

Square *gnosis*, beat *eros*: Alan Watts and the occultism of Aquarian religion

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Alan Watts' influence on religious discourse is beginning to be mapped by twenty-first-century scholars, but emphasis is mostly placed on his role as an interpreter of Eastern religion for the West. The present article considers Watts as a contributor of Western hermetic and occult tradition to contemporary American Paganism. Drawing on historical perceptions of occultism, Watts' works and their use by subsequent Pagans, I locate Watts as a source for both gnostic realization and erotic transmutation through cosmic hierogamy. Drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic theory, I contend that Watts' commitment to gnostic and erotic themes enframed a 'historically-effected consciousness' undergirding the modern Aquarian movement in general and American Paganism in particular.

Keywords: Alan Watts; paganism; hermeneutics; *eros*; *gnosis*; *Gnostica*; *Green Egg*; esotericism; occultism

Introduction: Alan Watts and parameters of California pluralism

Studies of American religion often focus on eastern and southern geographical regions, while areas west of the Mississippi River receive far less attention. In particular, California's contribution to religion is often limited to very specific frames of reference (e.g. Frankiel, 1988). However, scholars are now reassessing contributions to American religious history and culture from twentieth-century west coast religious experimentalists (Ashcraft, 2002; Davis & Taylor, 2015; Duntley, 2015). Of specific interest here is the role of Alan Watts. Emerging in the 1950s and 1960s, Watts is often credited with adapting and filtering South and East Asian religions in relation to institutional 'Western' traditions such as Roman Catholicism. Watts also launched intense critiques of Western academic philosophy and psychology as they served Cold War capitalism and technocratic materialism. Alongside others including Michael Murphy, Aldous Huxley, Abraham Maslow, and Timothy Leary, Watts developed a significant reputation as a public intellectual connected to countercultural impulses and sensibilities (Albanese, 2005).

Just as California's contribution to American religion is being reassessed, so do experimentalists such as Watts need their own reassessments. Watts is often credited with transmitting Buddhism (Zen in particular) to Western consciousness. I contend this is necessary but insufficient to understand his influence. Watts helped bring not just Eastern, but Western esoteric and occult traditions into the forefront of American

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countercultural religiosity. He proved himself open to recombinant and subterranean themes in American intellectual and religious history, valorizing what he and others saw as new awakenings of religious consciousness in American youth.

This article is intended to demonstrate Watts' instrumental influence in self-consciously setting particular parameters of modern Aquarianism. Through development of *gnosis* and *eros* as modes of transpersonal knowledge, Watts helped create an Aquarian/Pagan *hermeneutic*, a communal sense that a quantum leap of humanity was at hand, at least in terms of spiritual (re)awakening. Coupled with this hermeneutic was a process teleology, an unfolding arc of playfulness as both the path and the goal of the Cosmos with Eros as its sacramental expression. Such a sense formed an interpretive lens through which Aquarian community members filtered and integrated their experiences.

Some explanation of terms is in order here. I use the terms 'esoteric' or 'occult' to describe a kind of religiosity that has bubbled to the surface periodically in Euro-American history. While Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have *exoteric* or 'outward' forms of worship and development, each of these religions has absorbed specific ideas from ancient texts such as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Greco-Egyptian documents dating to late antiquity. Often thought to be of even more ancient origin and authorship, these texts became central in not only the practice of ancient *esoteric* (or 'secretive mystery') traditions but crucial to developing nineteenth- and twentieth-century occult religious impulses (Copenhaver, 1995).

A decades-old (and growing) body of scholarship shows that such Western esoteric concepts played important roles for mystics, kings, Renaissance magicians, authors, initiatory societies, musicians and many others. Antoine Faivre (1994; see also Roszak, 1975, pp. 9–10, 205–208) outlined four essential characteristics of Western esoteric thought, especially as found in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. First are claims of hidden 'correspondences' between material and spiritual realms, channels allowing human consciousness to be linked and expanded into divine power. Likewise, esoteric thought regards nature as 'living', vitalistically infused through structures of correspondence between material and spiritual realms, or what Emmanuel Swedenborg called a 'ladder of order' between Heaven and Earth. In esoteric thought, imagination is considered an organ of perception, rather than deception, especially vis-à-vis these 'ladders of order'. Indeed, 'imagination' becomes a way of internalizing connectivities between material and spiritual realms. Lastly are possibilities of drawing upon these first three aspects practically in ways creating *transmutations*, or *metamorphoses* of being. I use the term 'Aquarian' (sometimes referred to as 'New Age') in the sense used by Theodore Roszak in *Unfinished Animal*, referring to a religiosity that self-consciously understands itself as both evolutionary and supersessionist to institutional Western religion, primarily Christianity. One ingredient of what Roszak identifies as the 'Aquarian frontier' has come to be called 'contemporary Paganism (or neo-Paganism)', a self-conscious adaptation of ancient polytheisms and pantheism (especially Goddess-centered) as a form of modern religious expression (Roszak, 1975, pp. 3, 8, 9, 28).

