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'A critique of culture': Alan Watts, psychedelic Buddhism, and religious play in postwar America

Morgan Shipley

Department of Religious Studies, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

ABSTRACT

Heralded as a time of economic prosperity, the post-World War II period in America also experienced extraordinary religious awakenings of born-again evangelicalism, Prosperity Gospels, and an apocalyptic flare rendered palpable by atomic bombs and the Cold War. Postwar Christianity found itself reinforcing neoliberalism, sanctifying standardizations accompanying technological routinization, economic progress, and consumption-based lifestyles, resulting in alienating crises of spirit and culture. Amidst uncertainty and conformity, psychedelics offered sacramental means for bypassing postwar society's mechanisms by uncovering expressions of mutuality and compassion. Outlined within Alan Watts' work, psychedelics unveiled Buddhist wisdom, detailing existence not as a function of difference, but as an expression of absolute interconnection. Neither doctrinaire nor authoritarian, Watts' psychedelic engagement with Buddhism invites us to investigate beyond differences, toward moments in which the subjective self becomes an unselfish expression of the absolute 'other'.

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In 1951, Alan Watts arrived in San Francisco, California to become professor of comparative philosophy at the American Academy of Asian Studies. Already an established author and often credited as 'America's foremost popularizer of Zen' (Roszak, 1968/1995, p. 132), the 1940s found Watts in Evanston, Illinois, serving as Northwestern University's Episcopal chaplain. Although Watts resigned from the priesthood in 1950 (see Watts, 1972, pp. 193–199), his spiritual quest brought him to perennial philosophy, culminating in texts comparing Christian mysticism with the esoteric wisdom (gnosis) found in eastern religious traditions. Watts' journey from Zen student to Episcopalian priest and back captures a steadfast commitment to living religiously, a commitment whose apotheosis manifests broadly as 'psychedelic mysticism' (Shipley, 2015) and specifically in what I am terming, borrowing from Davis (2002) and Osto (2016), *psychedelic Buddhism*. A committed perennialist, Watts draws often not only from Buddhism, but also from Taoism, Hinduism, and varied expressions of esoteric traditions, including his own Christian background. However, his consistent return to Buddhism as a mechanism to unpack the lessons unveiled through psychedelic

CONTACT Morgan R. Shipley shiple18@msu.edu Department of Religious Studies, Michigan State University, Wells Hall, East Lansing, MI, 48824, USA
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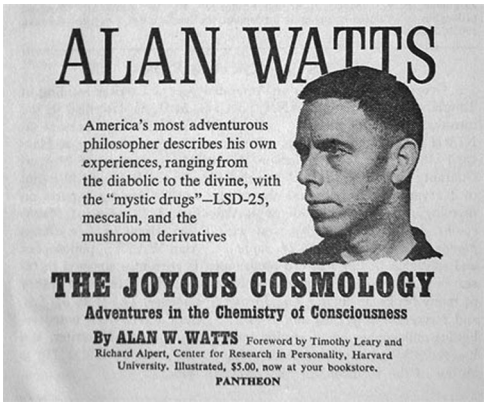

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exploration offers insight into what Davis (2002) identifies as 'countercultural spirituality', a method to bypass 'a culture that had swept its mystical and ecstatic traditions under the moldering carpet of mainline Christianity' in order to realize 'the simple, immanent "Zen" of the ordinary world' (pp. 152–153).

Osto (2016) furthers the significance of this 'subculture within a subculture', describing, in following Davis (2002), 'psychedelic Buddhism … [as a] new psychedelically enhanced or augmented Buddhism' (pp. xx–xxi). Osto illustrates how psychedelic Buddhism 'encapsulates a new religious ethos possessing cultural, sociological, philosophical, and theological aspects' (p. xxi). Important for Osto is to illustrate how American converts to Buddhism 'use psychedelics as part of their religious practice', pointing specifically to Watts as a central figure in explicating the nature of psychedelic Buddhism by emphasizing how

> psychedelics are not a spiritual path in themselves, but can be used in conjunction with Buddhist practice … [Watts] suggests the practice of meditation, which he explains as a type of contemplation or 'centering', whereby one lets one's attention rest in the present moment and allows the contents of consciousness to happen without interference. (p. 31)

Concerned less with the orthopraxic overlay between Buddhism and psychedelic spirituality, this article concentrates on how psychedelic Buddhism offered Americans a means to diagnose and respond to the malaise, alienation, and conformity confronting post-World War II society. In this context, psychedelic Buddhism refers to the connection between psychedelic consciousness and Buddhist insight, what Osto (2016) develops as 'tools or a technology to train the mind and develop insight into Buddhist truths … psychedelics can act as spiritual medicine … [by helping one] transcend the limits of rationality through altered states of consciousness' (pp. xxv–xxvi).

