

Itinerary and testimony of Dr. Jacques Mabit, Physician and Shaman

Jacques Mabit,
MD is the founder director
of the Takiwasi Center for
Rehabilitation of drug addicts in the
city of Tarapot, Dept. of San Martín,
Peru. He founded this center
some 15 years ago after several years
of training with many local shamans
practicing the ritual of ayahuasca,
the entheogen sacred brew of the
Amazon.

For the circumstances behind the writing of this article, see the appendix by Frederique Apffel-Marglin at the end of article. The headings of the article have been added by the editors.

The first questionings

I have a classic, conventional catholic formation on the basis of which there have been progressively fundamental questionings that for various reasons made me take my distance. As an adolescent, I found no satisfactory answers to personal questions from the religious figures to which I directed those questions. Their answers were of the following order: “wait, it will go away”; “sublimate your desires”; “grace will show you the way”... however, when one is 13 or 14 years old, one does not have the time to wait for grace!

At the same time, I was touched, beyond formal Catholicism but also through it, by certain personal experiences, which could be qualified by the term “mystical” or at least “experiential”, without speaking of any great mysticism. Nevertheless, I was able to feel, perceive and be deeply moved by something indefinable that made a deep but also intimate part of my being vibrate delicately and intensely. And this did indeed happen through this Catholicism in one way or another, through different persons, through different situations.

I spent part of my childhood in Africa, first in Algeria and then in Djibouti, thus in a Muslim context with Christian religious figures in difficult missions. In Djibouti there were the little brothers of Charles de Foucault who deeply moved me: they lived in extremely poor Muslim neighborhoods without any hope of being able to convert anyone... what witnessing! In my classroom coexisted 10 different nationalities and five religions. Even though it was a catholic school, there were Muslims, Animists,

Buddhists, Hindus... I lived in the midst of this cultural and racial diversity and it was greatly to my liking. I have always retained from this experience an attraction or even a fascination for “difference”.

I also came to know Ethiopia with its Coptic Christianity, which I experienced as luminous.

I have always maintained a contact, a strand, with this mystical dimension which has run through Catholicism, the liturgical mood, as well as the model of two brothers in particular of the Christians schools who were my teachers.

And then I had more fundamental questionings that were stronger, more and more rebellious, which have taken me to the time when I was a student in medicine in Nantes (France).

Formal answers disappointed me as well as the attitude of certain priests or monks. I felt the weight of the heavy moralistic attitude of the institution. However, I in no way felt anti-religious, quite the contrary. Criticizing certain forms of the Church never led me to identify with its ferocious critics.

Because even then I also found in the Church or in certain Christians, personal attitudes which seemed coherent to me, persons who were coherent with themselves, even if I did not share their answers. And finally it has been important for me to realize that there existed persons who were coherent with themselves.

So all this led me on a path where I permanently kept in touch with Catholicism, although the relationship was an elastic one, that at times was extremely distant, and at other times much closer: I have frequented monasteries, I have gone on retreats, I have studied the texts somewhat... I was divided and at times pulled totally apart.

Finally, there emerged progressively what I might term as “existential crisis”, where

personal problems, relational problems, psychological questionings, amorous and sexual issues, moral and social questionings all converged. In sum, a feeling of absence of meaning, of disintegration, led me to a rather difficult crisis where I was overwhelmed by despair due to the lack of coherent and unifying answers to my life. I was 29 years old.

However, a context had been created already anterior to this crisis.

Experience in Peru

In 1980, at the age of 25, I had gone to Peru and had already had contact with traditional Andean medicine. Sent there by Doctors Without Borders in order to take charge of a small rural hospital in the Altiplano, I very quickly faced grave technical and logistical shortages on the one hand and on the other I faced the cultural inadequacy of our Western medicine for the local culture. I made contact with the world of traditional medicine by necessity. Also, most likely, by curiosity as well since I had lived in countries outside of France where I always mixed with foreigners and I was always put in question by “the Other”. I have known and worked with bonesetters, midwives, birth attendants, healers in the Andes and diverse traditional medical workers. All of them explained their experience and their knowledge by invoking arguments and ideas that corresponded absolutely not at all to my cultural and intellectual framework, or to my way of apprehending the world. All this made no sense in our mode of thought.

I remember for example, Doña Felipa, an old Indian midwife who only spoke Quechua. One day I asked her how she had acquired her knowledge, thinking it was probably an issue of empirical transmission from mother to daughter. Instead she tells me that one day, as she was shepherding her sheep and lamas in the Altiplano, there was a thunderstorm and she was hit by lightning. Several of her animals died next to her; she lost consciousness but did not die. When she

woke up, she knew how to heal. And indeed, I was able to verify that she spoke the truth to me. She never made a mistake in her diagnoses, which she did, among other ways, by taking the pulse and it was astonishingly precise. This verifiable knowledge did not come to her through tradition, she did not inherit it, rather it came to her all of a sudden.

Thus, for the western mind, one either gratuitously disqualifies such an event by surmising that “the old woman is telling tall tales” or one is forced to recognize that there is here something that escapes us. Doña Felipa had no reason to lie to me. She spoke unselfconsciously about what had happened to her. In fact, I later realized that this phenomenon had been described

in other cultural contexts. There were thus things happening in the context of knowledge that were ignored, put aside, and censured by our culture and training.

Back from Peru, I carried out brief medical missions for different French NGOs in order to evaluate health projects in Southern countries. In this way I went to Tunisia, to the Philippines, to Burkina Faso, to Bangladesh, and again to Peru. In all those poor countries, I observed practices of traditional medicine, sometimes with an infusion of Christianity, as in Peru or in the Philippines, sometimes of Islam as in Bangladesh and Tunisia.

It is thus at the age of 29 that my existential difficulties become acute. I ask myself what path I will take in life and in my medical practice. I am no longer able to postpone my decisions.

Experience in India

Toward the end of 1984 I found myself in Bangladesh. I had the desire to travel back

via India upon returning from that mission. I wanted to go to Calcutta specifically. I had two goals for that visit. I had heard about mother Teresa and my aim was to verify for myself if this woman was really the carrier of a deep mysticism that she expressed through works of compassion or whether it was rather a matter of a kind of charitable action that tried to compensate for a Western sense of guilt for the misery of the south. Was she filled with a “fire in the heart” or did she instead harbor some kind of psychological heaviness saturated with guilt.

Besides, I had read Rabindranath Tagore with delight and liked his writings enormously. I wanted to see his home, touch the place where he had lived, feel myself closer to him or to what he expressed so delicately.

The
tells me that
one-day, as she was
shepherding her sheep and
llamas in the Altiplano, there
was a thunderstorm and she
was
hit by lightning. Several of her
animal died next to her; she lost
consciousness but did not die.
When she woke up, she
knew how to heal.

So I went to Calcutta for that reason. The trip was filled with all sorts of incidents and since Jung already sensitized me to his depth psychology and that I sensed that there was a great deal at stake at this particular moment, those signs of synchronicity spoke to me. In the plane, a Briton sitting next to me informs me that the name Calcutta is derived from the Bengali Kali Ghat, that is the place of Kali, the goddess of death and resurrection in the Hindu tradition. Then, on my way to the hospice (*mouroir*) of Mother Teresa, I discover that it is situated in the neighborhood of Kali Ghat, which gives its name to the city. Furthermore, I discover that the hospice is part of the buildings behind the temple of Kali. People were dying in the temple of Kali and in the arms of sisters who believed in the death-resurrection of Jesus! This conjunction between the Hindu death/resurrection and the Christian death/resurrection (is there anyone more Catholic than mother Teresa?) seemed to me absolutely astounding.