The other major concept I draw upon is the role of hermeneutics. Indeed, 'hermeneutics' and 'Hermeticism' as words share a common root – referring to Hermes, an ancient god of communication and understanding. In essence, hermeneutics is 'understanding of understanding', the humanistic endeavor to study processes by which consciousness apprehends and creates knowledge. In particular I call upon hermeneutist Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1994) term '*Bildung*'. Briefly, *Bildung* as articulated by

Gadamer consists in the ever-expanding and inherently playful edification of consciousness for its own sake by engaging ‘Others’. *Bildung* in the humanistic sense of spiritual self-cultivation is mirrored in the conditioning of a moral *sensus communis*. Often translated as ‘common sense’, Gadamer understands this as the ‘sensibility that undergirds a community’. It may be described as a set of cultural presuppositions and predispositions generating fields of possible discourse in given cultures, fields with mutable but always finite intellectual horizons. Such a *sensus communis* grounds cultural rules, allowing some intellectual and moral judgments to come into view rather than others, or what Gadamer called ‘historically effected consciousness’. Hermeneutics is not merely literary theory – rather, as the ‘understanding of understanding itself’ it underpins language use (broadly conceived) as the medium of human experience. For Watts, challenging ossified dominant structures of science, philosophy and religion (and the recovery of Eros) was crucial toward building this new *sensus communis*.

Watts and the enframing of occultism

Watts became known as a comparative religionist through studies such as *Behold the Spirit* (1947) and *The Supreme Identity* (1950). Starting in 1953 Watts hosted a regular program on the Berkeley, CA, Pacifica-owned KPFA radio station discussing various aspects of comparative religion. From 12 to 25 October 1958, Watts’ picture graced the cover of KPFA’s *Folio* program guide. The cover story sufficiently noted his seminary period and his published works up to that point, book titles speckled throughout the story in capital letters. Further in, past the radio offerings organized by date and hour, *Folio* lists a subscriber service, with tapes and transcripts. Alongside transcripts for ‘Redemption in Navajo Myth’, ‘How to Be Sane though Negro’ and ‘Christian Pacifism’ two scripts for Watts are offered, one on ‘The Proper Speech of Man’ and one on ‘The Problem of Death’, a subject he turned to repeatedly in later recordings. KPFA even advertised a benefit lecture by Watts (‘The Power of Non-action: Contributions of Taoism and Zen to Western Society’ for late October) on the back cover. Watts’ criticisms of canonical Western philosophy and religion were already central to his project, having been articulated in *Behold the Spirit*, and today have been canonized as quotations to represent him (Watts, 1997, p. v).

Just four years later, Watts’ Zen teachings were noted on a back cover advertisement of *Orion* magazine (Back-page Advertisement, 1962), a theosophical periodical published from Lakemont, GA. Typical of occult journals of its time, *Orion* functioned as a clearing house of esoteric thought and practice. Articles about ‘Ascended Masters’ and the ‘Astral Temple of Jesus and Mary’ share space with listings for two of Watts’ books on Zen; D. T. Suzuki; G. I. Gurdjieff’s associates John Bennett and P. D. Ouspensky; Lewis Spence’s *Encyclopedia of Occultism*; as well as Thomas Sugrue’s famous biography of Edgar Cayce, *There Is a River*.

