

Introduction: A New Look at Alan Watts

Peter J. Columbus and Donadrian L. Rice

I am committed to the view that the whole point and joy of human life is to integrate the spiritual with the material, the mystical with the sensuous, and the altruistic with a kind of proper self-love—since it is written that you must love your neighbor as yourself.

—Alan Watts (1973b, p. ix)

This book is a call to remembrance and an opportunity for reconsidering the life and work of Alan Watts. Writing a mere fifteen years after Watts' untimely demise, Michael Brannigan (1988) suggested that Alan's "place in our history remains to be ascertained. We are still too close to the events of his life and to his writings to perceive their full impact, but his influence has thus far been undeniable" (p. 2). Several decades have now passed beyond Alan's countercultural *zeitgeist*, arriving at a pivotal vantage point in a new century from which to assess and re-vision the enduring merit of his writings and lectures.¹ November 2008 signified the thirty-fifth anniversary of Watts' death, and this benchmark date served as inspiration for making a new study of his scholarship. The chapters compiled in this volume reconsider Watts' insights on the human condition in light of today's discourse in psychology, philosophy, and religion.

A hint of Watts' contemporary relevance may be found at the beginning of his essay on "Wealth versus Money." He wrote: "In the year of our lord Jesus Christ 2000, the United States of America will no longer exist" (Watts, 1971b, p. 3). The previous sentence strikes a rather prescient tone given so-called "post-9/11" sensibilities. Watts was reflecting on modern-day obsessions with abstract monetary riches acquired at the expense of personal, social, and environmental well-being. He wrote also of waning natural resources, nuclear arms proliferation, biological and chemical warfare, and "maniacal misapplications of technology." Nowadays, there are new variations on old themes: preemptive wars, terrorism, torture, "ethnic cleansing," food and fuel shortages, catastrophic oil spills, and global climate change. Each is pushing human civilization toward the brink of disaster. Yet, Watts always offered his audiences

propitious and uplifting insights on what it means to be human. He continually broached the possibility that greed, anger, and ignorance could be transformed, as Buddhists often suggest, into wisdom, compassion, and enlightenment. If it is true in the new millennium as it was during Watts' own day, that humanity is facing what Martin Luther King called the "fierce urgency of now" as some contemporary voices would imply, then all the more compelling reason to consider Alan Watts anew.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Alan Watts' resume is impressive. It reflects the depth, breadth, and variety of accomplishment afforded by his fifty-eight years of living. He was born on January 6, 1915, in Chislehurst, England, and graduated from the prestigious King's School on the grounds of Canterbury Cathedral in 1932. Eschewing a traditional undergraduate education in favor of tutorials on Buddhism with Zen scholar Christmas Humphreys, Watts eventually enrolled at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary where he was ordained an Episcopal priest in 1944 and awarded an S.T.M. in 1948. He served upon ordination as examining chaplain for the bishop of Chicago and as chaplain at Northwestern University until leaving the Episcopal Church in 1950. Watts subsequently held a professorship in comparative philosophy and psychology at the College of the Pacific's American Academy of Asian Studies (1951–1957), where he also served a stint as dean of the academy (1953–1956). In 1958, the University of Vermont bestowed an honorary doctorate of divinity for his learned offerings to the field of comparative religion. Watts then spent the remainder of his life as an independent scholar and freelance philosopher.

Watts served as editor of *Buddhism in England* (1936–1938; now *The Middle Way*), and co-edited (with L. Cranmer-Byng) the *Wisdom of the East* series (1937–1941). In later years he edited the *Patterns of Myth* series (1963a), Herigel's (1974) *The Method of Zen*, and served as editorial advisor to *The Psychedelic Review* and the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*. Watts' writings can be divided roughly into three clusters. His early works, between 1932 and 1940, include three books (Watts, 1936, 1937, 1940) and many articles in various periodicals for general readership (Watts, 1987, 1997a). These initial offerings were prodigious and insightful but somewhat derivative of psychologists Carl Jung and Eric Graham Howe, the mystic teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti, and philosophers Dimitrije Mitrinovic and D. T. Suzuki.² Still he showed from the beginning his genius for integrative thinking and clarity of expression (Watts & Snelling, 1997).

Watts' middle works, from 1941 to the late 1950s, exuded greater originality and sophistication for academic audiences as he was situated variously at Seabury-Western Seminary, Northwestern University, and the American Academy of Asian Studies. Sadler (1974) suggested that Watts' best efforts emerged

out of a tension between the “institutional conventions” of academia and his free-spirited intellect. Among these writings were *Behold the Spirit* (1947), *The Supreme Identity* (1950), *The Wisdom of Insecurity* (1951), *Myth and Ritual in Christianity* (1953c), *The Way of Zen* (1957), and *Nature, Man and Woman* (1958b). He also published erudite papers in such venues as the *Review of Religion* (Watts, 1941), *Philosophy East and West* (Watts, 1953d), *Journal of Religious Thought* (Watts, 1953b), and the *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* (Watts, 1953a, 1956).

By the end of the 1950s, however, Watts saw a need for academic specialists to “communicate with the myriads of literate nonscholars who increasingly constitute our world” (Watts, 1973b, p. 344). Although this view is an astute insight given current editorial attitudes in the social sciences calling for accessibility of content sans technical and pedantic jargon, Watts at the time was chastised in academic circles for vulgarizing Asian spiritual traditions by, for example, writing essays in *Playboy Magazine*. His books in this period include *This is IT* (1960), *Psychotherapy, East and West* (1961), *The Two Hands of God* (1963b), *Beyond Theology* (1964), *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are* (1966), *Does it Matter?* (1971a), and *Cloud-hidden, Whereabouts Unknown* (1973a). His popularity as a best-selling author and public speaker (e.g., Watts, 2006) inspired a generation of young people toward new ways of experiencing themselves and the world (Lawson, 1988).

