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Psychotherapy East and West: a retrospective review, part II

Peter J. Columbus

Shantigar Foundation, Rowe, MA, USA

ABSTRACT

This is the second of a two-part retrospective reflection on Alan Watts' *Psychotherapy East and West*. Part I, focused on 1961–1970 assessments in academic journals, noted the text's innovative alignment with countercultural and human potential movements, plus critical appraisals of Watts' approach to the ego. Part II concerns subsequent considerations of *Psychotherapy East and West*, including (1) later academic and literary reviews based on 1970s–1980s reissues of the text, (2) developments in 'Orientalism' and postmodernism, and concluding with (3) the twenty-first-century views of Bankart, Kripal, and Puhakka.

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Part I of this retrospective essay surveyed 1960s book reviews in academic venues to offer perspective on the role and impact of *Psychotherapy East and West* in American culture and in the psychotherapy field. With critical commentary focusing primarily on Watts' understanding of the ego and its transcendence, Part I showed the text as 'simultaneously inspective and symptomatic of 1960s crises in psychotherapy and American culture, as Watts aligned with countercultural sensibilities and the human potential movement' (Columbus, 2015, p. 352). Part II briefly notes three themes vis-a-vis Watts' text. The first concerns 1970s–1980s reviews in academic and literary venues worldwide. The second involves criticism in light of Said's (1978) Orientalism, and commentary re postmodernism. Third, Part II concludes with three twenty-first-century perspectives on *Psychotherapy East and West*, two of which point to its historical significance (Bankart, 2003; Kripal, 2007), and one to its contemporary relevance (Puhakka, 2012). Note that several of the reviews cited herein were written in languages other than English. Translations (and any mistranslations) of these reviews, as quoted below, are my own.

Later reviews: 1970s–1980s

In the 1970s extending into the 1980s, reissues of *Psychotherapy East and West* gained substantive attention in academic, literary, and religious journals in Britain (Skynner, 1971; Zaehner, 1971) and Ireland (Clare, 1971); the European continent, including Spain (Jover, 1973; Martinez, 1984), France (Bareau, 1976; Germain, 1975; Huard, 1975; Keller, 1974), Germany (Mann, 1983), and Sweden (Eneroth, 1973); and worldwide, including Brazil (Sigelmann, 1973), India (Thornton, 1971), Australia, and New Zealand (Burton-

CONTACT Peter J. Columbus pcolumbus92@hotmail.com Shantigar Foundation, 63 Davenport Road, Rowe, MA 01367, USA

Alan Watts (center) is flanked by Harvey Cox (left) and Leonard Bernstein (right), and by students at Harvard University, 1972. Photo used by permission of *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*.

Bradley, 1972). As with the original 1961 publication, the reissues received a range of evaluations from psychologically minded thinkers. Four reviews – those by Skynner (1971), Burton-Bradley (1972), Clare (1971), and Thornton (1971) – present a representative sample and will suffice for brief discussion.

Offering an optimistic assessment in *Group Analysis*, Skynner (1971) suggested that group-analytic practitioners will appreciate Watts' lucid case that 'our contemporary focus on the isolated individual and his ego is the cause of many misunderstandings and unnecessary problems'. Skynner explained: 'Watts sees the concept of the individual a misleading abstraction except when viewed as part of the total network of communication in which he has his being and from which he derives his meaning' (p. 192). Burton-Bradley (1972), writing in *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, noted that Watts used the word psychotherapy with broader implications than most thinkers would allow. However, 'psychotherapy technicians, as such … have indeed benefitted from contact with Eastern thought, and there is no doubt they could learn much from Watts himself' (p. 136). Still, Burton-Bradley offered a caveat concerning Watts' general approach to egoic functions, saying it 'could promote the morbid disease process of schizophrenia in predisposed persons through failure to establish clear ego boundaries between individual family members' (pp. 136–137).