When I arrived, a sister in a great hurry, who obviously had no time to lose in small talk, received me. "Mother Teresa is traveling. Who are you? What do you want?" I answer her that I am a physician that I am French, that am here to know this special place... "Ah, you are a physician? Very well. Well, this man over there is dying, go and take care of him!"

All this went very fast and I found myself suddenly in front of this dying man. I was helpless; I had no medical means at my disposal to face such a situation. He was unconscious, and I did not speak his language. I had nothing to offer him; I was truly bereft... almost as much as he was... well I don't know. And so, what came to me spontaneously was to hold his hand and to speak to him inwardly. I said the following thing to him: "Listen, I do not know what I can do for you but if in a mysterious way that I do not understand or know, my body, my energy, my presence, something in me can be useful, please make use of it, because I cannot do anything else".

And then he died, in a few minutes; it all happened very fast.

Then I went back to my hotel room, still full of what had just befell me. Alone in that room I experienced a sort of trance-like-state and without ayahuasca! I lived an absolutely astonishing experience. At the beginning I fell into some kind of deep depression, as if I descended into despair or into death and it was extremely anxiety producing. I very quickly was able to distance myself from my daily surroundings to the extent of having the sensation of a panoramic vision of my life or rather of life, as I perceived it. In fact, what I saw was all in a thick darkness, the world and life all in gray without light and it was inducing despair in me. I could perceive

absolutely nothing that gave any light to any real life, any color, any joy. Nothing stood out of this grayness, nothing was more important than anything else, everything was the same, depressed, uninhabited. Was it of any import that I be a man rather than a woman, a Frenchman rather than a Bengali, a physician rather than a coal maker? No, nothing of all that was of any importance really, made any difference, had any kind of primacy. What importance did I all have finally? All of this was neither fundamental, nor really significant. In these conditions, why live? What to do with my life?

And then, coming from the depth of me, arose an old nostalgia; I had the impression of remembering something, a presence as if a little light that I would have always "seen" lodged in the pit of my stomach, in my vital center or the "hara" described by easterners. Yes there was there a buried memory nevertheless always present that had maintained this perception and now it was becoming more evident, clearer, and surer. Definitively, it was an extremely small light like a cinder, but all the rest was so very dark that it was the only light shining and illuminating the obscurity.

I remembered then that as a child of 11 or 12, with the boy scouts we were doing a survival trek. We were in the Vosges, with only a bit of food, without tents. Night was falling and we had not eaten; we were cold, we were tired, we had to find shelter. At 11 or 12, it was a great adventure. We were coming down into a valley and suddenly, on the other die of the valley, on the slope of the mountain, in the middle of the darkness appeared a light, the light of a house. And I always remember this because this light isolated in the night represented everything at that particular moment. It was the warmth of the hearth, food, rest, security; it was above all a human presence.

I had the impression of remembering something, a presence as if a little light that I would have always "seen" lodged in the pit of my stomach, in my vital center or the "hara" described by easterners.

That reminded me a bit of that situation, since in the great darkness, a little light, even tiny, signifies the whole of what is Human as well as the entire Divine. And just so, for me, there is no longer any separation between these two dimensions, these two presences.

And thus, in Calcutta, I remembered in a hotel room, that I had always visualized this light, in the belly. Clearly, if anyone had asked me two hours earlier, I would have been unable to say that I had a “little light in my belly”. I had absolutely no conscious awareness of this. However, from the depth of the unconscious, there it appeared as a lightning bolt, totally evident.

And from the heart of grayness, of indifferentiation, it became the only thing that was really interesting, the only thing that deserved to be known and that justified life’s struggle. Of course, I could continue to live functioning, working, spending my money, doing anything at all to occupy my time, in sum, pretending... The other possibility was to go on a path of discovery to truly find out, to know from the inside what this light is. Clearly, it is easy to paste words on this: vital energy, divine spark, but these are only empty and hollow words if they are not invested with the density of experience, the thickness of the lived. To know from the inside, through a revelation to oneself became in that instant the only thing that really had any worth in my life.

A turning point

And this situation where nothing of one’s social identity had any importance at all, where all the exterior qualifications had become secondary, finally allowed me to divest myself of doubts, of hesitations, of shame, if I ever decided on something that appeared totally insane in the eyes of others. No longer being so narrowly tied to how others saw me, I became free for the most risky of options. And it was this kind of freedom of impoverishment that allowed me to say to myself: “I must go and see what this

light is... It could be the sense of a life and if I fail, well, at least I will have tried. If I do not attempt anything, I risk regretting it all my life”. And that is where I took the decisive step. I think that this moment is important in my whole evolution. I place it in a sense as the turning point, which has led me to do what I am doing now.

Quite logically I then asked myself how to undertake this path; by what road to go towards the knowledge of this light.

So, I was a physician and had seen a bit what was happening in the scientific academic world and it was clear to me that it was not in that direction that I would get answers. Science had become a nationalistic ideology, materialistic, dehumanized. Beginning my medical studies I had naively imagined that I was coming into the “temple of knowledge”. What a disappointment; I had found techniques, certainly often very sophisticated ones, but without soul, without intellectual curiosity.

I therefore tried to simultaneously study philosophy in the Humanities Faculty. However, it was quickly made very clear to me that one only had the right to ask questions after having acquired the bases of philosophical thought. Teachings did not start from our questionings in order to make these evolve but rather from a canon to be acquired. Here as well, curiosity was not on the agenda. I had therefore also stopped studying philosophy because of all this, and also I have to confess, because it was difficult to do medicine and philosophy at the same time.

The academic environment, or that of teaching, both in the natural science as in the humanities had not left me with the feeling that this was the site for the acquisition of knowledge about life. Except, however, for a few professors. I have always found those few individuals out of the box that had fed me, that had known how to transmit something of the human, beyond their professional qualifications. I believe strongly

in this peculiar capacity of the human being to be, often in a very solitary manner, as yeast in the dough.

The answer did not seem either to emerge from the side of the churches due to the reasons I have alluded to above. Here again I had been touched by the way of life of certain persons who had crossed my path as well as by the life of certain saints like Charles de Foucauld or the writings of inspired men like Teilhard de Chardin. The latter, greatly criticized by the institution, had nevertheless saved me from being asphyxiated by the breath of his inspiration. Those were souls that had given very consistent answers with a touch of authentic mysticism. However, the institution of the Church seemed to me to be too rigid, closed by a prudence leading to paralysis and with silences about certain topics, which seemed hypocritical to me or characterized by a less than admirable complicity. That was another path that seemed to me to be rather blocked.

The political path was never convincing for me; I always felt that there was something false there, a form of imposture, very quickly brushed aside.