Watts was awarded research grants by the Franklin J. Matchette Foundation in 1950 and the Bollingen Foundation in 1951–1953 and 1962–1964. He was a research fellow at Harvard University in 1962–1964, visiting scholar at San Jose State University in 1968, research consultant at Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in 1969, and guest lectured at leading universities and medical schools worldwide, including Stanford, Berkeley, Chicago, Yale, Cornell, Cambridge, and the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich. Watts offered a weekly program on Pacifica Radio originating at KPFA-FM in San Francisco and broadcast nationwide, filmed a twenty-six-part series entitled “Eastern Wisdom for Modern Life” for National Educational Television, and narrated award-winning films on Zen Buddhism for the Hartley Film Foundation.³ He was a member of the American Oriental Society, a board member of the Foundation for Mind Research, sat on the Executive Council of the World Congress of Faiths, was founder and president of the Society for Comparative Philosophy, and established the *Alan Watts Journal* as an outlet for his writings.

Watts died in his sleep on November 16, 1973. His ashes were interred within a Buddhist *stupa* erected at the San Francisco Zen Center’s Green Dragon Temple (*Soryu-ji*) in Muir Beach, California (see Baker, 1974; Ferlinghetti, 1974). Numerous volumes of his recorded and transcribed talks, conference presentations, and manuscripts continue to be published posthumously. A library devoted to preserving and disseminating his works for future generations of students and scholars, called The Alan Watts Mountain Center, is now under construction north of San Francisco.

ON THE TABOO AGAINST KNOWING ALAN WATTS

A contemporary reflection on Alan Watts may profit from a look at portrayals of him in earlier times and other places. This consideration requires suspending two common tendencies of judgment: idolatry and iconoclasm. As evidenced by any number of obituaries and book jackets, aggrandizing Watts as a cultural idol, New Age guru, or Buddhist holy man is conventional practice. He has even been called a “guru for those who don’t trust gurus” (Lott, 1999, p. 24). This idolatry may be traced to Watts’ involvement with the 1950s Beat subculture and subsequent countercultural wave of the 1960s. In the 1950s, his riveting lectures at the American Academy of Asian Studies, together with his KPFA radio program, fueled the “San Francisco Renaissance.” Watts’ writings on Zen Buddhism gained national attention with coverage in various news magazines such as *Time* (Zen, 1958), *Life* (Eager Exponent, 1961), and *The Nation*, which called him the “brain and Buddha of American Zen” (Mahoney, 1958, p. 311). He was closely associated with many eminent Beat poets and writers including Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac. Kerouac (1958), in fact, included a portrayal of Watts as the character “Arthur Whane” in his novel *The Dharma Bums*. Watts’ ubiquitous presence on the intellectual and cultural scene in 1950s San Francisco leads to perceiving him as a renowned participant in the Beat movement. Leary (1998) called him the “Lord High Admiral of the Beat” (p. 105). Yet Watts’ outlook on life was not consonant with the worldview of the Beat Generation as a whole; their lifestyle was seen as “aggressively slovenly and dowdy” (Watts, 1973b, p. 359). He criticized the Beats’ appropriation of Zen as a self-defensive revolt against traditional values rather than as a liberation (neither conforming nor rebelling) from social convention (Watts, 1958a). By his own account, Alan considered himself as situated “in” rather than being “of” the Beat subcultural milieu (Watts, 1973b).

Watts earned greater notoriety with the countercultural upsurge of the 1960s, becoming “one of the most magical, incantatory names” of that era (Beidler, 1995, p. 199). He was a key player in the psychedelic arena consulting for Timothy Leary’s research at Harvard University and writing the classic text on *The Joyous Cosmology* (Watts, 1962). *Time Magazine* called him “the psychedelic generation’s most revered and thoughtful guru” (The New Ministry, 1969, p. 6). Watts’ advocacy for Zen Buddhism and other Asian spiritual traditions gained greater currency amid the countercultural shift away from Western technocratic values (Roszak, 1969). Alan, furthermore, had a compelling style of presentation placing him at the forefront of the “human potential movement” at Esalen Institute where he “dazzled audiences with his verbal bridge-building between Eastern religion and Western psychology” (Anderson, 1983, p. 16; Kripal, 2007). His charismatic persona made him a venerated public figure and he constantly encountered individuals seeking discipleship (Furlong, 2001). Through his vocation of conveying Asian mystical traditions to Western

audiences, wrote Watts (1973b), “I was pressing a button in expectation of a buzz, but instead there was an explosion” (p. 359). The outcome was that his rise to prominence brought him “the kind of success that passes for greatness: He became a celebrity” (Stuart, 1983, p. xi). The saliency of Watts’ celebrity status makes it easy to render him as a sort of “popular iconic metaphor” (Columbus & Boerger, 2002) reflecting the veneer of cultural or historical fads and thereby obscuring the substance of his contributions to psychology, philosophy, and religion. The point here is not to deny the magnitude of Watts’ fame but merely to move it aside temporarily in order to shed light on the overshadowed aspects of his work.

Aggrandizing Watts inevitably invites critics to knock him off the figurative pedestal by engaging three common *ad hominem* arguments that summarily dismiss his writings and lectures. First, Watts is often discounted by pointing toward his lifestyle choices, such as his extramarital affairs and immoderate alcohol consumption, as contraindications of spiritual and philosophical insight. The assumption being that supposed sins of the flesh ought not to afflict those perceived as operating on a higher (or deeper) spiritual plane. As Sibley (1984) put it, many people viewed Watts’ style of living “as the complete antithesis of all he had written or talked about” (p. 219). Harding (1984) therefore asked, was Alan a “sage or anti-sage?” (p. 221). Second, the veracity or profundity of his spiritual awakening is diminished by contending that he misunderstood his subjective mystical experiences. The tack here is to extend this “misunderstanding” to Watts’ discussions of mysticism in general. Third, his ingenious capacity for rendering complex ideas in comprehensible fashion is interpreted as intellectual shallowness. Roszak (1969) described the latter two discounting maneuvers as “rather arrogant criticism”:

On the one hand from elitist Zen devotees who have found him to be too discursive for their mystic tastes (I recall one such telling me smugly, “Watts has never experienced *satori*”), and on the other hand from professional philosophers who have been inclined to ridicule him for his popularizing bent as being, in the words of one academic, “the Norman Vincent Peale of Zen.” (p. 132)

Ironically, Watts (1973b) apparently invited and contributed to the above *ad hominem* arguments. Regarding his lifestyle, he described himself as a “disreputable epicurean” (p. x) and “an unrepentant sensualist” (p. 54) with robust appetites for sexuality and liquor.⁴ Concerning his mystical experiences, there is speculation that his discussion of fraudulent mystics acting as master teachers—the so-called “trickster guru” (Watts, 1977b)—is a self-reference.⁵ Moreover, he often maintained sharp criticisms of academic life by arguing that upstanding reputations in American universities require production of mediocre work. “You must be academically ‘sound’ which is to be preposterously and phenomenally

dull” (Watts, 1973b, p. 114). According to Watts, he was never charged as being “scholarly” by critics because his style of writing avoids blatant pedantry.⁶

Watts (1977a) portrayed himself as an amalgam of contradictory and paradoxical aspects: a “coincidence of opposites” and “a joker” with reference to a wild card taking on a variety of qualities in various circumstances. He wrote, “I realize quite clearly that the ego-personality named Alan Watts is an illusion, a social institution (as are all egos), and a fabrication of words and symbols without the slightest substantial reality” (p. 17). Furlong (2001) concluded that “Watts is not a man on whom it is possible to deliver an easy verdict—he escapes labels” (p. xi). Nevertheless, by setting aside the usual inclinations toward idolatry, iconoclasm, and Watts’ own self-deprecation, a perusal of the literature reveals a number of variations in depiction of Alan Watts in scholarly and popular writings during and after his lifetime. These variations include Watts as theologian, contemplative mystic, Zennist, philosopher, psychologist, and cultural symptom.

WATTS AS THEOLOGIAN

Watts (1973b) saw himself as writing four key texts on theology (Watts, 1947, 1950, 1953c, 1964). Yet theological classifications of Watts are based on various combinations of his writings. *Behold the Spirit: A Study in the Necessity of Mystical Religion* (1947) was Watts’ “first full utterance in *propria persona*” (Wheelwright, 1953, p. 494). Episcopal Canon theologian, Bernard Iddings Bell, called it “one of the half dozen most significant books on religion published in the twentieth century” (cited in Stuart, 1983, p. 109). F. S. C. Northrop (1947) considered it “one of the best—in fact the only first-rate—books in recent years in the field of religion” (see also, Akhilananda, 1948). Hartshorne and Reese (1953) classified Watts (1947) as reflecting a “modern panentheism” that overcomes the boundary negations of pantheism and the categorical contingencies of dualism by viewing the notion of deity as eternal and temporal, conscious and omniscient, and world inclusive.⁷ Clark (1978), in contrast, considered the entirety of Watts’ theological works to be situated within a “monistic pantheism” defined as the “class of religions and metaphysical theories which hold that all levels of reality are related ontologically . . . and ultimately are one” (p. 15). Some critics interpret Watts (1950) as expressing an Asian normative theology because, they argue, Christianity is subordinated to an Eastern metaphysic (Christian, 1950; Fuller, 2008). Park (1974), on the other hand, judged *The Supreme Identity* (1950) as weighted by assumptions of Western dualism that ultimately prevented Watts from faithfully interpreting the nondual nature of Asian religious thought. Swearer (1973) called Watts a “metatheologian” defined as a “comparative, creative thinker whose theological synthesis is one very much his own even though particular strands of it may be identified in terms of Christianity, Zen Buddhism or Vedanta” (pp. 295–296).⁸ Another varia-

tion is Keightley's (1986) reading of Watts as an apophatic theologian because his texts exhibit the intention of "an intellectual yoga" emancipating the mind from enslavement to conceptual thinking. Likewise, Smith (2010) contended that Watts' vital contemporary significance for religious and theological studies is with reference to the "negative canon."

WATTS AS CONTEMPLATIVE MYSTIC

Alan Watts engaged a spiritual formation involving studies of Christian mysticism while preparing for Episcopal ordination as a priest. This included his translation and commentary on *The Theologia Mystica of Saint Dionysius* (Watts, 1944). In his essay on "The Meaning of Priesthood," Watts (1946) said "the privilege of priesthood is simply to be able to have the joy of giving to others the supreme gift of the Incarnation—union with God" (p. 23). In an era populated by neopragmatists reducing contemplative experience to affect, and positivists denying the reality of mysticism all together, Wheelwright (1953) considered Watts to be one of the few contemporary philosophers for whom contemplative reflection precedes action in the world. Bancroft (1989) included Watts in her text on *Twentieth-Century Mystics and Sages*. Alan was portrayed as deeply moved by his own mystical experiences of ego transcendence from which he forged a unique contemplative approach that joined Eastern and Western religious traditions. Nordstrom and Pilgrim (1980) offered a dissenting view by contending that Watts' mystical experiences were shallow and his contemplative writings were off the mark and misinformed. He was therefore called a "wayward" mystic. In a similar vein, Krishna (1975) suggested that Watts' mystical consciousness was not fully complete, his lifestyle revealing certain "dangers of partial awareness" (p. 96). Weidenbaum (2008), moreover, complained that Watts romanticized mysticism. In contrast, Foster (1986) argued that Watts was "a Western Bodhisattva" serving as an example for individuals who are wrestling with their innermost spiritual wisdom. Along similar lines, Guy (1994) suggested that Watts was a mystic in spirit and had the incomparable aptitude for expressing mystical insights with utmost clarity. Thus, Creel (2001) described Watts (1975a) as a twentieth-century example of the "mystical motive" in scholarly discourse.