In the early 1960s, Watts published two major works that have had lasting impact in the Pagan community: 1961’s *Psychotherapy East and West* and 1963’s *The Two Hands of God: The Myths of Polarity*. The impact of these texts is discussed below, but note that decades before Watts’ own countercultural explorations, religious activities tied to Buddhism and Hinduism sparked both interest and condemnation in American intellectual culture. Transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson brought Hindu and Buddhist philosophical ideas into

nineteenth-century American literary consciousness. Concurrently, actual practices associated with Hinduism and Buddhism often drew sharp nativist pushback, especially as fears over immigration grew in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nativists such as Mabel Potter Daggett tied racial, religious and class fears together with essays such as ‘The Heathen Invasion’ (1911). Persons (especially Christian women) falling under predatory influences of rapacious teachers of yoga, tantrism, and ‘paganism’ could expect nothing more than insanity, ‘domestic infelicity’, and death. But by the early 1960s, as magazines like *Orion* showed, occult and esoteric pursuits had become attractive topics for popular consumption.

Although occasionally suspicious of things labeled ‘occult’, Watts nonetheless was published in twentieth-century mainstays of the British press devoted to such matters as *The Modern Mystic* (see Watts, 1997) and the *Occult Review*, mainly during Watts’ stay among the London spiritual underground of eclectic ‘rascal-mystics’ in the 1930s. In *The First Occult Review Reader*, Watts’ (1968) essay focused on the paradox of attaining spiritual life through a kind of death to the ordinary consciousness of the Self. In this way Watts was juxtaposed alongside other essays on spiritualism, ghosts, ‘Voodoo’ possession and UFOlogy.

Just a few years later, Watts’ identification with occultism became even stronger due to his inclusion in Freedland’s (1972) *The Occult Explosion*. Watts is quoted alongside sociologist Harvey Cox as a discerning interpreter and cultural broker:

What is constructive and meaningful about the return of occultism is that for the first time, masses of young Americans are learning that life can have a goal ... besides producing and consuming junk ... [O]ccultism and mysticism are two different things. Occultism without mysticism simply deals with learning how to manipulate the future – it’s a power game. But the mystic seeks a basic understanding of the universe and identification with universal realities. This has to be achieved by full involvement with the eternal present. And I can only hope the kids will make this transition to a higher metaphysics. (Watts, quoted in Freedland, 1972, pp. 16–17)

It is precisely this involvement with the ‘eternal present’ as a basic element of human consciousness that Freedland (1972) identified as central to Watts’ thought. Freedland’s book was soon followed by a United Artists double-LP soundtrack called *The Occult Explosion Album*. Watts’ (1973a) audio presenting meditation in the context of occultism clocks in at nearly five and a half minutes. Compared to other tracks (Anton LaVey’s ‘Church of Satan’, for example), Watts’ calm, slightly accented distillation of Vedantic, Taoist, and Zen insights strikes a rather conservative tone. The dignified earnestness with which Watts communicates his views places him in a position of anchored gravitas. Thus, it is not surprising that Watts comes to be regarded in manner and substance as a ‘canonical’ intellectual of the counterculture, a builder of the new Aquarian moral *sensus communis*.

Watts and gnostic occultism

Throughout the 1960s numerous Aquarian religious currents began taking shape along a broad continuum. One current was a renaissance or resurgence in ‘nature religion’, the view that different portions of earthly and cosmic realms are interwoven with each other and to humanity. The most significant early institution within this current, the Church of All Worlds (CAW), was incorporated as a religious non-

profit organization in the state of Missouri in 1968. It was soon granted 501c3 federal tax-exempt status as a religious organization, arguably becoming the first 'Pagan church' in the United States. With growth came a desire to build common intellectual benchmarks for promoting religious and cultural education as the CAW's leaders understood it (Clifton, 2006, pp. 42–49, 145–148).

In the early 1970s, CAW's journal, *Green Egg*, published a 'Basic Bibliography' (Church of All Worlds, 1973) containing materials officially sanctioned for spiritual growth and development of church members. This bibliography was subdivided into categories such as 'Planetary ecology', 'Social revolution', 'Transpersonal psychology applied', and 'Comparative religion'. The latter category included well-known sympathetic scholars of Aquarian religion Robert Ellwood and Jacob Needleman, as well as Watts' *Psychotherapy East and West*.

