

From Messiah to Mushroom: A Brief History of John Marco Allegro's *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*

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ABSTRACT

In 1970, John Marco Allegro published *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, in which he argued that Jesus of Nazareth was a mushroom. The Gospels, he claimed, are not biographies of a teacher who lived and breathed but troves of sacred mushroom knowledge written down in coded language by members of a drug cult. Allegro's thesis caught many off guard, especially since, in his earlier work on the Dead Sea Scrolls, he considered Jesus to be a historical figure. This paper will explore the evolution of Allegro's thinking about Jesus from 1964-1970 based on archival research I have conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom. We will discover that Allegro's thinking about Jesus evolved over time and that he arrived at his mushroom hypothesis years after he initially began work on what would become *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*.

I.

John Marco Allegro published *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* on May 18, 1970;¹ the book caught many off guard. Allegro's now infamous thesis that Jesus Christ was a mushroom angered many scholars and people with religious sensibilities. He received criticism from all sides. Scholars publicly denounced him, his publisher issued an apology, and members of the clergy rebuked him.

Readers of the *Sunday Mirror* had advanced warning of Allegro's thesis when his book's contents were teased in a series of articles months prior to its publication. The first promotion came on February 15, 1970, in an article by David York titled "Famous scholar challenges the faith of centuries – CHRIST AND THE SACRED MUSHROOM," which included a photograph of Allegro inspecting a dried *Amanita muscaria* specimen. In April, the *Sunday Mirror* published extracts from *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* in a four-part serial. Yet even readers of the *Sunday Mirror* who experienced Allegro's thesis in smaller doses were taken aback by his bold claim that Jesus Christ was not a man but a mushroom.

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¹ John Marco Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, 1970).

A Dead Sea Scrolls scholar, Allegro had previously gained a reputation for stirring up controversy, making bold claims about a crucified Messiah in Qumran and undertaking an unconventional archaeological expedition, leading a team of amateurs on a treasure hunt for the hidden riches of the Second Temple.² Allegro often chose to take his bold claims straight to the public, skirting peer-reviewed journals and academic presses in favor of newspapers, popular magazines, and trade books.

Prior to 1970, despite his reputation as a provocateur, Allegro had not publicly made claims anywhere near as scandalous as those in *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*. In his earlier writings, Allegro regards Jesus as a historical figure who lived and breathed. He must have changed his mind about Jesus and the early Christian movement, but this shift in his thinking has remained a mystery. Archival evidence I recently gathered in the United States and the United Kingdom demonstrates that his thoughts on Jesus and the early Christian movement steadily evolved during the mid-1960s.³ Allegro's bold thesis may seem to appear suddenly, but *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* was years in the making, and its evolution can be plotted on a timeline that moves backward from the publication of *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* and the *Sunday Mirror* articles.

At the University of Manchester's John Rylands Library, I came across a letter dated November 25, 1968, from Allegro to William H. Brownlee, who was a junior fellow in Jerusalem when the Dead Sea Scrolls came to light.⁴ Brownlee became a professor at Claremont Graduate School, directing their Dead Sea Scrolls project until his retirement in 1982. Brownlee and Allegro's correspondence started in the 1950s, but the 1968 letter concludes, "For the past four years I have been working intensively on other researches which I hope will find first publication in 1970 here and in your country."

Allegro was prolific, and in 1970 and 1971, he published two books in addition to *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*. *The End of the Road* is a 1970 companion volume to *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* in which Allegro contemplates whether Christianity has any continued relevance after he exposed it as a cover story for an underground drug cult.⁵ *The Chosen People* is a history of Judaism from the exile to the Bar Kochba revolt written in 1971.⁶ It is unlikely that Allegro is alluding to these books in his letter to Brownlee. It was *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, as other sources I've found confirm, that Allegro—a man who otherwise researched and wrote with great speed—spent years composing. The Brownlee letter establishes that Allegro began work on *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* in 1964.

II.

A few months before the Brownlee letter, in July of 1968, Allegro and James Pike interacted. The exchange is preserved in the archives at Syracuse.⁷ Pike was a complex and compelling

² For a detailed account of Allegro's archaeological escapades, see chapters 6 and 7 in Judith Anne Brown, *John Marco Allegro: The Maverick of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005).

³ I am grateful to the staff at the John Rylands Library for granting me access to Allegro's papers. I am also grateful to the Institute for the Study of Antiquity and Christian Origins at the University of Texas at Austin for providing funding for my trip to Manchester in 2023.

⁴ John Marco Allegro papers, University of Manchester Special Collections, John Rylands Library.

⁵ John Marco Allegro, *The End of the Road* (MacGibbon and Kee, Ltd., 1970).

⁶ John Marco Allegro, *The Chosen People: A study of Jewish History from the Time of the Exile until the Revolt of Bar Kocheba* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1971).