Following the path of the empirical knowledge of the Peruvian healers

Since all these doors seemed closed, the only door that remained half open was that of the traditional medicines. Indeed, I have lived directly certain experiences; I had seen that these people knew things and that it worked. Their knowledge was entirely coherent and functional and went way beyond the level of simple collective beliefs. In my acquired medical pragmatism and my inherited peasant pragmatism, I could say of these empirical practices “they work”. And so, there existed in that direction answers congruent with reality.

The decision imposed itself to follow the path of the empirical knowledge of the healers. Because it was very clear to me that it was absolutely necessary to go through the way of experience. I did not want to be given answers from the outside but rather that I be guided toward the discovery of my own answers. This was the only thing that could satisfy me. It was a matter of learning from these specialists by following in their footsteps.

Then appeared more concrete queries: where, when, how. It seemed to me that I had to rely on what I had already acquired, my personal advantage. I was a physician and therefore I had to make use of this passport by elaborating a research proposal on traditional medicines. Peru quickly imposed itself as the place known by me that was most appropriate for such a project:

a Latin context closer to my own culture, a diversified country with a diversity of ancestral medicines where I already had contacts both in the formal sector as well as with healers.

The academic environment, or that of teaching, both in the humanities had not left me with the feeling that this was the site for the acquisition of knowledge about life

Without entering into details, one year after taking this decision I found the means to get to Peru. I observed with greater clarity how I was guided in this quest. For example I arrived in Tarapoto on the basis of a comment of a friend about that place and when I was coming down from the plane, smack in the middle of the stairs, the certitude that I had “arrived home” washed over me. I had seen nothing of the city; the feeling was totally irrational, but I knew. This certitude has not left me in the 20 years that I have lived here.

In the first months I visited and finally chose a few healers with whom I got along well, with whom currents of sympathy flowed more easily. We chatted and the conclusion of our conversations was always more or less the same: “the only way of learning, is to take the plants, that it was them that taught”. When I asked them how these plants taught

human beings, they answered me “like on TV!” Clearly we were not watching the same channels!

I then had to make a choice: that of putting my rationality and my judgments temporarily aside and to authorize myself to stop every six months, retake as it were all my rational Western tools, reflect and see where I was at physically, psychologically, and in my research. It must be said that it was somewhat of a dissociative process to divide oneself in this manner, but nevertheless indispensable in order to enter into a process of learning. In fact during several years I had recurring dreams where I was called for a medical emergency and I could not remember the treatments to administer or the dosages; it was extremely anxiety producing. I was leaving behind the security of the medical status for the meanders of Amazonian healing. C. G. Jung played a particularly important role at that time by the introduction of the symbolic, spiritual or mystical dimension. With hindsight. I now feel that Jung suffers from certain limitations, however he played a very important role of junction, of bridge between my Western training and the traditional Amazonian medicines. With Jung’s help one dared to approach themes of inspiration, of illumination, and to exit the Freudian suffocation and impoverishment.

The link of faith: mystical vision

Besides, I had never lost totally the connection to faith. I think that if I had not had faith, such an adventure would not have happened in the same way. Our vital experiences as well as the lived rituals are marked by our underlying intentionality. Of course, we are burdened by all sorts of question marks, of doubts, of fears, of pretenses, but our depth intentionality in great part determines the quality of our

experiences. Here faith establishes a structuring axis. The simple fact of conceiving of a vague transcendental dimension to human existence allows one to open up toward a “wholly other”, to accept that reality does not stop at the sensible world, at the visible, but that there exist an underlying meaning to Life. That meaning implies an order and by this alone protections, guides, guardposts. Even with a somewhat frayed or wilted faith, this gaze focused beyond the immediate, changes everything.

I was very struck during the seminars that we organize to realize what a disaster is the life of those bereft of faith.

The only way of learning, is to take the plants, that it was them that taught. “When I asked them how these plants taught human beings, they answered me “like on TV”! Clearly we were watching the same channels!

I am not here speaking of beliefs but of faith. Some parents believe to do the right thing by not transmitting any faith to their children in order to leave them free to choose when they become adults. But how can one choose when one does not know what the options are? I am here speaking of knowing from the interior; one speaks of faith not of beliefs. Faith, that is to say that life has a meaning with its share of suffering and sadness, of disease and death, beyond all “evil” life remains, becomes perennial, wins, remains coherent. Beliefs can be learned through study, but faith has to be transmitted through the heart, the lived, from being to being. From the instant that such persons have received no transmission of faith, of a sense of this “wholly other”, they have nothing with which to build themselves, just like empty fortresses. They exist only through their defenses and nothing at the center, nothing to defend. This is particularly frequent in the psychiatric profession. One must be prudent not to attack frontally these resistances without having previously planted a small plant at the heart of the fortress. The collapse of the defensive structures can be dangerous as long as the little plant has not grown. Such an interior emptiness from the lack of seeding of faith is the saddest thing that I know of. Even if one has received a

bad religious education, a twisted or painful one, one at least has something to rebel against, something on which to lean even if it is through battle, purification, revision. That way, one has elements and that is infinitely richer than nothingness. The worst is not to have anything at all.

I was lucky to have these elements as an inheritance. Not only through typically religious practices such as going to mass but through life witnessing. For it is such witnessing that validates religious expression in one's first steps. It is a manifestation of coherence. Through my paternal family, I inherited a peasant background. The peasant is the one who makes a furrow till the end of the field and starts again in the opposite direction in the hope of a crop. If the whole crop is lost, the next year he starts with the same determination, patience and hope. He has faith in what is to come, the promise of a harvest is always there.

At a certain moment, I believed myself to be an intellectual and It is through the plants that I discovered this interior peasant baggage, of which I was not conscious. And it is through this that I rediscovered the spiritual guidance that goes with it. The transmitted religion became once again inhabited of spirituality in my eyes and in my heart. Of course this mixed inheritance had to be purified and it continues to be purified. What seemed to me to be dissociated, the forms of the Church and my aspirations toward this interior light began merging, began again resonating. I see major themes that converge more and more closely even if I consider that such work is far from being completed. This does not prevent me from being quite critical of certain institutional forms, forms suffering from the decrepitude or moralizing, of certain structures, but essentially, at the core, the treasure is there, intact under the deposit of silt from centuries. At this stage of my journey I have no doubts about the coherence of the teachings of Jesus

Beliefs can be learned through study, but faith has to be transmitted through the heart, the lived, from being to being.

and the revelations of Nature through the sacred plants used in their appropriate context. I cannot imagine at this point that there could emerge in me a brutal fracture between these two forms of Revelation.

Curiously, this rediscovery, this re-appropriation of a post-modern Christian faith echoes a more mystical vision that modernity thought necessary to reject and associate with obsolete middle-age beliefs. That is to say that the super natural dimension of life reclaims its rights while differentiating itself from the superstitious forms of the magical thought of the contemporary world. I am well aware that those persons listening to me from the outside risk seeing this as a going backwards.

For me there is no contradiction in being a post-modern Christian while at the same time being attached to the transmission of traditions in their essence, quite to the contrary.

The spiritual realm is of the order of the experience: the presence of the spirit world.