Through his psychedelic experimentation in the late 1950s and beyond, Watts believed he experienced *satori*, the height of Buddhist awakening expressed not as a unique state, but rather a return to the natural condition of the human mind. Watts, in other words, believed he overcame the illusory differences that convince people that life is constructed out of serial antagonisms and division (see, e.g., Watts, 1965a). As Watts (1965b) experienced, psychedelics (LSD and mescaline) 'do not presuppose a universe divided into the spiritual and the material' and, like Zen Buddhism, 'do not culminate in a state of consciousness where the physical world vanishes into some undifferentiated and bodiless luminescence' (p. 6).

Although psychedelic mysticism is sometimes understood critically in scholarly, popular, and religious domains as empty of principled comportment and moral proportion (see, e.g., Lachman, 2001), I suggest herein that Watts' Buddhism, informed by psychedelic experience, was compassionately responsive to problematic aspects of postwar American living by identifying and ameliorating certain alienating conditions of the post-World War II zeitgeist of neoliberal values, consumerism, and Christian narratives of cultural and individual revitalization. Indeed, my article's title is inspired by Watts' (1961) reflection on Buddhism as 'a critique of culture, an enduring nonviolent revolution or "loyal opposition" to the culture in which it is involved' (p. 7). In this article, the spiritual parameters and emancipatory value of psychedelic Buddhism and Watts' religious writings are explored and discussed.

Responding to estrangement

Accessing unitive understanding, Watts' psychedelic writings respond to a postwar 'personality which is independent, isolated, insular, and estranged from the cosmos that surrounds it' (Watts, 1965b, p. xviii). As Fromm (1960), Marcuse (1964), Mumford (1967), and Whyte (1956/2002) attest, postwar American society's intense economic growth, via capitalist modernization and technological advancement, produced subjective alienation from one's self, other people, and nature. These social theorists unanimously lament the corresponding costs, highlighting profound dehumanization – the 'deadening of life' (Fromm, 1960, p. 78) ensuing from adorations of material wealth, standardizations and merit-orientations inherent to work and employment, and attendant constructions of 'selves' defined by conformity, competition, consumption, and communal disconnection.

This spiritual crisis of estrangement developed from postwar conditions where, Fromm (1960) writes, 'control by the intellect over nature, and the production of more and more things, became the paramount aims of life'. In this developmental course, people are 'transformed' into things, and 'life has become subordinated to property, "*to be*" is dominated by "to have"' (pp. 78–79). Watts (1951) deftly describes the experiential correlates of these conditions:

> Our age is one of frustration, anxiety, agitation, and addiction to 'dope' … . This 'dope' we call our high standard of living … . To keep this 'standard' most of us are willing to put up with lives that consist largely in doing jobs that are a bore, earning the means to seek relief from the tedium by intervals of hectic and expensive pleasure. These intervals are supposed to be the real living, the real purpose served by the necessary evil of work. … This is no caricature. It is the simple reality of millions of lives, so commonplace that we need hardly dwell upon the details, save to note the anxiety and frustration of those who put up with it, not knowing what else to do. (pp. 21–22)

Concurrent with economic growth, postwar America saw upsurges in doomsday-centered Christian discourses coupled with bourgeoning Prosperity Gospels, illustrating an intertwining of consumerism and Christianity. In *American Apocalypse*, Sutton (2014) details how influential Protestant evangelical preachers – Charles Fuller (1887–1968) and Billy Graham (b. 1918) among others – legitimated biblical end-times prophecies as explanations for the postwar existential malaise. Americans, they argued, are drowning in cauldrons of Satanic secularism and Cold War politics, thereby facing the wrathful side of God's final judgment, leaving only a turn to Christianity and an absolute rejection of communism

as the means for religious and secular salvation. Likewise, Bowler (2013; see also Harrell, 1979) documents concurrent risings of Christian Prosperity Gospels rooted in 1950s Healing Revivals of preachers including Oral Roberts (1918–2009) and A.A. Allen (1911–1970). Validating postwar consumer-competition orientations, prosperity theology asserts that God wills financial and physical well-being, which is achieved (purchased) through, among other self-interested strategies, one's own monetary payments to Christian preachers and religious causes.