The choice of *Psychotherapy East and West* for this pagan religious community is particularly telling. In *Psychotherapy*, Watts claimed that Eastern religions are keen to change the consciousness of ordinary individuals, while Western psychoanalysts are interested in the psychology of disturbed persons. Watts suggested that both have common meeting in their attention or attunement to changing consciousness as a need in itself. Moreover, Watts, invoking the Cold War, claimed that mainstream materialistic and political cultures were producing pathological consciousness as a rule, rather than an exception. By definition a radical critique, this was especially prescient for Pagans who were seeing technocratic materialism and sterile Christianity as ignoring or, in some cases, sanctioning wholesale destruction of natural resources and indigenous cultures. Under the influence of technocratic dualism, Pagans claimed the Cartesian *Bildung*, that separation of mind and matter (or culture and nature), was having disastrous and immoral effects upon all life on Earth. Likewise, the monotheistic view of God as transcendently separate from the world was viewed as giving a divine mandate for rapacious ecological exploitation (Zell, 1971/2009).

Like fellow countercultural critic Theodore Roszak, CAW and its leader, Tim Zell (1971/2009), now Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, sought to provide moral/aesthetic/religious justifications of the Youth Movement against this technocracy. Watts (1947, pp. 49–51), too, was concerned with increasingly ossified institutionalism, as well as justifying the New Youth. Watts criticized what he called 'the exhaustion of Humanism', or the disappearance of individuality within a modern technocratic context.

Perhaps more important than Watts' overall critique here is his articulation of a mystical synthesis between Zen and European psychotherapy in the moment of 'cure'. By using *koans* (insolvable riddles) to short-circuit ego-driven reasoning, Zen masters hope to produce a fault point where the sense of 'self shifts from the independent observer to that which is observed ... an identification of one's life and being with the [totality of] the organism/environment field'. In other words, Watts hopes to uncover more genuine modes of being, spontaneous integrations instead of the 'illusion of separateness'.

None of this conflicts with Aquarian occult philosophy. In fact, Aquarians such as Pagans and the CAW actively sought that radical *transformation*, that 'release of the individual from forms of conditioning imposed on him by social institutions' (Watts, 1961, pp. 13–14). This release is neither discursive nor symbolic. It cannot be encapsulated and taught through language but, rather, must be learned and

grasped intuitively. This is not *techne* (skilled knowledge) or *episteme* (discursive knowledge) but *gnosis*, intuitive realization, grasping, or insight.

Within Watts' 1950s hermeneutic boundaries, he expresses tempered skepticism for what he defines as 'paganism'. His explicit mentions of paganism are rather brief, and largely follow accepted cultural discourses of the time, long before witches and other Pagans like Sybil Leek entered public consciousness. For example, Watts (1960/1973) occasionally equated paganism with libertinism, an 'enormously superficial romanticism' of nature and flesh characterized by deficiency of awe and curiosity over the 'simple fact of is-ness' (pp. 118–119). He called forth 'those unashamedly earthbound souls ... the perennial pagan, the delightfully animal human who is not ashamed of his body'. For Watts, this was one of two dialectical poles of cultural consciousness, a pole opposed to celestially minded impulses to escape the confines of material bodies and existence in an embrace of transcendental spirit. Yet as with other dialectics, Watts hoped for a convergence, a gnostic consciousness where the 'thesis' of love of spirit and an 'antithetical' love of nature embrace in a kind of sacred marriage, a *hieros gamos*. Watts sought a synthetic 'animality of the mystic' grounded in deep sacramental relationship with power in its various manifestations (pp. 120–121). For Watts, this process of synthetic reconciliation is fundamental.

In other essays, Watts (1958) clearly associates 'paganism' with the outdoors and the natural world, while 'urbanism' is the province of the Christian tradition. But this too becomes a unity in process. For the synthetic reconciliation of these is again a deep sacramentalism placing divine power and presence pantheistically within all (pp. 28–46). Watts (1963) often referred to this apparent dualism as a game: a universal metonym of 'hide and seek'. Watts' 'animality of the mystic' is in fact how many contemporary Pagans would describe their practice, even if Watts himself was not poised to equate 'mystical animality' with 'paganism'.

CAW's *Green Egg* was one of the two major media organs of 1970s Aquarian religion; the other was Llewellyn Publications' monthly *Gnostica* newspaper, appealing to Pagans and the wider Aquarian movement. Anchored in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area, *Gnostica* claimed a 1974 circulation of 30,000 copies nationwide, making Llewellyn Publications the most widely known trade publisher of Aquarian spirituality. *Gnostica* provided a vehicle for scholarly articles, occult fiction, personal columns, and mail-order sales of books and cassettes. Serving Eastern and Western esoteric interests, it became a clearing house of information and connection between like-minded individuals and groups.