For example, the importance of the spiritual combat recovers all its vigor; the battle between the forces of Good and those of Evil is more than ever on the agenda. Because I am a peasant-physician, I function in a pragmatic dimension, clinical, with verification of the facts, observation and diagnostic, therapy and evaluation of the results. The spiritual domain is for me to be found in the area of experience, it has to be felt. I must admit that I did not at all expect to discover all this by following the path of traditional knowledges. I was still very much imbued by a reductionist Western psychologism that sees the spiritual domain as a compartment of the psyche, a by-product of our mental cogitations. Ever since the beginning of my explorations with healers, I was confronted with the presence of the world of spirits. I had originally considered this as something inconvenient, something artificial, an interference with my investigations, a pollution of ancestral

medicines that had nothing to do with me. However, I had to rather quickly recognize that the phenomenon was not simply a cultural one but a transcultural one and was part of human nature and the nature of the world. We ourselves are incarnated spirits liable to be polluted and that the whole of creation is inhabited by the presence of spirits. With the perspective of 25 years, I am simply amazed to see to what extent we rational westerners who deny or ignore this dimension are “infested” by malignant spiritual forms, which are frequent and the source of pathologies. In such cases, obviously, the cure must inevitably go through the purification of these invasions or contaminations.

I had to conquer many an interior resistance in order to be able to admit the extremely pervasive nature of this reality in our daily lives.

I cannot be surprised to find again these resistances in my contemporaries when I risk mentioning these topics. And such resistances may be even stronger on the part of the Church. Bad spirits are not part of the horizon of many church persons who feel extremely ill at ease with this topic and go as far as to negate their existence, even though Jesus mentions that the expulsion of evil spirits will be one of the major signs of the believer. To find a priest designated by Church authorities as an exorcist who dares to exercise his apostolic mandate is a most uncertain endeavor. In Peru, for example, there are no priest exorcists, and in Spain there are only two.

You can easily imagine that if a person meets such a priest and tells him that she has arrived from Amazonia, that there she took ayahuasca and through this experience discovered that a part of her problems were due to an infestation (of bad spirits), she is highly likely not to be heard and even to be

sent to a psychiatrist. However, among the few practicing exorcists that I was able to meet I was listened to attentively. I sensed them to be as alone as myself within the Church because through different approaches our experiences turned out to be extremely close and coincided. In fact, there exist extremely few places in the West where one may be able to verify in some fashion the existence and efficacy of the spiritual world, even though since some twenty years the charismatic movements are rekindling hope along those lines.

If the spiritual dimension is only the place of our mental projections, a stopgap of our psychic weaknesses, an imaginary scenario, then the denial of the invisible world imposes itself. As long as the debate remains an ideological one, an intellectual one, all kinds of interpretation as well as all types of denials are permitted. However, the moment one enters into the domain of lived experience, the one of the exorcist priest or that of the Amazonian shaman, these mental constructions are quickly undone.

The
super-natural
dimension of life
reclaims its rights while
differentiating itself from
the superstitious forms
of
the magical thought of
the contemporary
world.

The dimension of spiritual combat and the management of relations with the spiritual realm. Know-how and ritual formations: examples

The moment one rereads the writings of the Church Fathers, of the mystics, and also simply of the Bible and especially of the New Testament, the notion of a spiritual battle and of the existence of spiritual entities, angels or demons, is found on every page. It is as if one had occulted, or had forgotten this dimension. Traditional societies are permeated with this dimension of an inhabited universe, of a very active invisible dimension and have not known the rupture of the ideologies of the death of God. This also means that relationships with this invisible world are not always the most peaceful and that sorcery is extremely active. To pay attention to the information and

knowledges of traditional medicines certainly does not mean to be on board without precautions.

The management, if I may speak thus, of the relationship with the spiritual world requires therefore specific skills. It begins with one's intentionality, which, as I said earlier, provokes a certain ordering to these relationships. A plant can be used to cure or to harm, as everything else. The spirit of the plant is submitted to human will.

I was able, in a certain manner, to rediscover the importance of liturgical forms and of sacramental gestures through the ritual structures that allowed one to manage without detriment this relationship with the spiritual world through the use of sacred plants. Indeed, the choice of ritual form will induce from the ingested plant different effects.

Example 1: Coca

Let's take as an example coca, the sacred plant of the Andean world, the Incas. If one prepares a simple herbal infusion with coca leaves in order to help digestion, the cultural ritual of herbal infusion is sufficient since I only ask of the plant to act at a weak energetic level, at its molecular dimension, its pharmacological dimension. Now, if I want to use the same coca plant in order to access certain medical knowledge's, to cure myself through dreaming, to calm myself on the psychic plan, I need to begin by doing a ritual, because I will solicit the energy of this plant at a different vibratory level, as it were. If I wish to access a level of a relationship with the spirit of the coca in order to go toward wisdom, toward knowledge, I now need to proceed to a ritual act that allows me to "activate" the spirit of this plant. This spirit is named "supay" in Quechua and the Spaniards translated it by "devil" instead of "genie" or "angel" of the plant. Each

category of plant possesses a collective spirit, a tutelary entity that can strongly be assimilated to the angelic functions of the Christian tradition. Such entities preside in species of living beings (plants and animals), in natural places, in human collectivities, in psychic functions and in spiritual functions.

In the Amazonian tradition, as in all other non-Western cultural traditions, there exists a very elaborate knowledge of the world of such entities: fallen angels, demons and bad spirits, spirits of the dead. Such knowledge is widely used for magical actions, spiritist or witchcraft. Before arriving in Peru, I was ignorant of the existence of all of this. I thought like all average Frenchmen that we were dealing with cultural beliefs and that collective autosuggestion was at work. However, certain regions of France such as Mayenne, Berry or Corsica have kept pre-Christian roots where such practices are still active. But after all, this was a case of remnants from a backwards peasant world. In other words, one had to share in such beliefs. Indeed, one can accept that certain toxic substances can harm someone through direct contact, but what about hexes at a distance? We now have large migrations from the

South to the North with their cultural contributions that include negative aspects: maraboutage is now practiced in Paris.

Each
Category of plant
Possesses a collective
spirit,
A tutelary entity that
can strongly
Be assimilated to the
Angelic functions of the
Christian tradition.

Already in Peru, I reconnected with a priest from my student days. Even though I was in conflict with him on certain points, I had a decided admiration for his wisdom. I learned he was recently named exorcist-priest of his diocese. As a kind of joke, I say to him: "Well now, we do the same work, yes?" This smiling and serene man then confesses to me that he knew nothing of his new functions and was trying anxiously to learn more about the subject. It so happened that he exercised his functions very close to a military barrack housing overseas recruits. He was suddenly called upon by young New Caledonians,

Antilleans as well as recruits from the Reunion Island asking to be unbewitched... and he was sending them to the psychiatrist because he did not know what else to do.

His interpretation, common among most Church people, was that if demons exist, those belong to the individual: our pride, our anger, our lies, but those demons are not their own ontological entities. No doubt, all true healers are able to recognize the way in which a person collaborates with such entities and even feeds them but this takes nothing away from their singularity and their specificity, their individuality. In more Christian terms, there is indeed a wounding of the soul, an original fall that damages human nature by giving an opening to demons, which does not make them disappear into non-existence. To the point that Jesus expulses demons into the body of pigs that are then possessed. In spite of these concrete facts, priests who are regularly called upon to comment on such passages of the gospels either don't go there or suggest an interpretation that they characterize as being "symbolic". One must understand here the meaning of symbolic in the sense of something virtual, a sort of literary analogy. It would in some way excuse the coarseness of the topic. In fact symbolism is anything but virtual and in all traditions it signifies what is true at different and simultaneous levels of reality.