For Watts, psychedelics accentuated the realness of postwar society's alienating conditions while also offering playful solutions, paths to spiritual values and moral understandings antithetical to western religious and cultural constructs that isolate self from other, and estrange human from divine. Reflecting Buddha's Three Marks of Existence, Watts (1965b) understands everyday awareness as *avidya* (ignorance), noting how, 'in paying exclusive attention to differences … [the contemporary individual] ignores relationships'. This 'normal awareness', writes Watts, 'does not see, for example, that mind and form or shape and space are as inseparable as front and back, nor that the individual is so interwoven with the universe that he and it are one body' (pp. 6–7). Mired in dual narratives of apocalyptic Christianity and meritocratic consumption, postwar consciousness remained estranged from existential interdependence, resulting in obsessive but fleeting (*anicca*, or impermanence) attachments to material existence and consumerism, ultimately producing chronic suffering (*dukkha*). The gaps of alienation and isolation, wrote Watts, 'somehow … must be closed, and among the varied means whereby the closure may be initiated or achieved are medicines which science itself has discovered, and which may prove to be the sacraments of its religion' (p. xviii).

Watts (1965b) positions psychedelic rituals as religious practices propelling individuals beyond alienating illusions, illustrating clearly the Buddhist-inspired insight that 'does not deny physical distinctions but sees them as the plain expression of unity' (p. 7). Importantly, notes Watts, such psychedelic perception is 'not merely speculative' but represents 'a discipline in awareness as a result of which the mutual interrelation of all things and all events becomes a constant sensation' (p. 6). This 'constant sensation' expresses a moment of unitive consciousness in which the postwar limits of perception give way to 'mutual interrelation', of what Buddhism labels *pratitysamupada* (dependent origination). As a new counter-religiosity vis-à-vis prevailing religious narratives and political ideologies of postwar America, psychedelic Buddhism adheres to Watts' reflection regarding 'the transformation of consciousness undertaken in Taoism and Zen', which 'is more like the correction of faulty perception or the curing of disease. It is not an acquisitive process of learning more and more facts or greater and greater skills, but rather an unlearning of wrong habits and opinions' (pp. 8–9). In other words, psychedelic Buddhism captures a specific inflection of the perennialist perspective Watts locates at the heart of his experiences with psychedelics, a perspective that understands sacred wisdom as tethered to the attempt to actualize religious values of empathy, compassion, and responsibility.

Challenging secularism's coherency plus monotheistic absolutism, Watts' psychedelic religious writings – particularly *The Joyous Cosmology* (Watts, 1965b) – are neither burdened nor confined by these very structures. Within webs of interconnection, Watts identifies sacramental approaches positioning psychedelic consciousness as a numinous entryway to mystical experience, expressing Buddhist-laden imperatives of compassion that reimagine and re-engage complex dialogues between self and other, between the

always already and the never quite yet. Watts, in locating divinity outside of western religious discourse and beyond the confines of postwar understandings, advances religious wisdom (gnosis) as a syncretic expression of perennial love and sacred interbeing. Neither dogmatic nor canonical, religious experience, as Watts ultimately concludes, asks us to see beyond division, and to search out playful moments in which subjective selves become direct, altruistic expressions of the absolute 'other'.

Enframing psychedelic Buddhism

Beyond understanding conceptually, Watts' (1965b) psychedelic explorations offered experiential tools for self-knowledge as the knowing of 'something other, something strange. The landscape I am watching is also a state of myself … and all knowledge of other knowledge of self' (p. 48). Expressing neither narcissism nor insanity, the unmediated mind – the mind that functions outside the differential boundaries of binaries and hierarchies – 'is a perfectly normal state of mind' (Suzuki, 1949, p. 97). Just as Zen Buddhism unveils 'not an escape, but a resolution of the conflict within the present age' (Watts, 1973a, p. 50), psychedelic Buddhism reclaims spiritual sanity amidst chaotic and eschatological concerns suffocating postwar culture. The most extraordinary aspect of psychedelic usage is thus found in its harmonizing and enriching of various domains of consciousness understood as fundamentally irreconcilable within the context of postwar awareness.