Underneath an article investigating an 1897 possible UFO crash in Austin, Texas, *Gnostica* printed an advertisement for *The Knee of Listening*, the autobiography of Franklin Jones (also known as Da Free John or Adi Da Samraj) with a foreword by Alan Watts. The foreword itself is classic Watts, cautioning against any one definitive process of spiritual illumination and yet locating himself amongst the signposts of both the practices of Theravada Buddhism and esotericist G. I. Gurdjieff. The *Gnostica* advertisement also includes an enthusiastic endorsement of Jones' volume by Israel Regardie, perhaps best known for publishing the entire system of practice of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the famous late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglophone occult initiatory society. Likewise, Regardie was himself a star pupil of the Golden Dawn's most (in)famous member, the British magus Aleister Crowley. (In the 2004 re-publication of *The Knee of Listening*, Watts' foreword was replaced with one written by South Asian religion scholar Jeffrey Kripal. Yet Kripal

locates both Jones and Watts alongside Swami Vivekananda and Paramahansa Yogananda as participants in a current of non-‘dual gnosis’.)

While the *Gnostica* audience was receptive to purchasing Watts’ works in an occultist context, larger trends in Pagan and other Aquarian literatures echo, magnify, and popularize Watts’ concerns in the early 1970s – particularly the desacralization (or desacramentalization) of the world in the name of the Enlightenment project, modern scientism, and its progenitor, the aforementioned ‘exhausted humanism’ (Berenda, 1973). Consistent with the poetic approach of late twentieth-century Aquarian *Bildung*, poetic/noetic incantations from activists Gary Snyder and Gwydion Pendderwen worked to ‘dis-cover’ the underlying kinship that had retreated under the Enlightenment eye. For example, Snyder’s (1973) ‘Prayer for the Great Family’ invoked and re-established kinship relations among humans and the natural world. Watts himself received an extended review by Michael Hurley (1972) in *Green Egg*. Hurley called Watts a ‘seminal thinker’. Hurley first frames Watts in familiar terms as a prime ‘first-rate’ transplanter of Asian religious wisdom, but reserves his highest praise for *Nature, Man and Woman, The Book*, and *The Two Hands of God*, more so than even *Psychotherapy East and West* (Watts’ sole entry in the official CAW bibliography). Given relative emphases in these works on immediate problems in Euro-American culture, Hurley’s recommendation of them for an Aquarian readership is not surprising.

Kinship relations in Pagan literature extend not only to the natural world but to conscious efforts of harmonialist pluralism and religious juxtaposition of the type favored by Watts. As mentioned before, Watts’ writings are often productive juxtapositions of apparent dualisms such as ‘Christianity’ and ‘Hinduism’, ‘Self’ and ‘environment’, or ‘psychotherapy’ and ‘Buddhism’. Aquarians likewise engaged precisely the kinds of synthesis they saw in Watts and others. *Green Egg*, for example, featured selections from movements such as the Aquarian Family of our Lady, an organization based in Ontario worshipping the ‘Thrice-crowned Creatrix’ from a ‘Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Grokking Witchfolk’ point of view (Zotique, 1973). *Gnostica*, true to form as a mail-order catalog cum occult journal, advertised Watts’ *The Book: On the Taboo against Knowing Who You Are* in its catalog section as

Perhaps the most famous of all Watts works ... [it] delves into the cause and cure of the illusion that the self is a separate ego ... [A]ccording to Watts this illusion underlies the misuse of technology for a violent and hostile subjugation of man’s natural environment. (Advertisement, 1975, p. 74)

Indeed, *The Book* is probably Watts’ most succinct statement toward breaking down theological barriers between ‘Self’ and ‘environment’, thus effecting a long-range transformation for cultural cosmic consciousness.