⁷ James A. Pike papers, box 104, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.

character.⁸ He was installed as Episcopal bishop of California in 1958 but stepped down when faced with a heresy trial brought against him by his own church. Pike hosted Martin Luther King Jr. at Grace Cathedral following the march to Selma. He published a book detailing his efforts to employ clairvoyant and spiritualist methods to communicate with his son, who died by suicide two years prior.⁹ A year after meeting and corresponding with John Allegro, Pike traveled with his new wife to Israel, embarking on an ill-fated trip to the Dead Sea, where he fell down a cliff and died.¹⁰ Pike was profiled by Joan Didion in her book *The White Album*, and he was fictionalized as Timothy Archer by the sci-fi novelist Philip K. Dick.¹¹ What a life!

Pike visited Allegro in Manchester for a conference in June of 1968. A letter from June 27 reveals Pike discussed with Allegro his forthcoming book—presumably *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*—and gave him a “mushroom book” published by Doubleday.¹² I surmise, for Pike does not name the book, that to Allegro he gave Andrija Puharich’s *The Sacred Mushroom: Key to the Door of Eternity* Doubleday, 1959. In this text, Puharich describes his association with Harry Stone, a young sculptor known to slide into deep trances and speak ancient Egyptian. Stone would identify himself as Ra Ho Tep, a high-born Egyptian who lived 4,600 years ago, and would detail esoteric, ancient Egyptian mushroom rituals while in a trance. Allegro nowhere mentions Puharich’s book in *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, but I found Allegro’s handwritten notes about Puharich’s book in the Rylands archive on the reverse of a typed page of what could well have been the transcript of Allegro’s paper at that conference. Diane Kennedy, Pike’s widow, confirmed that her husband *likely* recommended Puharich’s *The Sacred Mushroom: Key to the Door of Eternity* to Allegro.¹³ If Pike lent Allegro Puharich’s book, then the bishop contributed to Allegro’s thinking about the mystical and religious qualities of the magic mushroom, and he may well have helped Allegro arrive at a title for *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*.

On July 3, 1968, Allegro responded to Pike, promising, at Pike’s insistence, to return the “mushroom book” to Doubleday, which he found “most stimulating.”¹⁴ He also reported unfortunate news: “After all the initial enthusiasm someone in the publishers has taken freight and a letter this morning regretfully decided against doing my book. A nuisance really as I haven’t the time or inclination to hawk it around, and I fear its being compromised if the detailed synopsis is shown to too many people. Still, it’s perhaps early days yet.” Allegro concludes the letter by signing “John,” followed by a drawing of a little mushroom.

Despite initial enthusiasm, Allegro’s publisher passed on the book. Someone at the press—possibly Doubleday, who previously published four of Allegro’s trade books—allegedly got cold feet. Allegro calls the rejection a nuisance in his letter to Pike, not because of the sting of rejection but because he did not have the time nor willingness to approach other presses, and he worried that his shocking thesis would be “compromised” if too many people saw the book proposal. Guarding the “shock value” of his bold thesis outweighed any desire for peer review.

⁸ For an overview of Pike’s life, see William Stringfellow and Anthony Towne, *The Death and Life of Bishop Pike: An Utterly Candid Biography of America’s Most Controversial Clergyman* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007).

⁹ James A. Pike and Diane Kennedy Pike, *The Other Side: An Account of My Experiences with Psychic Phenomena* (Doubleday, 1968).

¹⁰ Particularly harrowing is the account of his widow, Diane Kennedy Pike, who detailed the ordeal in *Search: The Personal Story of a Wilderness Journey* (Doubleday and Co., 1970).

¹¹ Joan Didion, *The White Album* (Simon and Schuster, 1979); Philip K. Dick, *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (Timescape, 1982).

¹² James A. Pike papers, box 104, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.

¹³ Diane Kennedy, email correspondence with author, October 22, 2023.

¹⁴ James A. Pike papers, box 104, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.

III.

During a Dead Sea Scrolls Exhibit at the British Museum on December 16, 1965, Allegro gave a well-reported lecture that set forth, for the first time, his argument that Jesus and the apostles were not real human beings but mythological characters styled after Essene leaders from Qumran, a departure from his earlier understanding of Jesus and the disciples as real, historical figures.¹⁵ He also declared with optimism that the philological method—unlocking the meaning of history by studying the root meanings of key terms—could unlock the mystery of Christian origins.

During a BBC radio interview in February 1966, Allegro restated his mythicist argument that Jesus never existed, provocatively adding that the New Testament is a “cover document” for the real truth and that New Testament authors used wordplay to conceal their secret teachings from the Romans.¹⁶ He also restated his promise that philology would unlock the “real truth” of Christian origins. So, by late 1965, Allegro arrived at three key ingredients for his mushroom argument: (1) that Jesus never existed, (2) the primacy of philology as a method for discovering the truth about Christian origins, and (3) the New Testament as a “cover document” to smuggle sectarian teachings past the Romans. But he had not yet discovered that mushroom knowledge was the particular secret that early Christians were carefully guarding.