Psychiatrist Anthony Clare (1971) reviewed Watts' 'fascinating and provocative' (p. 8) text in conjunction with Viktor Frankl's *The Will to Meaning*. Writing in *The Irish Times*, Clare suggested that Frankl and Watts were emblematic of shifting views on neurosis, from drive repression to death anxiety and existential estrangement. Perhaps aware of

budding British and European human potential movements (see Rowan, 2004; Weinraub, 1970), Clare anticipated that the texts would resonate significantly with lay audiences:

> It is said that the good doctor is one who keeps the patient amused while nature works the cure. If, as I suspect, more patients than psychiatrists read Frankl and Watts, they will certainly be amused, and equally certainly they will find much to give them hope and succor when other, more orthodox treatments can only give them pause. (Clare, 1971, p. 8)

Thornton's (1971) highly critical evaluation of *Psychotherapy East and West*, published in an Anglo-Indian theosophical journal based in Bombay, argued that Watts conflated psychotherapy and religion: 'Western psychotherapeutic tradition has its origin in *the Cult of Aesculapius*, *the God of medicine*, and should not be confused with the spiritual systems contained in either Eastern or Western essentially religious traditions' (p. 362). A trained Jungian, Thornton criticized the Wattsian ego's relations to death, arguing that Watts should have known 'that symbolic death is experienced throughout the whole Process of Individuation, and that Jung himself, as well as many of his pupils, even had to experience the reality of death in all its stark physical nakedness' (p. 361).

Unlike the initial 1961 version, later reissues of *Psychotherapy East and West* received critical attention from religionists, particularly Christian thinkers. Keller (1974), in the *Revue de Theologie et de Philosophie*, wrote:

> We regret that the author did not push his investigation a little further, for example, to study Christian practice. He would have discovered that process of liberation as he understood it is actually present in the most basic Christian therapeutic: the Law is given to man so that he is aware of the impasse in which he's entangled and accepts the Gospel that is *liberation*. (p. 292)

Mann (1983), in *Zeitschrift fur Katholische Theologie*, concurred with Keller (1974), further noting interpretive flaws in Watts' thinking: 'The nearest significant parallels allowed in Christianity are ignored … He quite happily cites and interprets biblical sayings – against all rules of the art and usually quite inappropriately' (p. 353). Germain (1975) added: 'He [Watts] goes on to draw a caricature of Christianity as a whole from an extreme puritanism' (p. 478).

The eminent Oxford religionist R.C. Zaehner (1971) offered in *The Spectator* a highly critical take on Watts' view of mystical experience:

> The trouble is that Alan Watts … refuses to face the fact that 'mystical' experiences are very far from being identical. Your reviewer has argued this so often [see, e.g., Zaehner, 1957] that it would be pointless to repeat it here. (p. 179)

Echoing Gordon's (1970) psychoanalytic critique (see Columbus, 2015) while foreshadowing conservative pushback against countercultural and human potential movements, Zaehner (1971) castigated Watts for the possible ethical and moral implications of mystical experience as 'the felt realization of the physical world as a field' (Watts, cited in Zaehner, 1971, p. 179):

> Alan Watts, like Timothy Leary, has spent a great deal of time and energy assailing the Protestant ethic of hard work and the morality of 'thou shalt not'. What he does not seem to realize is that he and his kind have succeeded so well that they have in fact destroyed morality of any kind. (p. 179; see also Burton-Bradley, 1972, p. 136)

Orientalism and postmodernism

In 1978, Edward Said published his influential text, *Orientalism*, a critical appraisal of Western representations of Middle Eastern and Asian peoples and cultures. Orientalism, Said argued, is a way of seeing that fabricates, accentuates, embellishes, and misrepresents variances between 'Oriental' and 'Occidental' toward justifying Western self-importance and worldwide hegemony. Following Said, historian David Kopf (1986), in his 'Macrohistoriographical Essay on the Idea of East and West from Herodotus to Edward Said', showed that 'the idea or myth of encounter between an Orient and an Occident has been a major theme in macrohistory' (p. 22). *Psychotherapy East and West*, Kopf suggested, represents a particular variation of that myth: the post-World War II era when 'the East' was seen as offering 'a positive ideology of salvation for a world continually on the brink of some ultimate disaster' (p. 32).