Throughout the 1970s, the literature indicates the growing complexity and recursive sensibility of this Aquarian *sensus communis*, or what Roszak referred to as the ‘Aquarian frontier’ with its various maze entry points of ‘organicism’, ‘Eupsychian therapies’, ‘etheralized healing’, ‘neo-primitivism and paganism’, and popular culture (Roszak, 1975, pp. 26–29). Watts’ influence in particular continued operating within iterative calls for visionary transformation of consciousness toward a new gnostic *Telos*. For example, the March/April 1979 issue of *Gnostica* saw publication

of John White's essay 'Evolution and the Future of Humanity'. White suggested that in response to apocalyptic threats from human development, Nature was effecting a species transformation. Just as Cro-Magnon gave way to Neanderthal, so too was *Homo Sapiens* giving way to *Homo Noeticus*. White's essay was essentially an extension of his ideas presented as the introduction to *The Highest State of Consciousness*. White (1972) edited this volume, which included contributions from Aldous Huxley, R. D. Laing, Richard M. Bucke (often cited by Watts over the years), Abraham Maslow (often cited in *Green Egg*), P. D. Ouspensky, Norman O. Brown, and Alan Watts himself. The very same issue of *Gnostica* included a review of White's 1972 book. Occult ceremonial magicians Melita Denning and Osborne Phillips (1979), famous for their own five-volume set called *The Magical Philosophy*, combining 'ancient mystical methods of Gnosis' with the 'archetypes of Carl Jung' (Advertisement, 1979), wrote the review of White's book. Denning and Phillips singled out Watts and Ouspensky for their abilities in shedding light on the development of 'cosmic consciousness'. Roszak's 'entry points' were engaging in mass cross-fertilization, with Watts as a key nexus point.

Deeper *gnosis*: flowering *eros*

Pigeonholing Watts into any specific practical mode of gnostic induction would be a grave misunderstanding, but Watts nonetheless reserved the greatest respect and understanding for the *erotic* as a mode of synthetic *gnosis*, a channel through which spontaneous enlargement of the 'Self' (to include the totality of its environment) could be potentially actualized by all. (The term 'synthetic' refers to the 'synthesis', or the product of the dialectical thesis/antithesis process, not to mean 'artificiality'.) In particular, Watts used iterations of *hieros gamos* or *hierogamy* (sacred marriage) illuminating the gnostic core of mystical experience. In *Nature, Man and Woman*, Watts (1958) began his essay on 'Spirituality and Sexuality' by discussing relationships between dyads of Spirit/Nature and Male/Female as emerging from ancient cosmology. Using the Hermetic *Emerald Tablet* demonstrating analogic works of occult correspondences between *macrocosmic* processes and *microcosmic* processes, Watts quoted the following lines: 'Heaven above, Heaven below; Stars above, stars below. All that is over, under shall show; Happy who the riddle readeth!' But Watts saw the 'opposition of spirit to nature and sexuality' as a subcategory of the more general problem of defining 'Self' as an ego-controlled will against the external environment, which includes forces beyond ego control (such as spontaneous sexual arousal). Thus, institutional Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism often called for sublimations of libido or *Eros* as prerequisites for advanced states of holiness. Repressive sublimation (or purely libertine embrace) of sexuality requires its abstract isolation, what Watts understood as a severing from its concrete relationship with all other aspects of life. As an abstraction, Watts called it an 'idol' no less spiritually dangerous than any other synecdoche, a 'failure to realize the mutuality and bodily unity of man and the world ...' (p. 187).

For Watts, issues of spirituality and sexuality require no less than the same transformational attitude as other forms of therapy or religious practice, a pansexuality irradiating every aspect of the universal Self. This theme is boldly reinforced in *Beyond Theology: The Art of Godmanship* (Watts, 1964). Here, Watts posited that, properly understood, 'Christianity is *the* religion about sex and in which sex plays a

more important role even than in Priapism or Tantric Yoga' (p. 169, his italics). Thus, he understood sex as the universal Christian 'taboo', because of its power to connect God and humanity as expressed clearly in the Biblical book 'Song of Songs' and by female Christian mystics. Sex remains theologically scandalous today, even though studies have begun exploring highly developed sexual cultures among evangelical Protestants (DeRogatis, 2015).

Subsequent Aquarians and Pagans have not emphasized *Nature, Man and Woman* (1958) as much as Watts' other writings, but in my view both this text and *Beyond Theology* (1964) support an understanding of Watts as a major figure in the historical *Bildung* of Western sexual mysticism, itself a major current in historical and contemporary esotericisms (Hanegraaf & Kripal, 2008). Watts (1964) inferred from the Church's obsession with policing sexuality that sexuality is in fact the tacitly esoteric essence, the true meaning of the Church. 'If Christianity truly means what it says about the union of the Word and the Flesh, the resolution of the problem must be the divinization of sexuality ... in the mystical marriage of Christ and the Church' (p. 189). Yet instead of accepting Freud's humbug condemnation of religion as sublimated libido, Watts suggested that Christians celebrate this characteristic. 'The church spire is, indeed a rampant penis, that vesical windows are vaginas, that the font is the womb' (p. 190). Far from a merely pornographic image born of obsessive disgust, Watts presents this issue no differently than juxtaposing cultural images of flowers (botanical sexual organs) as at the same time revealing a 'world of innocence and joy'.