Overcoming divides between thinking and feeling, spirit and body, sacred and profane, Watts' Buddhist reading of psychedelics directs ways of living in which humanity 'is no longer an embodied paradox of angel and animal, or reason fighting against nature, but a marvelous coincidence in whom Eros and Logos are one' (1973b, p. 153). Reflecting on Watts' legacy, Krippner (2012) captures this sentiment, noting how 'the beauty, the visions, the sense of mystical unity made him conclude that such chemicals were to be approached with much care and on the order of a religious sacrament' (p. 86). Psychedelic mysticism propelled Watts' (1965b) rejoicing in others' sacredness, seeing his companions as no longer the 'harassed little personalities with names … the mortals we are all pretending to be … but rather as immortal archetypes of themselves' (p. 50).

Notable Zen Buddhists, however, including Roshi Philip Kapleau (1967, pp. 21–22) and D.T. Suzuki (see Aitken, 1997, p. 30), criticized Watts' cultural interpretations and psychedelic application of basic Zen principles. Notable also were wider criticisms of the psychedelic counterculture, including (1) the shift from structured laboratory experimentation to arguably less safe and less controlled public usage of psychedelics, and (2) the general misappropriation of various mystical traditions to legitimate psychedelic experience (see Shipley, 2015, pp. 3–22). Still, Watts represents a countercultural trend of searching for ways beyond internal and external divides pervasive to western ideologies toward harmonious living with others. By seeing others as 'immortal archetypes', his connecting of psychedelics to Buddhism aimed at solving the alienation and anxiety associated with postwar civil life. Watts is not disparaging western values through symbols of spiritual otherness; rather, his engagement with psychedelic Buddhism signals a cultural offset to neoliberal values (primarily, the postwar intertwining of American exceptionalism and consumerism), thus representing a spiritual alternative to the entrenchment of apocalyptic Christianity and prosperity theology.

In turning away from 1950s Christian evangelicalism toward esoteric and non-Abrahamic religious traditions offering a world unburdened by illusory concerns of consumerism, materialism, and binary thinking, Watts' psychedelic Buddhism signals – as do earlier movements of Transcendentalism, Theosophy, and neo-Advaita – an alternative to the established narratives driving America's religious culture forward. The American countercultural turn eastward and inward represents the search for spiritual solutions to the isolating estrangement inhibiting full personal and communal potential – an opportunity, in other words, to 'feel absolutely *with* the world, freed of that chronic resistance to experience which blocks the free flowing of life and makes us move like muscle-bound dancers' (Watts, 1965b, pp. 78–79). Psychedelic Buddhism exemplifies munificent postwar counter-religious awakenings defined by immediately directed and mutually sustaining models of sacred understanding positioned as the means to reimagine the very nature of how we relate to and engage with others.

Watts' reliance on Buddhism to interpret psychedelic consciousness highlights a broader tradition within American religious life that engages eastern religions and philosophies toward actualizing dual promises of pluralism and spiritual freedom by transcending a millenarian exceptionalism that discounts historical possibilities and religious alternatives. On a spiritual level, psychedelic Buddhism highlights a religious experience where the monotheistic hierarchy of sacred difference (e.g. between God and human) is replaced with unitive mutuality, displacing concerns about the hereafter-state of one's soul with ultimate concern in the eternal now 'by making it clear that the function of practical action is to serve the abiding present rather than the ever-receding future, and the living organism rather than the mechanical system of the state or the social order' (Watts, 1965b, p. 84). Psychedelics thus confirmed for Watts an essential insight of Buddhism, unveiling an absolute sense of moral responsibility always already existing when all is seen as equally necessary in their co-dependency.