WATTS AS ZENNIST

Watts' reputation is closely tied to his writings and lectures on Zen Buddhism. *The Spirit of Zen* (Watts, 1936) is considered the "first major attempt by a Westerner to write on the subject" (Humphreys, 1994, p. 15). *The Way of Zen* (Watts, 1957) was called the most comprehensible introductory overview of Zen Buddhism in the English language (Ellwood, 1981). According to Ellwood, "we cannot think of . . . Zen in America without putting Alan Watts in the fore-

ground” (p. 152). Labeling Alan Watts as a “popularizer” of Zen is common practice (e.g., Oldmeadow, 2004; Szasz, 2000). This popular connection to Zen afforded his guru status among the nonconformists of the 1950s and 1960s (Balantyne, 1989). His take on Zen was one of three styles of Zen Buddhism in the United States in the 1960s, along side monastic Buddhism and Thomas Merton’s “dialogical approach” (Swearer, 1973). Swearer said Watts’ style of Zen was an “accommodation approach” derived from a fusion of Eastern and Western sources. This blended Zen was criticized as unfaithful to, and incompatible with, a traditional Japanese Zen Buddhist orthodoxy (Nordstrom & Pilgrim, 1980). However, a rejoinder to Nordstrom and Pilgrim emphasized that Watts’ view of Zen was neither the bohemian affectation of American “Beat Zen” nor the monastic regimentation of Japanese “Square Zen,” but instead reflected the Daoist inclinations of ancient Chinese Zen masters (Columbus, 1985). Watts is often ascribed the opinion that meditative discipline is not necessary for Zen realization, a position referred to as “the Alan Watts heresy” (Sharf, 2005, p. 284) and “freestyle Buddhism” (Anderson, 2003, p. 86). Given this apparent heretical approach, he is sometimes interpreted as propounding an “intellectual and theoretical” Zen (Yamada, 2009, p. 221). Despite its seeming intellectualism, Coleman (2002) described Watts as presenting “a sophisticated picture of Zen and its subversive view of human nature” (p. 188).

WATTS AS PHILOSOPHER

Watts (1973b) described himself as an “eccentric and non-academic philosopher” (p. 5). Yet he offered scholarly critiques of positivist philosophy (Watts, 1953b) and continued advocating for a “philosophy beyond words” (Watts, 1975a) amid the upsurge of postmodern philosophies of language in the 1960s and 1970s. He was offering, in Beidler’s (1995) view, “a semiotic sense of understanding . . . at the phenomenological intersection of words and things” and thus providing an alternative to the crisis of “infinite indeterminacies” unfolding in postmodern Western philosophy (p. 199). In their “Framework for Comparative Philosophy,” Gupta and Mohanty (2000) suggested that Watts construed Western philosophy as propounding an artifactual model of the world, whereas he saw Indian philosophy reflecting a dramatic model, and Chinese philosophy an organismic model. A study appraising the logical consistency within and between philosophical ideas contained in his writings concluded that Watts has too many unexamined assumptions in his works resulting in hasty jumps from limited data to across-the-board judgments (Suligoj, 1975). Another critical evaluation, informed by a fundamentalist Christianity, concluded that Watts’ philosophy falls short of rational credibility (Clark, 1978). Clark contended that Watts rejected the primacy of reason in favor of mysticism and therefore had nothing relevant to say about reality because all significant communicative pro-

cesses are governed by rules of logic. In contrast, Brannigan (1988) proposed that acts of systematizing Alan Watts' philosophical works are "presumptuous" and shallow arrangements at best. Watts, he pointed out, was a philosopher of the intangible. Brannigan moved instead to render the feeling of what Watts had to share with his audience. He saw in Watts' writings a nondual philosophy substantively informed by the doctrine of *advaita* from Hindu Vedanta and the concept of *polarity* found in Chinese philosophical thought. More recently, Smith (2010) considered Watts' philosophy to be optimally appreciated as a distinctly modern nondualism rather than as a conduit for the expression of traditional Asian thinking.

WATTS AS PSYCHOLOGIST

Alan Watts is considered "one of the first to publicly point out that useful links could be developed" between Asian religions and Western psychology (Watts & Snelling, 1997, p. 5). In the *Handbook of General Psychology*, Wolman (1973) described Watts as an "apostle of rapprochement" between East and West (p. 833). Watts' eloquent portrayals of Daoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism made him a "Titan" of the humanistic psychology movement in the 1960s (Klee, 1970). He was also a major "nascent" influence on the emerging field of transpersonal psychology (Ferrer, 2002, p. 6), where his writings became "bibles of the consciousness movement" (Taylor, 2000, p. 275). The field of clinical psychology felt his influence most deeply when his "pioneering work . . . brought Eastern ideas of consciousness into the world of psychotherapy" (Lebow, 2006, p. 80; Santee, 2007). The eminent psychotherapist, Jay Haley (1992), cited a series of Watts' lectures on Western psychology and Eastern philosophy as substantively informing the trajectory of his and others' professional development in the early 1950s (see also, Watts, 1953a, 1956). Likewise, the renowned Jungian analyst, June Singer, credited Watts as profoundly affecting her understanding of Analytic Psychology (Rountree, 2005; Singer, 1983). Moreover, Bankart (2003) identified the publication of *Psychotherapy East and West* (Watts, 1961) as a "foundational event" in the contemporary expression of Buddhism in Western Psychology:

Psychotherapy East and West was a far-reaching call for psychology and psychotherapy to facilitate the liberation of individual souls from the suffering resulting from suffocating conformity of a joyless, sexless, over-analyzed and vastly over-controlling society. He rejected the Freudian call for what he had called the domination of Eros by reason, and called, in its place, for Eros expressing itself with reason. The book was, for all extents and purposes, a vivid and heartfelt rejoinder to Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents. (p. 62)