Example 2: A transgenerational transmission of problematics

I can give another example, that of human solidarity, of the solidarity of the human condition, that of an altered nature, that of sin since we are in a religious discourse. Observation through traditional medicine attests that there exists a trans-generational transmission of problems. Transgressions against life, against the laws of life, are transmitted from generation to generation

until the offence is resolved, repaired, expiated in some fashion, until forgiveness can happen. We are here again dealing with a "clinical" observation. In fact, very often, the offence that occurred in the past, the offence of an ancestor, is not known by those who suffer its consequences but it is carried forth by the body's memory and can re-emerge to consciousness through the ritualized use of psychoactive sacred plants. And then an a posteriori verification of the veracity of the facts becomes possible.

One observes that when it is a matter of a very serious transgression such as murder, rape, abortion, treason, the first silencing is known among the first generation. Everyone knows about it but no one talks about it. In the next generation, one knows that there is a silence, but what it covers is not known. There is the awareness that something unwholesome happened but it is not talked about and this something is not clearly identified. Starting with the third generation, one no longer knows that there is a silence but what it covers remains active in the familial and individual consciousness. Such a situation can give rise to forms of dissociation because the individuals are inhabited by verifiably destructive forces whose origin they cannot identify, that seem not to belong to their history and that nevertheless exercise a certain control on their lives. This state of affairs can eventually lead to such forces becoming compulsive and quasi uncontrollable. At that point, people write to me saying that they have the "impression" of being possessed even though

most of them say this is an allegorical manner of speaking without literally believing it. It is a way of saying that they cannot control something in them. However, I now would dare to say that there is really a form of real possession, not in the sense of the great diabolic possession, in the style of the movie "The Exorcist". Those cases of great possession, even though rare nevertheless exist and I saw a

Transgressions
Against life, are
transmitted
From generation to
generation until the
offence is resolved,
repaired, expiated in
some fashion, until
forgiveness can
Happen.

few of them and they are really impressive. But more often, it is a matter of forms of “infestations” more or less important, single or multiple. During therapeutic, ritual sessions, the diagnostic can be made or more precisely imposed itself by external manifestations or energetic manifestations that cannot be confused with hysterical posturing. It is in fact one of the basic functions of the shamanic or healing work to make this type of diagnosis which will require specific therapeutic actions.

Such infestations can also be the result of a magical practice on the person or an ancestor, of curses, of polluted inheritances. For example, one can be astonished by the fact that during a therapeutic procedure, a European visualizes incessantly images connected with the world of India or that the therapist sees him being surrounded by Africans, and the whole being wrapped in very disagreeable and sinister perceptions and sensations. And then one discovers that an ancestor has lived in India and has experienced cultural conflicts or that this person spent time in Africa and had a romantic relationship that ended badly.

In such cases, the treatment inevitably requires a form of exorcism. We are not talking here of exorcism in the canonical sense of the term, reserved to a priest specifically mandated by his bishop. Such great exorcism requires recourse to the official Roman ritual, which is not available to us. One prefers then to speak of a ritual of liberation, or small exorcism, authorized for any baptized person of good faith. Any Christian can pray for the liberation of a human being suffering from a degree of infestation, which we no longer dare to do today. It seems to me fundamental to insist here on the necessity of an absolute agreement with the Church. Why? Simply because the only way to have absolute security in the case of such delicate procedures is to remain in total obedience. Obedience maintains us in humility and maintains us in security. If our superior sometimes makes mistakes, which obviously

can happen, the sheer fact of obedience maintains us in the “security zone”. Here we have had the good fortune to have a bishop who has always approved and supported our actions. He is a man very much socially engaged and I think he has moved to see drug addicted patients who have not been “drenched in holy water” being sometimes surprisingly transformed on the basis of what we offered them here at Takiwasi. I must say that this has been a grace for me and for the Takiwasi project. His permanent and unreserved support has been a sign on the path.

Then being very busy and seeing that we were greatly in demand, the bishop delegated a priest to us. I must confess that I was somewhat frightened when I learned that he was the chaplain of the military barrack here in Tarapoto. My prejudice led me to think that he was little favorably disposed toward a method such as ours. We discovered a generous and open man who himself undertook little by little the path of discovering traditional medicine with its riches when used in a correct ritualized context. Father Christian accompanies us very closely and allows us to integrate ever more closely the components of traditional medicines and those of the faith in Christ. He in some manner undertook an inverse journey to that of Christianity toward ancestral knowledge, which has only deepened and enriched his faith.

Results of the work at the Takiwasi center: intensification of the ways of faith

Without doubt one of the results of the Takiwasi Center for me and a few other persons has been the intensifying of a path toward faith. During such a journey, there was of course the need to discover the coherences between “Christianity and shamanism”, to say it briefly, and thusly of this tools that the Church offers, the liturgy of the sacraments. It is certainly true that for the average Christian, the knowledge of his faith is limited to the catechism of his

childhood. Here, it was necessary to approach the texts anew and reread them with a different gaze, detect the correspondences, deepen the symbolic reading, nourish oneself anew in the mystical sources.

Simultaneously, the spiritual dimension emerged very rapidly during the two week long seminars, which we organize for non-drug addicted visitors based on a psycho-therapeutic approach. Such groups not being composed of only Christians. I felt it necessary to be sensitive to the non-Christian participants by adopting a more therapeutic or symbolic approach. However, a certain number of engaged Catholics have requested that a seminar be offered where one could openly speak of faith and of the echoes between their experience with the sacred plants and their Christian faith. It was a matter of suspending the necessity of reserve in order not to offend others so as to be able to really pose the essential questions relating to faith. That is how we came to organize seminars for persons who had already come to Takiwasi and had already experienced the ritualized use of plants and who were also actively engaged in a faith practice.

Unfailingly one observes that these persons deepen their faith in a really extraordinary fashion. For example, one cannot remain indifferent hearing a priest affirm that during his first conversion he decided to become a priest and that the second conversion of his life consisted in his experience with plants.

Becoming aware of the importance of the corporeal dimension

Actually, Christian faith is lived in a much too intellectual or mental manner with a flagrant embodiment or incarnation, of inscription in the body. Suddenly, with the experience of the plants, a powerful awareness of the importance of our embodiment emerges. Spiritual life returns to inhabit the body of the subject, a body which

is not a simple object, a container for the spirit, but which is an integral part of the subject.

It is rather strange to note that the two great reproaches made constantly form the exterior to Catholic faith nowadays are the rejection of the body and the genesis of a sickly culpability. It seems to me that it is precisely the inverse that is at play here since it is the very religion of the incarnate God who offers forgiveness; I was going to say in a discretionary manner.

Our body is not just anything; it is the temple of the Spirit and it is called to resuscitate for a life without end. We are thus here far from the concept of a temporary vehicle, one that is finally secondary. In this sense, the practice with plants allows one to live intensely this dimension of corporality, to attest to the investiture of the body by the Spirit that contributes to reveal us to ourselves.