For Watts, Buddhism's value is its affordance of new religious worldviews, perspectives sanctified by non-divisive practices and non-antagonistic relationships. This is right mindfulness (*sammā-sati)*, non-judgmental awareness where one experiences reality as it is (*yatha-bhuta*), as a web of endless interconnection. Within postwar moments suffused with value hierarchies and corresponding social anxieties, right mindfulness proved essential in helping psychedelic practitioners chart shifts from conditions of suffering – and that which causes suffering (e.g. clinging or attaching to that which is impermanent) – to *dharma*, to the truth of the way things are. Experiencing reality as it is, one becomes aware of the absolute dependency structuring our material world and our spiritual interconnections, resulting in a sacred sense of 'love which is distinctly eucharistic, an acceptance of each other's natures from the heights to the depths' (Watts, 1965b, p. 51).

Psychedelic consciousness mirrored this 'cosmic dance', helping Watts (1963) see how 'the polar, reciprocal, or mutually sustaining relationship of events and forces that are usually considered to be opposed to or basically separate from one another … may [in fact] be a perceptual illusion based upon inadequate concepts of sensing and knowing' (p. xix; see also Metzner, 2012). And, exactly because such an illusion leads the individual to feel a 'basic separation from his universe' (Watts, 1963, p. xix) – a separation overcome within psychedelic consciousness – Watts relied on Buddhism toward recognizing the artifice of opposites, restoring unitive experiences of internal and external interconnection. In other words, Buddhism empowers a sense of mutual responsibility by disempowering the

hierarchic divides (spirit vs. material; soul vs. body; intuition vs. reason; divinity vs. humanity; owners vs. workers) associated with the religious, political, and economic structures of postwar America.

Set specifically against the postwar American motif in which 'modern consumers … identify themselves [more and more] by the formula: *I am = what I have and what I consume*' (Fromm, 1976, p. 15), psychedelic Buddhism collapses this binary, offering alternatives to the 'blind robot symbolic uncertainty' defining postwar life (Leary, 1966, n.p.). Mindfulness does not separate object from subject, or vice versa, but instead illustrates how proper understanding unveils the 'sacramental vision of reality' (p. 22), the 'Is-ness' (p. 17) of things, as noted by Huxley (1954/2009) in his Buddhist-infused response to his first psychedelic encounter. The mind is not void of material connection, but represents a position beyond the very boundaries separating the material from the immaterial. 'Beyond words, beyond space-time, beyond self', Leary, Alpert, and Metzner (1964/2007) stress in their now classic psychedelic manual, 'there are only pure awareness and ecstatic freedom from all game (and biological) involvements' (pp. 4–5). 'Games', the authors note, 'are behavioral sequences defined by roles, rules, rituals, goals, strategies, values, language, characteristic space-time locations and characteristic patterns of movement' (p. 5n). Psychedelics allowed those trapped by postwar understandings to locate this vision and to experience its effects.

In *The Joyous Cosmology*, Watts (1965b, pp. 47–49) describes similarly how postwar modes of understanding spawned sensations of being 'lost in a maze. I don't know how I got here', Watts continues, 'for I have lost the thread and forgotten the intricately convoluted system of passages through which the game of hide-and-seek was pursued'. Illustrating 'the linear, step-by-step, contrast-by-contrast procedure of attention', psychedelics offer the opposite by making 'the principle of the maze … clear'. In demonstrating how 'all dualities and opposites are not disjointed but polar; they do not encounter and confront one another from afar; they exfoliate from a common center', Watts' psychedelic journey leads to the heart of Buddhist insight, to 'the realization that at the deep center of a time perpendicular to ordinary time we are, and always have been, one'. Most importantly, however, in exposing this 'marvelously hidden plot, the master illusion', psychedelic gnosis leads not to religious isolation or philosophical withdrawal; nor does it fortify egotistical perspectives driving contemporary consumer culture and millenarian religions. Rather, whereas illusory living leads postwar individuals to 'become a being centered in consciousness' and, as a direct result, 'centered in clash, conflict, and discord', in psychedelic consciousness, as Watts (1965b) emphasizes, 'love, unity, harmony, and relationship … take precedence over war and division' (p. 56).