WATTS AS CULTURAL SYMPTOM

The *zeitgeist approach* to intellectual history indicates that eminent individuals yield vital contributions to various fields of study because of their historical context (Teo, 2005). A key issue is that social climate and cultural circumstance influence the structure, meaning, and relevance of any particular piece of work. Alan Watts is no exception to this “*spirit of the times*” view to understanding the emergence of intellectual products. A reviewer of *Myth and Ritual in Christianity* (Watts, 1953c), for example, described the text as indicative of the circumstances Western religions inhabit since the issues addressed in the text turn up repeatedly in contemporary examinations of the subject matter (H. Watts, 1954). Similarly, Perry (1972/2007) considered *Beyond Theology* (Watts, 1964) as “typically symptomatic” of its time. Roszak (1969) explained Watts’ ascendancy in the 1960s counterculture as an interaction between his uncanny ability to render Zen accessible and a population of young people imbued with a spur-of-the-moment yearning to oppose the cheerless, greedy, and self-obsessive inclinations of the modern technological world. Watts has been characterized as exhibiting a distinctly twentieth-century reading of Zen (Wright, 2000, pp. 126–127). Practitioners of Zen in the early twentieth-century West were looking to differentiate themselves against the ground of European Romanticism, and Zen readings were therefore interpreted through the lens of Western individualism. Wright identified the title of Watts’ autobiography, *In My Own Way*, as an extreme case in point. Watts is therefore viewed as belonging to a lineage of scholars articulating a “modern Buddhism” (Lopez, 2002) and “Buddhist modernism” (McMahan, 2008). Moreover, Watts’ considerations of Asian mysticism have been criticized as misappropriations imbued with the assumptions of Orientalism and neo-Orientalism (Bartholomeusz, 1998; Tong, 1981). A final example is Woodhead’s (2001) consideration of Alan Watts’ life and work as a revealing illustration of what she has termed the “turn to life” that is endemic to present-day spiritual and religious practice. Watts is described as rejecting a somber, guilt-ridden, and repressive Christian religion and turning instead toward a free-thinking, sensual, and affirmative spirituality. This “turn” is considered by Woodhead as indicating one of the most noteworthy developments in Western culture since World War II.

HERE AND NOW

This volume is a collection of original essays written by eminent scholars. The story of how the book unfolded has as much to do with intuition and spontaneity as with reason and logistics—a plot line that undoubtedly would have resonated deeply with Alan Watts. The idea for the book emerged when Peter Columbus was on sabbatical at the Unitarian Universalist Rowe Conference Center. An exchange of brainstorming emails with Don Rice led to questions

about Watts' legacy in the twenty-first century. Conjecture emerged concerning Stanley Krippner's perspective given his position as Alan W. Watts Professor of Psychology at Saybrook Graduate School and long-time association with Watts. Ralph Metzner, another former colleague of Watts, was scheduled to give an invited address at the University of West Georgia where Rice is stationed as chair of psychology, and was immediately invited to participate in the book project. Metzner recommended contacting Chungliang Huang.⁹ Alan Pope, the "resident Buddhist" in the Psychology Department at West Georgia, climbed on board as well. Michael Brannigan and Alan Keightley each authored outstanding books on Watts in the 1980s, which sparked curiosity as to their latest viewpoints in the new millennium. Likewise, Ralph Hood's renowned expertise with the psychology of mysticism, Miriam Levering's insightful research on women in religion, and Kaisa Puhakka's depth of experience with Zen Buddhism and clinical psychology came to mind at once.

The editors invited these esteemed colleagues to contribute original chapters with general thoughtfulness to the following questions regarding Alan Watts' legacy: How do his writings appear in the context of twenty-first-century scholarship? In what ways does Watts inform psychology, philosophy, and religion in the new millennium? Are there domains of his scholarship, or particular nuances of his work, that have heretofore been neglected, unrecognized, or ignored? Moreover, in what ways has Watts informed one's own scholarly sensibilities, perceptions, and activities? The resulting volume is less a systematic study than a compilation of individual chapters, each with a unique angle on the life and work of Alan Watts. Yet there is a pattern to the organization and trajectory of the text that emerged organically from the writings themselves, beginning with Ralph Hood's chapter. Hood contributed an insightful chapter on four key issues in the psychology of religion anticipated by Watts in his autobiographical writings about his personal spiritual journey. As it turned out, all of our contributors submitted chapters that fit, broadly speaking, into Hood's four themes. Following Hood's contribution, therefore, are chapters addressing (a) perennial philosophy and psychology (Keightley, Chapter 2 and Columbus, Chapter 3), (b) psychedelic research and experience (Krippner, Chapter 4 and Metzner, Chapter 5), (c) embodied consciousness (Rice, Chapter 6; Brannigan, Chapter 7; and Levering, Chapter 8), and (d) psychospiritual transformation (Pope, Chapter 9; Puhakka, Chapter 10; and Huang, Chapter 11).

Hood brings Watts' contemporary relevance immediately to the fore with his chapter entitled "Alan Watts' Anticipation of Four Major Debates in the Psychology of Religion." Hood maintains that Watts' personal spiritual quest, as expressed in his autobiography and reflected in his popular writings, presaged noteworthy topics currently interesting scholars focused on the psychological study of religion. The first topic concerns the veracity of perennial psychology. Watts, like William James before him, contended there are universal bases to mystical experiences independent of cultural and contextual interpretation. The

second debate involves the degree of relationship between religion, psychedelic drugs, and mystical experience. Watts asserted that LSD and the like could afford experiences of mystical states indistinguishable from those attained by religious practice when a person has the appropriate mindset and socioenvironmental setting. The third debate is on the extent to which eroticism and mysticism are connected. Watts experienced an intimate connection and described it clearly in his writings. There is, finally, the religion versus spirituality debate about whether religious institutions constrain or enable spiritual experience. The trajectory of Watts' personal development was toward spiritual experience free from institutional control or code of belief. There is now a body of empirical research supporting Watts' positions on each of these debates. The quirk of fate in all this, suggests Hood, "is that academics whose disdain of popular works kept Alan from a broader appreciation among scholars nevertheless belatedly championed his views in the academy."