It is also the very religion of forgiveness since it is sufficient to confess one's faults, which is not always easy, to realize one's errors, of course sincerely, which is the minimum that can be required in order to obtain forgiveness. Repentance is the equivalent of a systematic forgiving! This mercy here is offered permanently, it is only necessary to want to receive it wholeheartedly. Similarly the sacred plants that have been received with open heart inevitably lead one to progressively become aware of one's shadow, of the pain one has caused, of the self-complacency of the ego.

Christian faith rediscovered under lovable aspects

The proper use of plants therefore offers an opportunity to reconcile oneself with a Christian faith rediscovered under more amiable aspects.

The exterior image of the Church suffers a great deal from the neurotic superposition placed on the very substance of faith on the part of Christians and in particular on the part of Churchmen. We see coming here many persons distant from a Church that wounded them in their childhood. Some of them were asphyxiated by the moralizing prescriptions of parental figures, others were pulled apart by the contradictions between the discourse on love and the silences concerning certain intra-familial events, or even worse those who were deeply affected by attitudes or gestures with sexual connotations, doubly unwholesome when it is done by persons entrusted with a religious function.

Such backgrounds, sometimes extremely painful, weigh heavily on the judgment, the distrust or the hostility directed indiscriminately toward faith through these troubled parental figures. The rejection, sometimes the blocking or hatred will then be directed beyond itself to the “good news” that it was meant to transmit.

It is here necessary to undertake a work of differentiation, which allows one to discern what has been distorted during the transmission of the faith and simultaneously to find the very essence of the message so that it may become meaningful for oneself. This was as well in part my own itinerary and the ritual with the plants offers one this psychic acuity that facilitates such discernment.

One of the difficulties of this manner of accessing a more lively and purified faith consists in finding the necessary sign posts in order to continue on one’s journey when one returns home. It’s true that to return to one’s local parish and state that “In Amazonia I rediscovered my faith” may create some problems... Nevertheless, with the help of

the Spirit, paths do open, and some come to know true interior revolutions.

The practices with plants allows one to live intensely this dimension of corporality, to attest to the investiture of the body by the Spirit that contributes to reveal us to ourselves.

It is not a syncretistic approach

It is necessary to insist that we are not speaking here of syncretism, a kind of pseudo-neo-Christian rite where ayahuasca would replace the Eucharist. To my mind this would be a major transgression and besides a total absurdity. There do exist neo-Christian churches that have replaced the wafer and the wine with ayahuasca. This seems to me to be a form of idolatry, which clearly I absolutely do not share.

One must be extremely clear about these issues. If the world is created good, the plants and ayahuasca are in their essence good. But human beings, in their freedom, may make bad use of them. To my mind, it is fundamental to inscribe their use in a clear spiritual intention when one wishes to make a spiritual use of these. There are here two aspects, that of intentionality and that of the forms. I do not pretend to be totally clear and transparent about these matters, but there must be a “basic sincerity” as a minimal condition of one’s intentionality. And as for forms, I cannot place myself outside of the ritual prescriptions authorized by the Church authorities in respect to the fundamentals of dogma. When I say “dogma”, I do not refer to exterior secondary and temporal prescriptions but to the very essence of the truth concerning faith. And this “deposit of faith” is the Church inspired by Christ who is its guarantor. This base has never been contradicted for 2000 years in spite of the sometimes agitated history of the Church and of all its errors. This is rather remarkable. I remain in admiration of the fact that the Church as an institution, with all its human imperfections, has never altered the very essence of what the Church is as the mystic body of Christ.

Here is another work of differentiation to undertake. How often one sees coming here persons who mistake the institution of the Church, which is human, material, terrestrial government and fuse it, identify it completely, to the Church in its aspect of an assembly of believers and mystical body of Christ. The rejection of the one implies the rejection of the other.

And one sees to what extent, in our days of confusion, the necessity of good discernment imposes itself. How many differentiations to undertake at all levels! And one of the great problems of a work like ours, which tries to open doors in order to enter into relationship or in contact with the world of the Spirit, consists in asking the question about the sources of inspiration. Where do those inspirations that gush forth during the ritualized therapeutic practices with the medicinal plants and in particular with the sacred psychoactive ones such as ayahuasca come from? Can one trust the content of visions, things said, heard, that make their appearance or again trust the seeming messages of the rich dream life post-ayahuasca? This clearly is an enormous obstacle but this is not the only obstacle of traditional medicine but rather that of all forms of inspiration. But given the intensity and frequency of such inspirations in this ritualized context it remains fundamental to establish some basic securities.

In order to avoid all kinds of possible deviations

Being permeated with the rigor of theology or of dogma plays an essential role, in my opinion, in order to avoid all sorts of possible deviances, from the sectarian movements all the way to ideological fanaticism and to practices of witchcraft and to idolatrous forms. Such work turns out to be very difficult and discernment

The Revelations concerning Oneself or one's ancestors, one's family, the silences, can sometime be extremely painful but in the end they make the weight of lies, of imposture, and of pretensions lighter.

must always be renewed basing itself on prayer, the sacraments, in remaining in obedience and in practicing prudence. To discern what comes from the Spirit and to differentiate it from the temptations of the Great Seductor cannot be done without recourse to the tools that the Church offers us to do this.

This them deserves to be worked upon and reflected upon calmly. In order to do just this we have organized in 2005 a meeting on the theme of "Christianity/ Shamanism". It is not as if I place Christianity and Shamanism as two path situated on the same level, as equivalent, but it was an issue of presenting this theme in the stylized manner of a shock meeting. The Proceedings will be published during 2007 before October when a second meeting is planned.

The francophone and hispanophone participants have testified about the effect that their experience with the ritual use of plants has had on their faith or has helped them discover new aspects of their faith. One finds in these totally astonishing teachings. The consensus is that this approach is both very beautiful and very difficult. That is so because the spiritual combat intensifies but the spiritual fruits are also more gratifying. One finds again this "tremendum et fascinans" of numinous experiences to use Jungian terminology.

A deeply liberating experience

The first steps inevitably confront us with our shadow. What emerges spontaneously, without any verbal injunction, is the vision of our own misery, the error's of one's life, the harm done to others and to oneself. Nevertheless, one sees one's faults and one's lacks, in short one's sins, but this never comes as a reproach, as an accusation, but rather in the

evidence of truth. This awareness leads one to real gratitude and reveals itself as being profoundly liberating.

And to my mind here lies the number one criterion: this lived experience is profoundly liberating, since only truth liberates. The revelations concerning oneself or one's ancestors, one's family, the silences, can sometimes be extremely painful but in the end they make the weight of lies, of imposture, and of pretensions lighter. Here is an important criterion of discernment.

When the inspirations or the visions push the subjects into self-accusations and culpability, when they increase confusion and discomfort, they simply do not come from "the good side". The accuser is the demon, is Satan.

Very often, after sessions of ayahuasca, participants desire to speak and even in some sense to confess. After the liberating vision there is a need to translate it into words in order to definitively expulse the secret by exposing it to the light of day. Ayahuasca plays the role of a truth serum but one that does not obligate anyone. The liberating process of becoming aware is always accompanied by two elements: forgiveness and gratitude. And that is not anti-Christian, as far as I know.