As mentioned previously and recognized by other scholars of Western esotericism, this is an occult understanding of the *hierogamy*, or sacred sexuality, and its esoteric correspondence between 'Heaven above' and 'Heaven below' (Versluis, 2008, pp. 128–131). Watts reclaims a sacramental and thus 'cosmically' playful redemption of sexuality away from dualisms of 'abstract lust and abstract disgust'. Sacramental sexuality, at the heart of Pagan rituals like the Wiccan 'Great Rite', is no less than Goethe's 'unity in process', a process of iterative revealing and concealing, or what Watts calls the 'eternal oscillation' (Roszak, 1972, p. 341).

Apart from his own original contributions, Watts' other works have been used to construct (and challenge) the role of sexualities in religion. In 1971, Watts and Elisofon collaborated on *Erotic Spirituality: The Vision of Konarak*. The temples at Konarak (also known as Konak) and a similar site, Khajuraho, are UNESCO World Heritage sites in India. They are popularly understood as architectural pinnacles for the development of the so-called Northern style of Hindu public temples (*mandir*) before the predominant rise of Islam in the northern sub-continent. Elisofon contributed fantastic black and white photographs of erotic icons on the temples, *shikara* towers, and practitioners. Watts' commentary on the photographs challenged what he saw as rarified caricatures of Vedantic asceticism, as well as secular and Christian provincial declarations of such erotic iconography as merely some sort of 'primitive porn'. Watts instead described these icons as 'cosmic play' and genuine pansexual *eros*. This was, for Watts, ecstasy in the technical sense ('*ek-stasis*' or being 'outside oneself') exemplifying tantric cosmic consciousness (Elisofon & Watts, 1971).

Erotic Spirituality was dedicated to the famous comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell. Comparative religion (like Campbell's) was a common trope in popular essays on 1970s witchcraft and paganism. Carl Jones, a frequent and provocative

contributor to *Gnostica*, penned an essay series on religious sexuality and its relationship to ‘nature religion’, a crucial ingredient in contemporary American Pagan *sensus communis*. Jones (1978c) argued that conjugal union is the central root of all nature religion, and to be significant it must connect practitioners to the ‘Great Ocean’ which Wicca serves. (‘Ocean’ is a prominent theological motif in American Pagan religiosity; see Chase, 2013). Wiccan sexuality, for Jones, required intuitive gnostic faculties working on different levels of *correspondence* to Cosmic power than the purely intellectual or emotional realms. Drawing on Wicca’s mythology as the ‘Old Religion’, ancient Greek, Tibetan, and Hindu worship were used as cross-cultural examples verifying valorization of sexual worship in the literary Paganism of D. H. Lawrence and the matriarchal mythos of J. J. Bachofen. In the language of comparative religionist Mircea Eliade, sex is the ‘eternal return’, whether in terms of ‘Tantric iconography or Wiccan epiphany’. It is here that Jones referred to Watts’ work on Konarak. For Jones had little patience for those ‘sexless Wiccans of today’ performing the *hieros gamos* only metaphorically or worse, only mentally. Whereas such persons rob the nature religion of its pristine beauty, the genuine authenticity of the physical rite was validated by ‘Watts’s ... lovely pictorial book’. Human social structure, according to Jones’ reading of Watts, is all but overturned in sacred orgy as humans become ‘organism’ rather than ego. Here, perhaps, is a most literal interpretation of Watts’ commitment to Eros as sacramental Play.

In subsequent essays, Jones (1978a, 1978b) extended criticisms of inauthenticity toward most Wiccan practices in general. Instead, he argued for radical embrace of *Eros* through which the Self destabilizes and is reborn, using Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* as paradigmatic examples of unabashed sacred sexuality. Jones (1978–1979) elaborated at greater length on the physical character of the icons at Konarak and Khajuraho, as well as aniconic representations of relationships between phallus and yoni, Shiva and Shakti, all providing Watts and Elisofon’s (1971) work as the entry point for Aquarian investigation.