The Buddhist-infused understandings unveiled by psychedelic consciousness called for new symbolic structures capable of mapping the mutuality of these experiences toward (1) helping others understand the nature of psychedelic exploration and the realities of Buddhist insight, and (2) maintaining ethical imperatives implicated in the unitive interconnectivity defining everyday existence. In their reflection on Buddhism as a means for engaging and mapping psychedelic experiences, Leary et al. (1964/2007) describe how their shift to religion (from clinical psychology) was not merely an effort to *understand* what occurs during psychedelic sessions, but, in vastly more significant ways, to make 'the consciousness-expansion experience endure in subsequent daily life' (p. 12). More than naïvely appropriating religious traditions (Zaehner, 1957), and against stereotypes

of decadent withdrawals suffusing historical and popular records (Farber, 2002; Grinspoon & Bakalar, 1979), psychedelic exploration in postwar America affords a 'religious demonstration' (see also Hutchison, 1959; Miller, 1950), that is to say, a spiritual protest. *The Joyous Cosmology* (Watts, 1965b), and psychedelic Buddhism more broadly, offer perfect examples, functioning as spiritual protests against moribund orthodoxies and instrumental fundamentalisms of postwar America. Influencing both the 1950s religious conditions and the 1960s/1970s religious revolts, broader psychedelic movements toward spiritual liberation signaled rejections of western monotheistic religion, of what Allen Ginsberg called 'monotheistic hallucinations' of the 'whole Judeo-Christian-Islamic mind-trap' (Brown & Novick, 1993, pp. 267–268).

From discord to unity

Although preposterous, with the 'exterminating angel of nuclear holocaust' hovering in Cold War America's public imagination, those 'who grew up after World War II in America could set little in store regarding the future' (Raschke, 1980, p. 207). With death seemingly around every corner, Raschke notes, instant gratifications presented by consumerism and materialism 'made sense' (p. 207). Presented with competing images of material well-being, nuclear apocalypse, and atrocities wrought by global war, postwar happiness proved to be a thinly veiled 'radical insecurity', a religious catalepsy demanding 'a total revaluation of the past and future' (Raschke, 1980, pp. 207–208). With slaughter and devastation echoing from past wars, and threats of nuclear annihilation moving one's future beyond meaningful control, immediate moments emerged as infinitely more precious, brought uniquely into focus by psychedelic experimentation, perennial insight, and Buddhist interpretation.

Unable to remain active participants in dramas of postwar American progress defined increasingly by organized society's slow creep toward the mutual self-destruction promised by the nuclear arms race, psychedelic Buddhism offered people mystical 'immediatism', 'spontaneous, direct, unmediated spiritual insight into reality (typically with little to no prior training)' (Versluis, 2014, p. 2). Dilating one's senses and cultivating inner experiences, psychedelics supplied paths to rediscovering joyful immediacies. Yet, stresses Watts, psychedelics alone cannot provide sustained solutions to spiritual disaffection. Once psychedelic wisdom is received, the next move, as Osto (2016) accentuates in his discussion of Watts, is finding ways of actualizing the value of seeing the world as mutually interdependent. As Watts (1965b) advised, 'psychedelic experience is only a glimpse of genuine mystical insight … when you get the message, hang up the phone. For psychedelic drugs are simply instruments' (pp. 25–26; see also Watts, 1971/2017).

Emancipatory values of psychedelic substances, then, reside in their sacramental capacity to exceed habitual thinking modes, allowing for unsullied senses of reality. What one sees, Watts (1965b) details, is an ending of dualism between personality and cosmos, a perennial truth in which 'there is simply no way of separating self from other, self-love from other-love. All knowledge of self is knowledge of other, and all knowledge of other knowledge of self' (p. 48). Symbiotically, 'self and other, the familiar and the strange, the internal and the external, the predictable and the unpredictable *imply* each other' (Watts, 1973b, p. 151; see also Watts, 1963, pp. 49, 185). Psychedelics are thus resituated as entheogens, mystical elements affording transcendence of dualistic thinking

toward divine awareness. A cross-cultural religious sacrament found, for example, in Hinduism's soma myth, the Bwiti ritual use of ibogaine, ayahuasca among Amazonian indigenous peoples, or Native American peyote ceremonies, entheogens act as 'vision-producing drugs … something that causes the divine to reside within one' (Ruck, Bigwood, Staples, Ott, & Wasson, 1979, pp. 145–146). For psychedelic Buddhism, this suggests relational polarities in which immanent mutuality becomes the defining mark of religiosity.