Watts, asserted Kopf (1986), 'viewed himself as the Columbus of the psyche who discovered in the sacred texts of the East a new world full of promise for liberating humanity from anxiety and neuroses' (p. 32). Watts thus transformed a pre-World War II vision of 'the East' as passive and life negating into 'a positive idea of social criticism and individual self-realization' for the West (p. 33).

A full reply to Kopf's (1986) assessment is beyond this article's scope, save to note Watts' strong circumspection about Eastern spiritual disciplines in relation to Western psychotherapy:

> Both are fumbling in the dark, though not without light. Wonderful as I have found them, I do not believe that the Eastern disciplines are the last word in sacrosanct and immemorial wisdom such that the world must come and sit humbly at the feet of their masters. Nor do I feel that there is a gospel according to Freud, or to Jung, in which the great psychological truths are forever fixed. (Watts, 1961/1969, pp. x–xi)

Part I of this review (Columbus, 2015) contained discussion of Moffett's (1962) likening of *Psychotherapy East and West* to an anti-novel. Moffett noted: 'Watts' discussion of the ego and "its" actions persuades us that they don't exist. Or rather exist only as a *necessity of communication*, not as necessity of nature' (p. 486, italics added). Columbus (2015) concluded:

> It seems plausible to suggest that *Psychotherapy East and West* reflects not only the anti-novel genre, but, in reaching 'a crisis of isomorphism between language and life' (Moffett, 1962, p. 490), it foreshadows certain postmodern, constructionist, and deconstructionist approaches to reading, writing, and living. Indeed, *Psychotherapy East and West* predates seminal publications by de Man, Derrida, and Berger and Luckmann by at least five years. (p. 350)

The above observations seem appropriate as far as they go. But they do not go far enough. A case can be made that *Psychotherapy East and West*, though intersecting with postmodernism, moved beyond the extreme relativism and radical constructionism of postmodern thought. Watts' discussion of Buddhism in *Psychotherapy East and West* was informed primarily by the Madhyamika – Middle Way – school of Nagarjuna (see Watts, 1961/1969, p. 64n30). As Hiett (1995) noted, in citing *Psychotherapy East and West* in support of his cross-cultural perspective on postmodernism, the Madhyamika is a 'liberative technique … showing the inconsistency of all philosophical positions … removing the

ground upon which a person based his or her life' (p. 200), and this includes the relativism and contextualism of postmodern ideas. Puhakka (2012) likewise observed:

> The Middle Way teachings demonstrate again and again that there really is nothing that can be claimed as absolutely true. Watts understood that such a demonstration is the very essence of the Buddhist and Zen teachings and this understanding gave him the freedom to speak clearly and boldly without bowing before the sacred cow of cultural and social context but cutting right through it. (p. 211; Puhakka is further discussed below)

Conclusion: *Psychotherapy East and West* in the twenty-first century

In January 2017, *Psychotherapy East and West* was again reissued, implying a sustained significance more than a half-century after its original 1961 publication date. Here, discussed succinctly, are three twenty-first-century perspectives on Watts' text. The initial two assessments, by Bankart (2003) and Kripal (2007, pp. 144–148) respectively, consider its historical significance. The third, by Puhakka (2012), considers its contemporary relevance.

