A Lamp Unto Himself: Alan Watts and the Illumination of Spirit

A review of

Alan Watts—Here and Now: Contributions to Psychology, Philosophy, and Religion

by Peter J. Columbus and Donadrian L. Rice (Eds.)


Reviewed by

Frederick J. Heide

When I was a long-haired college sophomore in 1971, I stumbled upon a dog-eared copy of an Alan Watts paperback in a friend’s patchouli-scented apartment. I was transfixed. Watts had been raised in the Anglican Church, as I’d been—indeed, he was educated at King’s School in the shadow of Canterbury Cathedral (center of the worldwide Anglican community) and even carried the Archbishop of Canterbury’s train at his enthronement.

Though Watts later was ordained an Episcopalian priest, he’d grown impatient with the church. “Impoverished Christians do nothing in their religious observances except chatter,” he’d write in his autobiography (Watts, 1972, p. 47), noting that they “hardly ever consider changing consciousness itself” (p. 184). He offered a thrilling alternative, steeped in the wisdom traditions of the East, in which we would “approach our experience—our sensations, feelings, and thoughts—quite simply, as if we had never known them before, and
without prejudice, look at what is going on” (Watts, 1951, p. 81). In contrast to the word-
encrusted spiritual practices of my upbringing, this method replaced recitation with
observation. “To know truth,” Watts declared, “one must get rid of knowledge” (p. 10).

Like millions of youthful seekers, I devoured this and subsequent books by this
British philosopher, scholar, and raconteur who helped set the tone for the countercultural
revolution. Almost 40 years after his death, I likewise bit into Alan Watts—Here and Now:
Contributions to Psychology, Philosophy, and Religion, edited by Peter Columbus and
Donadrian Rice. This volume, designed to rigorously reevaluate Watts in light of ensuing
scholarship, is a nourishing addition to the small literature on this complex and enormously
influential individual. Although its largely academic tone will likely render it less interesting
to the general public than Watts’s own writing or lectures, the book may be of significant
value to those wanting to learn more about the history of the counterculture, Watts himself,
or subtle distinctions between Eastern philosophies.

Columbus and Rice begin with a sketch of Watts’s prolific life, touching on his
contributions to theology, philosophy, psychology, Zen studies, and culture via his 20 books,
work for educational television, research at Harvard, and guest lectures at top universities,
including Stanford, Yale, Chicago, Cornell, Berkeley, and Cambridge. Their well-
documented overview of commentary on his work demonstrates why Watts has been called
everything from wayward heretic to one of the most significant writers on religion in the
20th century.

Columbus and Rice waste little time noting the twin poles of idolatry and iconoclasm
that characterize reactions to him. On the one hand, Watts is lauded as a charismatic
wordsmith, brilliant exponent of Eastern philosophy, and foundational figure in the San
Francisco renaissance and human potential movement. On the other, he’s critiqued for his
immoderate lifestyle, accused of having misunderstood the mystical traditions, or even
dismissed as the shallow “Norman Vincent Peale of Zen.”

The following 11 chapters explore these polarities as a variety of scholars (mostly
professors of psychology or religion) consider his work in light of contemporary scholarship
on Buddhism, Christianity, neuroscience of consciousness, phenomenology, transpersonal
psychology, gender studies, and psychology of religion. With several chapters offering
personal recollections by friends (e.g., Stanley Krippner, Ralph Metzner, Chungliang Al
Huang), the end result is a book that the editors accurately describe as “less a systematic
study than a compilation of individual chapters, each with a unique angle on the life and
work of Alan Watts” (p. 11).

Certain themes unite several essays. For example, chapter authors are virtually
unanimous in noting Watts’s historic role in helping bring Eastern philosophy to a wider
audience. Praise of Watts’s writing style is a constant theme. Alan Pope calls him “at once
comprehensible and profound” (p. 183), Ralph Metzner dubs him a “word-choreographer”
(p. 108), and Kaisa Puhakka argues that his writings “distilled the teaching to a simplicity
that seemed intrinsic to the teaching itself” (p. 205). Other recurring themes include Watts’s
contemporary relevance, psychedelic explorations, fondness for the *philosophia perennis*, ideas on nonduality, and relationship to postmodern and constructivist thought.