In "Alan Watts: The Immediate Magic of God," Alan Keightley traces a thread of "direct, immediate mystical realization" running through Watts' theological writings. By the 1940s, Watts was steeped in Christian mysticism and saw its apophatic approach to religious experience as commensurate with the negative metaphysics of Buddhism. He envisioned that Christianity could absorb and synthesize Asian spiritual traditions and thereby re-form itself anew as a truly "catholic" or universal religion. By 1950, however, Watts was disillusioned with the institution of the Episcopal Church and its orthodox views of Christian doctrine. He resigned from the church because of its declarations of exclusivity as the highest religion and its assertion of the total distinction between God and creation. A rapprochement occurred in the 1960s when Watts saw that Christianity could be interpreted in the context of Hinduism as a radical journey of God getting lost in a Self-made illusion or *Maya*. From this point of view the absolute distinction between the Creator and the created is less real than apparent. The mundane world is therefore wholly sacred. The sacred quality of the mundane world allowed Watts to espouse an "atheism in the name of God" in response to the "death of God" theology of the 1960s. Keightley concludes that Watts saw spiritual treasures in "the ordinary, everyday, which are transparent to the divine transcendence, for those who are awake."

In "Phenomenological Exegeses of Alan Watts: Transcendental and Hermeneutic Strategies," Peter Columbus outlines philosophical methods inherent to a pair of texts where Watts claimed to be presenting Asian wisdom traditions in styles accessible to contemporary Westerners. Watts implicitly used a Husserlian transcendental phenomenological method for exploring anxiety in *The Wisdom of Insecurity* (1951), and employed a tacit hermeneutic phenomenology for understanding identity in *The Book* (1966). Both embedded strategies were engaged toward facilitating mystical experiences for his readers. How is Watts to be understood as a purveyor of Eastern philosophies in light of his appropriation of Western phenomenology? The short answer is that *philosophia perennis*

was a *point of departure* toward applying transcendental phenomenology in *The Wisdom of Insecurity*. In light of Christian claims to exclusivity, however, Watts saw perennialism as a *point of arrival* via the hermeneutic “fusing” of Eastern and Western perspectives in *The Book*. The notion of Watts as a “phenomenologist” is largely unrecognized but seeing him as such allows for reconsidering his antecedent and contemporary influence on humanistic and transpersonal psychology. He is usually recognized with reference to Buddhism and psychotherapy but can now be viewed in terms of his holistic approach, phenomenological methods of inquiry, and subject matters of anxiety and identity. Thus, contrary to Watts’ often quoted recommendation to hang up the telephone upon receiving the message, Columbus concludes that his texts are rich with implicit influences that remain available for discovery by contemporary and future scholars.

Krippner documents “The Psychedelic Adventures of Alan Watts.” Watts’ perspective on psychedelics ranged from an initial esthetic-perceptual experience to an eventual recognition of the substances as religious sacraments, a view traced to his spiritual formation and training in the Anglican/Episcopal church. Krippner met Watts in the context of Timothy Leary’s research at Harvard University. Krippner appreciates Alan’s mentoring, details the influence of LSD on one of Alan’s concurrent projects, and shares their mutual concerns about Leary’s approach to psychedelics. Krippner submits that Watts’ writings and lectures in the 1960s legitimized the ontological status of psychedelic experience and, by integrating psychedelics with Eastern thinking and Western science, laid a foundation for subsequent spectrums, models, and typologies of consciousness in psychology. Additionally, Watts anticipated the issue of *neuropolitics* in reference to the debate about who controls and dispenses psychedelic chemicals. He argued that psychedelic usage should be constitutionally protected as a religious practice and the substances made readily available to scholars and students of religious experience. Thanks in part to Watts’ advocacy many years earlier, there is a resurgence of entheogenic research in the United States and around the world. Krippner goes on to contrast Watts’ occasional use of psychedelics with his all-too-frequent use of alcohol. There is a curious paradox of alcohol, tobacco, and Eastern philosophy in Alan’s adolescence and young adulthood that presaged his lifestyle in later years. But, Krippner writes, “while rife with contradiction, the complex interaction of his life in his work, and vice versa, was partially responsible for the fertility of his thought.”

Metzner illuminates further details of Alan Watts’ psychedelic journeys “From The Joyous Cosmology to The Watercourse Way.” Metzner was a key member of Leary’s psychedelic research team at Harvard University where he first met Watts in 1961. The chapter begins with a collation of recollections about the early associations among Watts, Metzner, and Leary. Metzner then details the “experiential riches” contained in *The Joyous Cosmology* (Watts, 1962). Watts’ text on psychedelics remains a singular achievement in a research field marked by controversy. Indeed, Leary’s research program at Harvard was

eventually wracked by accusations of supervisory negligence and lack of scientific rigor. Here Watts offered intellectual support for Leary's innovative existential-transactional approach by arguing its consistency with cutting-edge scientific theory and methodology. Metzner concludes by elaborating Watts' transition away from psychedelics toward renewed interest in Daoist philosophy. Watts devoted a great deal of time at his mountain cottage to writing his final essays and books, including *Tao: The Watercourse Way* (Watts, 1975b). Metzner conveys his gratitude for Watts' mentorship at Harvard University while continuing Alan's legacy at the California Institute of Integral Studies, the outgrowth of the American Academy of Asian Studies where Alan served as professor and academic dean in the 1950s.