In a contemporary vein, Watts’ (1963) work on theological polarity is used creatively by interpreters such as Mongo BearWolf (1993) in addressing heterosexism and gender essentialism in the present-day American Paganism. BearWolf challenged a common idea within Wicca on the need for a heterosocial framework for enacting ritual power, a framework where men and women must ritually work across genders. Such views, BearWolf says, are premised on assumptions that only men can fully identify with masculine divine power (God), women with feminine divine power (Goddess), and thus reciprocally gendered power has only dim understanding of neighboring genders. Limited space prevents full elaboration of this concept here, but debates and conversation on this topic are as old as the mid-century roots of Wicca itself. BearWolf argued that gay and lesbian Pagans have not been fully appreciated for their role as ‘keepers of the bridge between polarities’, or nexus points for the meeting and expression of Cosmic power.

Watts’ synthesis of polarity in *Two Hands of God* comes to BearWolf’s rescue. Watts (1963) describes polarity as unity in process. BearWolf follows Watts in claiming ‘polarities are representative of an underlying unity in process’, and understands that ‘darkness is intrinsic to the nature of light, rather than essentially *opposed* to it’ BearWolf 1993, pp. 34, 50. BearWolf claims that Goddess and God are ways of mapping Watts’ teaching on the ‘coincidence of opposites’. (Watts, 1973b) BearWolf thus calls Wiccans toward a playful understanding of magical polarity structured in terms of

Watts' (1963) synthesis, a space which gay and lesbian Wiccans can safely inhabit as full practitioners. It is not difficult to see Jones' 1970s essays as among the targets for BearWolf's critique, but this merely demonstrates the breadth of Watts' work as a field for recombinant interpretation over decades within the Aquarian *sensus communis*.

(Re)reading Watts in the Aquarian *Bildung*

The fourth edition of the *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology* (Melton, 1996) contains an entry for 'Alan (Wilson) Watts' occupying barely more than two paragraphs (pp. 1391–1392). His significance is defined solely in terms of books popularizing his 'personal appropriation' of Zen Buddhism, as well as his television series 'Eastern Wisdom and Modern Life'. Watts' influence on Americans' reception and enframing of South and East Asian religions is undeniable. As Theodore Roszak made clear in 1975, and Tweed and Prothero (1999) make clear today, Watts stands as a significant contributor to Asian religion in the United States. Yet as scholars of psychology, religion and intellectual history re-examine Watts' role and legacy in twentieth- (and perhaps twenty-first)-century American religion, honest and full appraisals will include his contributions to Western occultism both on a personal level in his writings, and in the ways in which others used his work as building blocks in their own intellectual and cultural production.

It is this which is perhaps the most significant contribution of Watts to Aquarian religion in general and a pagan *sensus communis* in particular. It has become trivial to signal paganism's debt to European Romanticism, for example, but *it is significant* to identify a specific dialectic for the formation of a *Bildung* – those twins of polarity and synthesis (or William Blake's struggle and reconciliation) moving rhapsodically toward a higher teleological synthesis, an organic 'unity in process'. This is echoed in Watts' personal tension between what he called the 'mystic' and the 'sensualist'. Both Watts and his contemporaries understood this Romantic revival as hermetically rooted, aiming toward a larger imminent and transpersonal reach for a Telos of Play. In the Aquarian *Bildung*, teleological and purposive play becomes a sacramental and sensory mechanism in and of itself. It is not some infantile liability of primitivism, but rather a grounding assumption of consciousness itself. Play is not 'mere diversion' but existentially necessary to find one's relationship/process within the world. One must 'play' as the world 'plays'.

In the same way that Watts contributed constructively toward positive progressive aspects within Aquarian and pagan *Bildung*, this was also couched within profound skepticism and critiques of institutional religion and mechanistic humanism. Hermeneutic bonds between Watts and the Aquarian *Bildung* are at least twofold. He criticized these other historically situated consciousnesses (whether institutionally religious or materialistic) as dangerously unaware of their finitude – unable to see the long-term end results of abandoning sacramental perception in the world (materialism) and protean vitality extending beyond it (religion). Beyond simple criticism, he enacted a questing engagement to repair this problem based in the occult logic of Hermeticism, an opening toward occultism coupled with mysticism in a realization of the 'eternal present' (Watts, 1968).

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