The need to forgive and be forgiven is very often associated with indications concerning the reparations to be made. This is so because all faults need to be recognized and then repaired. One can attest to numerous cases where the transgressions go back to former generations and are expiated today in the present generation. The Bible says that the faults of the parents fall on the children up to the fourth generation. This kind of solidarity of sin is clinically attested to and often beyond four generations, a number that I think needs to be taken symbolically, while consoling

ourselves by the fact that blessings are transmitted to a thousand generations! And that too can be attested when a subject discovers itself to be protected by an ancestor who acted justly and intercedes on his or her behalf. Sin is discovered at the same time as grace is.

To discover oneself to be protected, accompanied, guided beyond even what one could imagine evokes then a movement of gratitude. Such consolation does one good and is indispensable because if we only saw our disgrace and our misery we would sink into despair. What appears then is this marvel: "in spite of everything I am still here, alive, undeserving recipient of the goodness of life" and that is extraordinary. Life then reveals itself as demanding, without doubt, but in the measure of the kindness that is offered to us graciously... in the image of the Father.

Many persons are thus progressively led to revise their history and to redraw their affective map. The shadows that appear also give salience to the flashes and lights that had not necessarily been seen before. Love had been waited for in a certain way and it expressed itself differently and we thought ourselves bereft of love. Yes, my father has been relatively absent but on the economic plane he never abandoned me; he has always assured my food security; it was his way to

say to me: "I love you"; he did not know how to say it any other way. That was the way that he held my hand somehow and expressed his affection. In that way, a whole interior emotional, psychic and spiritual geography can reconfigure itself.

What I find extraordinary in this practice with plants, when it is carried out correctly, is the absolute coherence that underlies it. That is also undoubtedly what allows one not to become mad.

An essential fact imposes itself: even if I do not get the meaning of life as a whole, a fact is certain, this life is woven of meaning, inhabited in coherence. Undoubtedly, what I find extraordinary in this practice with plants, when it is carried

out correctly, is the absolute coherence that underlies it. That is also undoubtedly what allows one not to become mad. The shadows can become deeper, the spiritual combat can become desperate, but coherence remains. I have never experienced a session of ayahuasca where an inspiration, a piece of information, was contradicted later or by a previous vision. Such contradictions would obviously have put me in an intolerable situation of doubt. Definitely it happens that certain type of information needs to be completed little by little, to become more precise, more pure, but never to the point of becoming contrary to the orientation or substance at the beginning.

The discovery of the collective shadow, of “the sin of the world”, leads to the revelation of this unsuspected dimension of witchcraft, satanic or demonic practices. I was totally oblivious of this universe, which I thought was tied to cultural beliefs. I even tried to avoid it but the presence of evil is unavoidable, its pervasiveness omnipresent, and the spiritual combat inevitable.

Ayahuasca, a teaching path

The ritualized practice of sacred plants constitutes thus an instrument that gives access to the “inspirators”, a path of teaching. The healers have known this since time out of mind when they named ayahuasca as the “teacher plant”, the plant that teaches. All persons who take ayahuasca speak of this spontaneously saying “I was told, I have learned, I saw, I was taught”. This leads us to the question of discernment about “who teaches?”

This teaching is done in a symbolic mode that includes simultaneously the physical, psycho-affective and spiritual dimensions. Between these diverse levels of life there operates a principle of non-contradiction. It is “true” at all levels and at the same time. But our analytic tendency sometimes renders the task difficult when we try to dissociate these different aspects of being. In particular in the spiritual sphere, reason must operate as

a logical principle of non-contradiction but by widening itself to the mystical dimension. It so happens that Christianity, and contemporary religions in general, rationalized themselves at the same time that the modern world pervaded society. This loss of the mystical dimension renders us deaf and blind to the analogical, metaphoric and even poetic language through which the realities from “above” articulate themselves. We are spiritually disabled and need to be re-educated through listening to the voice of the spirit.

If we have known how to use our cerebral left hemisphere in the context of our western education, the non-rational functions of right brain remain atrophied or latent. As it happens, ayahuasca and the other teacher-plants activate this “melodic” hemisphere by awakening the psychic functions such as clairvoyance, perception at a distance, intuition... The sudden awakening of these non-educated, repressed, censured functions can generate an initial disorder and the symbolic information be avidly recuperated by a reductive and rationalist left hemisphere, generating misunderstandings and confusions. The sudden discovery of the world of transcendence, of trans-generational inheritances, of the world of the spirits, of the efficacy of Evil, can suddenly overwhelm the subject and generate confusion.

The extreme power of the ritual context: not reserved for specialists

It is at this point that must intervene the extreme power of the ritual context. All spiritual traditions, including the Christian one of course, have established liturgies, rites, forms of symbolic containment and integration.

This has led me to seriously ask myself: “who am I to perform rituals? I am not a priest, I am not even a deacon; thus in the name of what, in the name of who?” I now see this as a regrettable lack in classical Christian education, which leads us to think that this is reserved to the “Specialists”, that

is to say to Church persons. It is doubly regrettable because it is partly false since any baptized person is from that moment onward part of a priestly people and not only can but must exercise his or her ministry. This, clearly, must not authorize such person to replace the priest ordained for the sacraments. But the ministerial function of all Christians leads them to pray for others, putting on their hands to heal the sick, invoke the Holy Spirit, offer praises and thanksgivings.

Furthermore, since ordained priests resist engaging themselves in the dimension of healing, of liberation, or else not being available, lay persons must take up these forsaken ministries. In fact, the experience of the Church turns out to be extremely rich in tools of liberation that have had the tendency to be abandoned these last centuries. I have found there a gold mine where the lode is far from being exhausted. For the liturgical structures are efficacious and beneficent forms of Tradition. It is not an issue simply of establishing aesthetic and moving contexts that provoke devotion (others would call it suggestion) but to perform operational practices and thus delicate ones. I went there, however, on tiptoes, fearing to go wrong, to delude myself.

Ritual forms are extremely precise and rigorous, therefore the ritual needs to be taught, and must really be inspired and conform to the truths of faith.

The capacity to offer represents a properly fundamental human function, for only the human being can give glory to its Creator in full consciousness and through the verb. St Francis of Assisi invited the birds to do the same. The word of ritual is thus a polysemic verb that speaks truth simultaneously at diverse levels of reality. This “speaking

truth” is a blessing that cures silences, half truths, sicknesses and curses. The word of a human pronounced in a ritual context has an astonishing power. Obviously this word is not a rational word but rather a metaphoric, analogical and mystical one.

Chanting: a central therapeutic function

In the Amazonian tradition, songs called “ikaros” accompany the therapeutic sessions. The center that I have founded here is called Takiwasi or “the house that sings” in Quechua. What appeared to me is that it is really the song that exercises the central therapeutic function in all these ancestral practices. These songs are inspired through dreams or during ayahuasca sessions or sessions with other teacher-plants. The song represents a form of celebration of life and the sessions of ayahuasca consists of an intense moment of celebration of life, a long sung prayer, not only of requests but also of gratitude and praise.

The Word of a human Pronounced in a ritual context has an astonishing power. Obviously this word is not a rational word but rather a metaphoric, analogical and mystical one.