In "Alan Watts and the Neuroscience of Transcendence," Rice considers Watts' descriptions of transcendent or mystical experience, sometimes called "cosmic consciousness," in relation to contemporary neuroscience research. First, Rice sets the stage for his discussion by elaborating six variations of research on the neuroscience of transcendence. Contemporary advancements in neuroscience research technologies are allowing some adventurous neuroscientists to investigate transcendent/spiritual-like experiences and corresponding changes in brain activity related to cognitive, emotional, and perceptual processes affected by meditation or ingestion of hallucinogenic substances. Yet these research programs have been criticized for either reducing spiritual experience to biology or, conversely, introducing supernaturalism into natural science. Rice points out that Watts bypassed reductionism and supernaturalism by couching his writings on the nature of transcendence in terms of Gestalt psychology. The trajectory of Watts' Gestalt psychology of transcendent experience into the twenty-first century is traced in relation to the body-mind problem, cognitive-Gestalt neuroscience, quantum psychology, and reflections on the extent to which a neuroscience of transcendence can fully know its subject matter.

Brannigan expands on the body-mind issue with his contribution entitled "Listening to the Rain: Embodied Awareness in Watts." Brannigan draws the distinction between the immediacy of pre-reflective bodily awareness and the reflective processes about an experience. Pre-reflective and reflective modes of awareness are intertwined in everyday experience but a problem arises when the latter is confused with the former: We lose touch with the sensuality of our lives. This problem is evident in "disembodied religions" of the Judeo-Christian heritage, which emphasize dogma and liturgical regimen while considering bodily experience as the basis for moral transgression. As exemplified by his commentary on the erotic spirituality depicted on the ancient Hindu temple of Konarak, Watts invited religious men and women to experience the wonders of existence through sensitivity to bodily experience. Brannigan describes Watts as advocating and living a "sensual mysticism" that informs a contemporary critique of technological culture, especially communication technologies. Like blurring the distinction between pre-reflective and reflective experience, Bran-

nigan suggests it is easy to get caught amid communications tools and lose sight of an embodied connection to immediacy and interpersonal relations. Hence, phenomena such as “phoneslaughter,” referring to vehicular deaths related to use of cell phones while driving. Watts challenges us “to observe things simply as they are without imposing layers of interpretation and judgment, to cultivate an embodied awareness, a persistent mindfulness,” like listening to the rain.

Miriam Levering offers a contemporary view of “Alan Watts on Nature, Gender, and Sexuality.” She describes three themes from *Nature, Man and Woman* (Watts, 1958b) anticipating and informing trends in the North American counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, and which remain relevant for current scholarly discourse:

1. The interrelations of nature and gender,
2. The polarity of men and women, and
3. The confluence of sexuality and spirituality.

Levering then offers critical reflections in light of present-day scholarship. Watts is seen as an important precursor of the eco-feminist movement despite the fact the Christian feminist theologians could not accept his unitive mysticism. The polarity of men and women is considered with reference to Luce Irigaray’s notion of “at least two” sexes, which intimates that polarity is a premature delimitation. Finally, Watts’ integration of sexuality and spirituality borrowed heavily from Asian tantric systems and is critiqued for inspiring a Western “neo-tantra,” which glorifies sex experience rather than enriching spiritual development. Levering suggests that “Watts’ introduction of serious Indian and Chinese cultural practices to a wide audience in *Nature, Man and Woman* risks being seen as an insufficiently respectful appropriation of expressions from another culture for purposes for which they were not intended.”

Alan Pope reflects on “Contributions and Conundrums in the Psychospiritual Transformation of Alan Watts.” In the first half of his chapter, Pope celebrates and reviews some of the major themes in Watts’ elucidation of the nature of psychospiritual transformation. These themes include the following:

1. The cultural and historical myths that guide perceptual activity,
2. The value of poetic language for expressing that which otherwise could not be expressed,
3. The issue of death,
4. The illusion of the self,
5. The field of awareness, and
6. The nature of liberation.

The second half of the chapter is a critical assessment of “Watts in Practice,” addressing his approach to psychospiritual transformation in relation to phenomenology, Buddhist philosophy, and the *zeitgeist* in which he lived and worked. Pope completes this section of his chapter with a consideration of “Watts as Conundrum.” The term *conundrum* refers to the paradoxical and mysterious nature of Watts’ bohemian lifestyle. To what extent was he personally transformed through his mystical studies and spiritual explorations? Was his lifestyle symptomatic of unresolved neurosis or akin to the *crazy wisdom* of Chogyam Trungpa? Regardless of the ambiguity, or perhaps because of it, concludes Pope, Watts’ contributions to the contemporary understanding of psychospiritual transformation are “profound and far-reaching.”

Kaisa Puhakka draws on many years of Zen study and expertise as a clinical psychologist to consider “Buddhist Wisdom in the West: A Fifty-Year Perspective on the Contributions of Alan Watts.” Buddhism, especially Zen, was a spiritual tradition central to Watts’ life and work. Although not always a disciplined practitioner of sitting meditation or koan study, he was instrumental in bringing it to America. The Zen experience is beyond words and concepts, but Watts was uniquely able to convey its essence to twentieth-century Western audiences through his eloquent oratory and writing style. Puhakka suggests that Watts saw Buddhism as primarily a critique of the culture in which it happens to be situated at any given time. He therefore offers a needed corrective to disconcerting trends in the twenty-first century West. Informed by the Middle Way teachings of Buddhism, Watts allows for deconstructing the extreme (absolute) relativism in academic and popular thinking that reduces people to their contexts. Puhakka writes: “The Middle Way teachings demonstrate again and again that there really is nothing that can be claimed as absolutely true,” including the relativistic thinking of constructivist philosophy. Watts, moreover, offsets contemporary tendencies to see Buddhism as either an adjunct to psychotherapy or as a compartment of therapeutic technique. He instead embraced a larger understanding of Buddhism that expands the horizons of Western psychotherapies by exposing the cultural premises on which they are based.

