture, its ritual uses (is dancing ever profane?), and (as the name indicates) provokes an experience users have taken to labeling "ecstatic."

The problem with this bias and its subsequent omissions runs deeper than this one example of overlooking my area of research into the religious history and experience of adolescents. Fuller's agenda, shared with many in the field of American religious history today, is ostensibly to surface the historical voices of people on religious

borderlands or frontiers, or at least beyond the Puritans. It is ironic, then, that Fuller's historical catalog of "drugs in American religious history" is largely the history of white, middle-class, Protestant, male usage. Fuller does devote an entire chapter to Native American herbal and other rituals, but subsumes them under the context of the "pursuit of ecstasy" (replace "ecstasy" with "happiness" or "property" and you'll see the problem). The use of drugs in American religious history becomes part of the progress of the Puritan ethic. There are, in short, many more and different stories to tell in the history of "drugs in American religious history" than can be captured under the title "Stairways to Heaven."

Nevertheless, I would not hesitate to use this book as a complementary text for introductory courses in Religions in the U.S. or in American Studies. It is an amusing read, and it will introduce beginning students to a basic convention in the fields. I would not recommend the text for a historically-based class; the contextual settings of the various examples are simply too thin. The strongest chapter in the work is the final one, "The Quest for Ecstasy," where Fuller grounds his "empirical" findings in both theoretical literature about drug use and current public debate regarding the free exercise of religion. Unfortunately, even in that chapter, the "war on drugs" manages scant mention. Consequently, Stairways to Heaven fails to illumine the "sacred quests" (if they are such) of those young underclass entrepreneurs and experimenters who currently (and in the past) found their way to prisons (figurative or physical) for the practice of their "spiritualities." Inevitably, then, the "spiritualities" of those who imprison them, or the "spiritualities" of those who have the leisure and economic power to dabble in "alternative pieties" and simply ignore the true believers, remain ascendant.

Copyright (c) 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Jon Pahl. Review of Fuller, Robert C., *Stairways to Heaven: Drugs in American Religious History.* H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. March, 2001.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5016

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.