Throughout the book, the perspicacity of Watts’s thinking is jaw-dropping. He was the first author in the West to write seriously about Zen (Watts, 1936), the first person to conduct a seminar at Esalen, and one of the first to propose linking Eastern philosophy and Western psychology. Ralph Hood devotes his lucid chapter to Watts’s anticipation of four abiding themes in the psychology of religion, including the now-prominent distinction between spiritual quest and religious affiliation. Ingesting psychedelics two years before Timothy Leary did, Watts became a principal spokesman for their spiritual value and even proposed that their use be protected constitutionally.

Watts wrote about the psychology of acceptance, one of the central issues in 21st-century cognitive behavioral psychotherapy, as early as 1939. His *Nature, Man, and Woman* (1958) was one of the earliest feminist critiques of Western religion, preceding most others by decades, as well as a forerunner of the modern environmental movement. And so on.

Despite or perhaps because of this foundational stature, Watts received abundant criticism that has left his legacy ambiguous. One fascinating aspect of the present volume is how multiple authors attempt to come to terms with the apparent contradiction between Watts’s spiritual philosophy and bohemian lifestyle.

For example, Pope shares an anecdote about the evening Watts, known for his heavy drinking, visited Zen master Shunryu Suzuki at Tassajara. After observing Watts talking nervously and periodically leaving the room for more alcohol, one of Suzuki’s students commented the next day that he no longer saw Watts as profound. Suzuki responded, “You completely miss the point about Alan Watts! You should notice what he has done. He is a great bodhisattva” (p. 198). Pope cogently explores possible meanings of this pronouncement and raises the example of Chogyam Trungpa, another spiritual teacher who used alcohol extensively yet whose behavior has been interpreted as congruent with the “crazy master” tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

Although the overall tone of the volume is appreciative of Watts’s contributions, several chapters offer useful critiques. Kaisa Puhakka notes that Watts never had formal discipleship in any of the practices about which he discoursed and indeed didn’t travel to Asia until decades after he penned his most influential works on its philosophies. Several authors comment that Watts seemed almost contemptuous of what he called the “aching legs brand of Buddhism” (p. 111) and had no formal sitting practice. Others make a case that he misconstrued maya as a social rather than mental phenomenon and that his view of gender polarity inappropriately restricts sexual variety.

Not surprisingly, authors sometimes disagree about what Watts was trying to say. For example, Columbus devotes a chapter to detailing Watts’s implicit use of phenomenological methods, whereas Pope suggests that he fell short of fully applying the phenomenological attitude. These varying viewpoints are a strength of the volume.
The book is sufficiently documented such that only a few statements stand out as curious. Pope, suggesting that a subtle type of Cartesianism and an objectivist epistemology limited Watts's thinking, concludes, “Still, Watts made no pretenses to being anything other than an entertainer, albeit a gifted and brilliant one who, indeed, influenced a generation” (p. 199).

Although Watts apparently affixed the label entertainer to himself on multiple occasions, he also described his own ego-personality as illusory, “a fabrication of words and symbols without the slightest substantial reality” (p. 6). Many of his self-descriptions reveal British understatement and modesty, such as his assertion that he had managed to live by “getting by, even successfully, without really deserving to do so” (Watts, 1972, p. 262). Elsewhere he referred to himself as a philosopher–teacher and theologian, described two of his books as “major,” noted that an academy he cofounded was a principal root of the San Francisco renaissance, whose spiritual energy affected the whole world, and so on. Even if entertainer were the sole label he had affixed to himself in later years, it is beyond dispute that his work had an effect on millions that was more profound than any entertainment.

The principal impression left by the book is that Watts may have been more important than many academics acknowledge. Although several authors note that his interpretations of Eastern philosophy do not always accord with details of specific traditions, this was clearly not his goal. “I am not interested in studying, say, Buddhism in terms of what most Buddhists think about it,” Watts (1972, p. 248) wrote in his autobiography In My Own Way (the title of which serves as an ironic pun for those who believe his lifestyle circumscribed his insight).

Watts was more in the tradition of other singular spiritual figures such as Emerson, Krishnamurti, or even the Buddha, whose advice on his final day to “be lamps unto yourselves” advocates the nondogmatic quest that Watts championed. Like the Taoist tradition that Watts loved, his life bespeaks paradox; Aldous Huxley called him “half monk and half racetrack operator” (Smith, 2012, p. 162). No single volume can clear up the controversies that this invites, but Columbus and Rice go a long way toward sorting out the legacy of a man whose summons to see the world anew illumined a spiritual path for a generation.

References