This is why the session by itself, through the songs, constitutes a sort of exorcism or more precisely a sort of ritual of liberation. The song touches deeply the integrality of being, the body in some way absorbing the energies of the ikaro and expelling the evil spirits incorporated in the organism of the patient. These liberations sometimes take spectacular forms or simply are carried out through physical expulsions such as vomiting.

This practice of exorcism seems also to exist in other religious traditions because one can appreciate that as soon as truth is spoken, that sincerity and devotion are present; the evil spirits are treated badly. But in my experience, the conjunction of Native American knowledge on the body and integration of prayer in the name of Christ actualize themselves with an astonishing synergy.

I have become more Christian and ecumenical

This path has therefore made me more Christian if I may speak thus but also more ecumenical. In my own inspirations all along this path of ayahuasca for the last 20 years, I was “requested” to visit healers of very different traditions, countries, religions and cultures. It was as if it was a matter of deeply rooting in me that “truth” appears wherever sincere humans pray from the heart.

I went to the Loyalty Islands to meet a protestant woman healer, only on the basis of my visions; and the an afro-Brazilian woman practicing Candomble in Bahia; then the oriental Christian rites in Syria and Lebanon; the Buddhist monks in Thailand; an old hundred years old Evengk shamaness in Mongolia; a spiritist healer in Palawan in the Philippines; a Maya Priestess in Guatemala; a Navajo Indian in the United States... and it is not yet over.

The way of plants: an opportunity to undergo within the self a great reconciliation

All of this I did based solely on dreams and visions of ayahuasca, discovering little by little the persons I was supposed to meet according to the indications. I still do not understand clearly what is gestating through such varied experiences that I sometimes resist. But I am at peace only when I end up accepting to carry out the indications of the visions. In all these traditions I have found points of convergence with my Amazonian and Christian practice, but I do not yet have all the answers. I can very well see that a kind of ordering of experiences is taking place, as if there were something accumulating in my body, in the large sense of the word, as an on-going gestation.

It is interesting to note that the coherence of these experiences leads one toward an open Christianity. It was never communicated to me to close myself in a “shop” with a

defensive attitude where “one” exclusive truth had to be preserved. If there is a radicalization, it would be in the real etymological sense of a re-descent to the deep “roots” of Christianity, and maybe, in such roots, to find other forgotten ramifications. I still am not able to situate well all of this.

I must note that at the experiential level, when I was with those persons of other traditions, I had no problems of communication at the core of those lived experiences. At this level, there are no watertight compartments; the “clinic” of suffering and of its resolution is the same. As soon as the approach of the suffering subject includes the invisible, transcendental, spiritual dimension, the “clinicians” of the diverse traditions see the same thing and therefore operate globally in the same manner. What conjoins is then stronger than what separates, that is cultural forms. When the issue is approached through ideological, religious or cultural forms, the situation becomes more complex. What I sense is that as soon as I am in the presence of a man or woman of faith, a fraternity immediately establishes itself, a kind of connivance, things become simpler. That is why even though I think of myself as relatively incompetent to debate theological questions, which I nevertheless do not underestimate, it appears to me that it is not this that should be put first and that the approach by way of the suffering subject, this “spiritual clinic”, offers a unique space of convergence. What unites us through diverse religious traditions, when they are sincere and not fanatical nor fundamentalists, is much more important than what separates us.

What can be observed in Takiwasi is that the persons who had a personal religious path before coming here, “radicalize” themselves, in the good sense of the term, that is go to the root of their own faith: Christians become better Christians; Jews become better Jews; Muslims become better Muslims; Buddhists become better Buddhists...

In a first experience, there is no sudden massive conversion. That can happen but

these are isolated cases; there are only a few cases of conversions. The majority of persons go through a process of purifying their own faith, their own spiritual path, and experience reconciliation with their own spiritual heritage. A kind of dynamism is established and that is already a lot.

Finally, what I discovered as being essential in this process on the spiritual plane is firstly that one is guided; therefore there is really a Father. It is such an important thing! Of course, as a Christian, I knew this intellectually, but the day that I really felt the presence of the Father, giver of Life, kind, protective, what a relief! In reality I became aware of the metaphysical anxiety arising from spiritual abandonment and the intrinsic fear of the Father as the one who punishes, that means also of something within one that bears a consciousness of sin. In fact it is a Father who forgives and calls for return.

Our itinerary, our suffering, our difficulties have meaning. One does not discover this from one day to the next; it is necessary to start the journey and journey patiently and with constancy.

A great reconciliation

The process with the plants as we practice it here is before anything else the opportunity to carry out in oneself a great reconciliation. To reconcile oneself with one's spirituality, one's history, one's body, one's heritages, with what we are and as we are, to reconcile ourselves with our human nature of a loved creature and therefore with a loving Father. This is to my mind a characteristic of the ayahuasca process well carried out embedded in at once a rigorous and open ritual forms. In this dissociated modern world where the subject is divided, broken up, dis-identified, de-sacralized, near collective madness, this inverse enterprise of reconciliation, of reunion, of association, leads to a process of unification which is salvific and peace making.

Appendix

Interview of Jacques Mabit, MD, by Frédérique Appfel-Marglin held in Takiwasi, Tarapoto, Peru in January 23, 2007.

Jacques Mabit, MD is the founder director of the Takiwasi Center for Rehabilitation of drug addicts in the city of Tarapoto, Dept of San Martín, Peru. He founded this center some 15 years ago after several years of training with many local shamans practicing the ritual of ayahuasca, the entheogen sacred brew of the Amazon. At Takiwasi,

patients are treated with the Amazonian ritual of ayahuasca with a catholic "colouring" as it were, as well as with psychotherapy and other therapies. The rate of success among those patients who stay the nine months course interned in

Takiwasi is of the order of 65 to 70%. This is against a rate of 3%

recovery with methadone and 29% recovery rate for those going "cold turkey". (see report by Prof Neil McKeganey, chair of Drug Misuse Research at Glasgow University, UK. Ref: <http://news.scotsman.com/leaders>).

Takiwasi also offers the ritual of ayahuasca to visitors both on a weekly basis, every Tuesdays and Fridays, as well as in the form of 12 days intensive "seminars". My own experience of a Tuesday night ritual at Takiwasi with two shamans leading, one a local one and the other one Dr. Mabit himself, was of a deeply spiritual and transformative experience where Christianity and indigenous spirituality enrich and deepen each other. I emerged from the ritual with a deepened experience of my own Jewish Renewal path (see Zalman Schachter Salomi's essay in this volume for more on this Jewish movement). Dr. Mabit is engaged not only in healing drug addicts but also in deepening the spirituality of those who visit Takiwasi, whatever their spiritual tradition

The Majority of Persons go through A process of purifying their own faith, their own spiritual path, and experience reconciliation with their own spiritual heritage.

may be.

The following words were spoken to me in French during an interview I conducted with Dr. Mabit on January 23, 2007. I told Dr. Mabit that I had awakened interest in the editorial team of InterCulture for his practice of an ayahuasca ritual where Christianity and indigenous spirituality were blended and enriched each other. I explained that we wished to publish his words in this issue on religious pluralism. I also reminded him of my own spiritual experience with ayahuasca at Takiwasi. I translated his words into English.