In an essay entitled 'Five Manifestations of the Buddha in the West', Bankart (2003) offered brief historical accountings of Buddhism's influence on five Western psychotherapeutic paradigms, including 'Freudian Psychodynamics; Jungian Analytic Psychology; NeoFreudian Eclecticism; Behavioral Pragmatism; and New Age Consciousness' (p. 45). In this arrangement, *Psychotherapy East and West* is the first of three 'foundational events' in the emergence of 'New Age Consciousness'. (The other two events being the 1969 launch of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, and Wilber, Engler, and Brown's *Transformations of Consciousness: Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development* published in 1986.) 'Taken together', suggested Bankart, 'these three primary sources created legitimate space for a serious extended academic discussion of consciousness, and its role in physical and psychological well-being' (p. 62). Two key features of Watts' text, in Bankart's view, are the 'powerful' Buddhist critiques of Western culture, and the questioning of Western psychotherapy's capacity to afford 'reconciliation between individual feeling and social norms without sacrificing the integrity of the individual' (p. 62). Considering *Psychotherapy East and West* as a 'vivid and heart-felt rejoinder' to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Bankart concluded that 'it was a far-reaching call for psychology and psychotherapy to facilitate the liberation of individual souls from the suffering resulting from the suffocating conformity of a joyless, sexless, over-analyzed and vastly controlling society' (p. 62).

In his history of the Esalen Institute and its formative influence on the Human Potential Movement, Jeffrey Kripal (2007) highlighted Esalen's emphasis on the body's centrality for psychological and spiritual transformation. Kripal noted the development of a 'Western Tantra' informed by (1) the Freudian Left who considered the id as 'essentially good and wise' (p. 143) and by (2) the '*Shakti* (occult energy) of Asian Tantra' (p. 144). In Kripal's view, 'probably the earliest major Esalen figure to envision a deep synthesis of Western psychology and Asian Tantra was Alan Watts in his *Psychotherapy East and West*'. There, the id and libido are not merely energetic, but 'literally cosmic' (p. 147):

> What our social institutions repress is not just the sexual love, the mutuality of man and woman, but also the still deeper love of organism and environment, of Yes and No, and of all those so-called opposites representing the Taoist symbol of the yang-yin, the black and white fishes in eternal intercourse. (Watts, as cited in Kripal, 2007, p. 147)

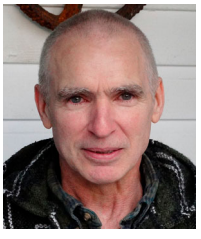
'In this way', concluded Kripal, 'Watts transgresses the conditionings and norms of conservative culture, divinizes the entire cosmos as an erotic play of opposites, and imagines an eternity of unrepressed flesh' (p. 148).

In a paper entitled 'Buddhist Wisdom in the West: A Fifty-Year Perspective on the Contributions of Alan Watts', Puhakka (2012) suggested that Watts' view of Buddhism in *Psychotherapy East and West* as 'first and foremost … a critique of culture and society' (p. 213; see Watts, 1961/1969, p. 19) offers a needed corrective to the contemporary, widespread inclination to condense Buddhist and Zen teachings into psychology, such that Buddhism and psychotherapy are viewed

> either in a symmetrical relationship where the two are equivalent alternatives that can be 'mixed and matched' depending on what the situation requires, or in an asymmetrical relationship where psychotherapy is the more encompassing term and Buddhism serves as an 'adjunct' that can add to the arsenal of specific techniques in psychotherapy. (213)

Instead, Puhakka observes, and here Part II of this retrospective review concludes, Watts ascertained and rightly formulated an asymmetrical relationship between Buddhism and psychotherapy where Buddhism embraces and outspreads psychotherapy, thus affording critical appraisal of the culturally determined and limiting premises of psychotherapy, and an opportunity to broaden the parameters of psychology.

Notes on contributor



Peter J. Columbus is administrator of the Shantigar Foundation for Theater, Meditation, and Healing, adjunct professor of psychology at Assumption College and Greenfield Community College, and serves on the Board of Directors of Valley Zendo, a Soto Zen Buddhist temple in the lineage of Kodo Sawaki and Kosho Uchiyama. Co-editor (with Don Rice) *of Alan Watts – In the Academy: Essays and Lectures* (SUNY Press, 2017) and *Alan Watts – Here and Now: Contributions to Psychology, Philosophy, and Religion* (SUNY Press, 2012), he holds a PhD in experimental psychology from the University of Tennessee, and an MA in Humanistic Psychology from the University of West Georgia.

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