Chungliang Al Huang fittingly concludes this volume with “Watercourse Way: Still Flowing with Alan Watts.” Huang, of course, put the finishing touch on Watts’ (1975b) final book, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, after Watts died unexpectedly in autumn 1973. Huang’s chapter contains personal stories and anecdotes counterbalancing the analytical papers by other colleagues. Watts’ friendship and mentoring ushered Huang into the human potential movement of the 1960s. Huang recounts various episodes from their work together and highlights Watts’ infectious enthusiasm for his subject matter. Watts’ most poignant teachings concerned “the wisdom of insecurity”—the process of finding equanimity in situations and times of uncertainty. These teachings guided Huang along his own path of integrating his Eastern background with his

Western life, especially in appropriating a sense of competence with the English language as he embarked on writing his first book. Huang recounts with mirth and irony two of Watts' alcohol-inspired speaking engagements but laments that Watts too often used liquor to cope with his heavy work schedule and seemed to become a victim of a "yang-dominant world." However, Watts' "delight with life was founded on his willingness to acknowledge the faults underlying his footing in the world. He was a clay-footed Buddha, but those feet of clay were positioned directly on the path of life."

AN EMERGING LEGACY

Through the chapters in this volume, Watts' legacy may be seen with greater clarity and insight. This legacy embodies Watts' living expression of the human condition shared by all—from the depths of suffering exemplified by his struggles with alcohol to the heights of transpersonal awareness and mystical consciousness. Personal suffering brought him to "the wisdom of insecurity" that infused his writings and lectures toward overcoming the "taboo against knowing" a cosmic sense of identity. His legacy intertwines contemporary scholarship on mysticism, entheogens, embodied awareness and sexuality, eco-feminism, spirituality and neuroscience, humanistic and transpersonal psychology, phenomenology and hermeneutics, Buddhism and psychotherapy, Daoism in the West, and psychospiritual transformation. Alan was not an "organization man" but he nevertheless has an institutional legacy: the California Institute of Integral Studies, the Alan W. Watts Professorship at Saybrook Graduate School, Esalen Institute, and Huang's Living Tao Foundation. And then there is the genealogical legacy of the mystical counterculture: his friendship and mentoring of Krippner, Metzner, and Huang who, in turn, affect the lives of many students. Finally, there is Watts' body of work, an abundance of writings and lectures with continuing resonance for untold numbers of readers. Perhaps Watts is not the "be all" or "end all" of contemporary scholarship in psychology, philosophy, and religion, but his voice and words offer his audiences an opening to the next moment of their lives. This opening is a radically new beginning to personal and transpersonal experience. At this moment, here and now, the new beginning is "Alan Watts' Anticipation of Four Major Debates in the Psychology of Religion" in Chapter 1.

NOTES

1. One biographer, writing in the 1970s, suggested that Watts was "among the most enduring" writers of his time and continues to "live through a body of work that has a very high vitality" (Stuart, 1983, p. xii).

2. Howe and Mitrinovic are likely the least recognizable names on this list. See Edwards (2006) for an account of Howe's contributions to psychology, and Howe

(2009) for a selection of writings (see also, Watts, 1937/1997b). Rigby (2006) provides an exposition of Mitrinovic's life and philosophical ideas. Watts published in the *Alan Watts Journal* an essay by Rutherford (1973) outlining aspects Mitrinovic's views on Christianity.

3. Film prizes include a Blue Ribbon at the American Film Festival and an Award of Merit from *Landers Film Reviews* (Hartley & Watts, 1967) plus the Gold Award (Hartley & Watts, 1968) and Silver Award (Hartley & Watts, 1969) at the New York International Film Festival. *Alan Watts: Art of Meditation* (Hartley & Watts, 1971) was a Finalist at the American Film Festival.

4. The "sensualist" label on Watts seems to have lasting (although not necessarily *ad hominem*) currency in popular Buddhist literature. For example, see Tweti (2007).

5. In *The Joyous Cosmology*, Watts (1962) reported this psychedelic-induced insight:

I began to see my whole life as an act of duplicity—the confused, helpless, hungry and hideously sensitive little embryo at the root of me having learned, step by step, to comply, placate, bully, wheedle, flatter, bluff and cheat my way into being taken for a person of competence and reliability. (p. 43)

6. Watts (1973b) referred to one particular professional academic organization as an "in-group of . . . philological nit-pickers and scholarly drudges" who "dissolve all creative interest into acidulated pedantry" (p. 165). Yet the following insight by Richard Quinney (1988) may point to the source of Watts' criticisms of academe:

As we mature we move beyond the rational and linear mode of thought to a more intuitive and transcendent mode. As we make the shift we lose the grasping and craving self of the individualized ego and we find ourselves in the realm of the universal Self. It is not natural—it is unhealthy—for the academic, the intellectual . . . to continue strictly in the rational mode of speculative and dualistic thought as he or she matures, although this is the approved and rewarded form for the modern academic. To continue solely in the rational mode of thought is retrogressive for the maturing person. Yet we are expected to continue in a thought form that is appropriate only for the middle stages of a discipline and of life. (pp. 104–105)

7. However, a reviewer of the Hartshorne and Reese (1953) text lamented: "the allocation of space is not always proportionate to the significance of the thinker: for example, less than two pages are given to quotations from the Buddha and more than nine are accorded Alan Watts" (Nagley, 1955, p. 365).

8. Elsewhere Swearer (1970) suggested that "Alan Watts will never be a theologian's theologian" (p. 139) because his writings are too idiosyncratic.

9. Having the participation of Krippner, Metzner, and Huang in this volume is an opportune circumstance. Toward the end of his autobiography, Watts (1973b) commented:

the closer I get to the present time, the harder it is to see things in perspective. . . . I feel I must wait another ten years to find out just what I was

doing, in the field of psychotherapy, with . . . Stanley Krippner. . . and in the formation of the mystical counterculture with . . . Ralph Metzner . . . and Chung-liang Huang. (pp. 415–416)

Watts, of course, died in 1973 thus never offering extensive reflections on his later years.

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