Allegro gave a public lecture on March 5, 1967, presumably at the University of Birmingham. I do not know the topic of his lecture since I have yet to find the title or a transcript of the talk. But the letter he received in response to his lecture gives a clue about its contents.¹⁷ The day after his lecture, the psychiatrist Bernard Barnett sent him a letter thanking him for the talk and enclosing an offprint of his article titled “Witchcraft, Psychopathology, and Hallucinations,” published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*.¹⁸ Barnett argues that the sixteenth- to seventeenth-century witch craze could have resulted from the deliberate use of hallucinogenic drugs.

Allegro responded with enthusiasm two days later.¹⁹ His colorful rescript contains a nascent version of the grand conspiracy theory that he would publish in *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*. “Just recently, it became evident that the No. 1 drug to the Christians was the narcotic mushroom, particularly the *Amanita Muscaria*,” he confesses. “I should like to know,” Allegro continues, “more about the atropine-like drug that does the trick, but more than that at the moment is the necessity to pin down the Semitic and Greek names under which this fungus was known. The most common is certainly the word underlying Peter, but there are others which are coming all too slowly.” The name of the disciple Peter, Allegro would later argue, “is an obvious play on the Semitic [word for] ‘mushroom.’”²⁰ Allegro apologizes for not being able to send a publication on the topic to Barnett in return, for “my most recent work is still in the formative stage.”

It is unknown where Allegro learned of the *Amanita muscaria*, but he discovered the linchpin of his argument for *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* just before writing his letter in response to Barnett. What is clear is that Allegro arrived at this conclusion *before* doing the extensive linguistic work found in *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*. It seems impossible to interpret this as anything less than a proverbial conclusion in search of evidence. Allegro had

¹⁵ See Judith Anne Brown, *John Marco Allegro: The Maverick of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 174-184.

¹⁶ Quoted in Judith Anne Brown, *John Marco Allegro: The Maverick of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 183-184.

¹⁷ John Marco Allegro papers, University of Manchester Special Collections, John Rylands Library.

¹⁸ Bernard Barnett, “Witchcraft, Psychopathology, and Hallucinations,” *British Journal of Psychiatry* 111, no. 474 (1965): 439-45, <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.111.474.439>.

¹⁹ John Marco Allegro papers, University of Manchester Special Collections, John Rylands Library.

²⁰ Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, 46.

found his overarching mushroom theory; now, all he needed was evidence to reconcile with the theory.

Allegro had apparently “pinned down” linguistic evidence by October 1967. In the *Daily Mail*, he teased his provocative, sacred mushroom argument—likely still thinking his publisher would accept it—in an announcement on October 13, titled “Drugs and the Christian Prophets.”²¹ Allegro is careful not to reveal too much. He does not mention the *Amanita muscaria*, but he does venture that biblical authors were on LSD or something like LSD. “They had visions. They went on a trip.” The article notes that Allegro was “shortly to publish” new findings; he was not. *Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* would not come out for another two and half years, and it would not be published by Doubleday but by Hodder and Stoughton.

IV.

What are we to make of this new evidence from the Allegro archives? First, it is sometimes said that Allegro got his idea for *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* from the pioneering work of ethnomycologist Gordon Wasson, who wrote *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*. Wasson’s book, however, was published in 1968, and Allegro arrived at his sacred mushroom theory early in 1967. Perhaps Allegro discovered psychedelic mushrooms by reading Wasson’s 1957 photo essay, “Seeking the Magic Mushroom,” published in *Life* magazine, or from *Mushrooms, Russia, and History*, which Gordon and Valentina Wasson also published in 1957, but he clearly arrived at his thesis for *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* prior to the publication of Wasson’s *Soma*.

Second, Allegro’s thinking on the early Jesus movement evolved. He initially considered the early Jesus movement to be derivative of earlier Jewish movements, and then he progressed to mythicism; then, he began to see the New Testament as a cover story of an underground drug cult with a particular affinity for the *Amanita muscaria*. The full thesis for *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, in this light, cannot be considered—as many have proposed over the years—a knee-jerk reaction to the religious abuse he suffered, real or imagined, from pious members of the early Dead Sea Scrolls team. Perhaps Allegro’s initial impulse to see Christianity as derivative was motivated by an anti-Catholic impulse, as some have alleged, but his grand mushroom theory did not sprout overnight. It took time to grow.

Finally, we cannot escape the impression from Allegro’s letters, particularly from his letter to Dr. Barnett in March of 1967, that after Allegro discovered the *Amanita muscaria*, his research was no longer driven by evidence but by a desire to prove his grand mushroom theory. Allegro seems to have done much of his work in isolation from other scholars who could have urged him to exercise more caution in his philology and history. Considering his longstanding reputation as an iconoclast—evident in his publications, press releases, and publicity stunts dating back as early as the 1950s—feedback from peers would hardly have caused Allegro to rethink his grand mushroom theory; after all, in the words of his daughter and biographer, Allegro was the “maverick of the Dead Sea Scrolls.”

²¹ “Drugs and the Christian Prophets,” *Daily Mail*, Oct 13, 1967.