As Watts (1965b) ultimately highlights, 'the more I become aware of [opposites] … implying each other, the more I feel them to be one with each other' (p. 46). Such awareness supplies a religious morality motivated not 'from the love of rewards or the fear of punishments' (Watts, 1973b, p. 149), but from 'the unmotivated play of love' (Watts, 1965b, p. 89), including 'a sense of social unity which civilized man has long since lost' (p. 97). Accordingly, after receiving the wisdom of unitive interconnection, 'to choose not to play rather than to play is still to choose, and thus to remain in duality. Therefore', reflects Watts (1963), 'the most truly awakened sages are represented as coming back to participate in the life of the world out of "compassion for all sentient beings"' (p. 27). Thus, psychedelic consciousness, when framed through the ineffability of mysticism and Buddhist motifs, encourages altruistic spirituality modeled on the bodhisattva, the Buddhist figure who, out of compassion, helps all sentient beings achieve enlightenment. It is not an either/or proposition – neither artificial materialism (Nordstrom & Pilgrim, 1980) nor profane spirituality (Zaehner, 1972, pp. 66–135) – but rather both spiritual and material. 'In the unitary, or nondualistic, view of the world', psychedelics enable perspectives in which care for others becomes tantamount, a position Watts (1973b) interprets as resulting from understandings that 'individual differences express the unity, as branches, leaves, and flowers from the same plant, and the love between the members is the realization of their basic interdependence' (p. 146). Psychedelic Buddhism, therefore, is neither rigid nor institutional. Rather, it functions experientially in the here and now, mutually concerned with reciprocal perceptions of reality recognizing the 'Suchness' of all subjects and objects and a love for others that makes compassion the daily imperative of right living.

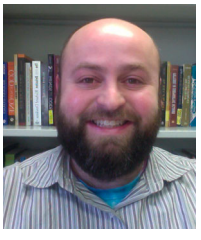
Conclusion

Mystical interpretations and sacramental applications of psychedelics thus do more than merely profane orthodox religions. Archives left by psychedelic mystics reveal spiritual efficacies of psychedelic substances. Engaging psychedelic Buddhism's nuances, what clearly emerges is not only an understanding that situates psychedelic consciousness as a religious state allowing absolute love for all sentient beings, but also a recognition of the healing capacity of psychedelics, of a means for bridging gaps between self and other, between the isolation of subjectivity and the sublimity of community. Psychedelics, when coupled with Buddhist insights regarding the human condition, offer ways of transforming life and knowledge. Within sacramental spaces afforded by psychedelic exploration, we begin to uncover the therapeutic expression of psychedelic consciousness, the ways in which stronger and more engaged understandings of self and other can help reorient the very means by which we relate to and participate in our social and political worlds (Shipley, 2015).

Rather than isolated sites of psychedelic exploration, engaging psychedelic Buddhism as a spark for reimagining the structure of personal and interpersonal relationships helps

locate moments of intersection that might bridge the gaps that commonly divide the religious effects of psychedelics from contemporary studies that illustrate the profound impact of psychedelic therapy (see Goldsmith, 2011; Shroder, 2014). In the midst of trying to 'keep up with the Joneses', psychedelic Buddhism in the 1960s offered healthy-mindedness through the frames of detaching from – and not merely adjusting to – one's immediate phenomenal and spiritual settings. In this sense, Buddhism offered a direct alternative to postwar capitalists, evangelical millenarians, and Christian positive thinkers by challenging the coherency of the status quo. By removing the very categories that differentiate the saved from the fallen, the sacred from the profane, psychedelic Buddhism upends the basic narratives directing postwar American society, ultimately locating an understanding of the world that simultaneously substitutes top-down implementation and salvation for absolute openness, looks beyond the commoditization of ends, and embraces a religious experience of the world described in terms of selfless responsibility and expressed as a therapeutic balm for overcoming individual anxiety and communal disconnection.

Notes on contributor



Morgan Shipley holds a PhD in American Studies from Michigan State University, where he now serves as visiting assistant professor of religious studies. He is co-editor of *The Silence of Fallout: Nuclear Criticism in a Post-Cold War World* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), and author of *Psychedelic Mysticism: Transforming Consciousness, Religious Experiences, and Voluntary Peasants in Postwar America* (Lexington, 2015).

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