

# Thomas Merton and Alan Watts: Contemplative Catholic and Oriental Anarchist

Ron Dart

Thomas Merton, for example, really understood what Zen is all about, and wrote most admirably of Chuang-Tzu's Taoism.

Alan Watts

*In My Own Way: An Autobiography* (1972)

THOMAS MERTON (1915-1968) and Alan Watts (1915-1973) are often seen as two of the more important Western religious thinkers who called the frenetic West back to a deeper and more contemplative way of being. Both men emerged from the Christian Tradition, both men sought to rediscover the mystical roots of the Western Tradition, and both men turned to the East in their contemplative journey. There is no doubt that Merton and Watts shared many of the same concerns, but they did hike down different paths by the time day was done. This short essay will briefly touch on the important points of concord between Merton and Watts and the equally important points of divergence and discord.

Alan Watts had deep and firm roots in the Church of England. The English Anglican way is grounded in a contemplative way of knowing and being, Watts knew this and, in his earliest writings probed the contemplative theology of the Western Tradition. Watts, though, was most interested in Buddhism from an early age, and, in many important ways, his leanings were more Buddhist than Christian. Watts mentioned, quite clearly in his autobiography, *In My Own Way*, his interests and commitment. "It was thus at the age of fifteen, as a scholar supported by the foundation of Canterbury

Cathedral, the heart of the Church of England, I formally declared myself to be a Buddhist" (p.62). Needless to say, this approach to doing theology ran against the grain in the post World War II era and ethos. Most who taught or studied theology at the time were more concerned with confessional, dogmatic, Biblical, systematic or historic theology. Interfaith contemplative theology was, sadly so, missing at most seminaries. Watts sensed this lack both in himself and society, and he wondered why this was the case. It was just a matter of time, as Watts immersed himself in the fullness of the Christian Tradition, that he discovered that both Christianity and the East were profoundly mystical and contemplative. The publication of *Behold The Spirit: A Study in the Necessity of Mystical Religion* (1947), by Alan Watts, was a groundbreaking work at the time. Watts had clearly established himself as a mystical theologian of note and worth. *Behold the Spirit* was a sustained meditation and reflection on the Christian mystical way, and a firm and steady call to return to such a way. Watts was, also, even at this time, attempting to synthesize the Eastern Tradition with the West. He thought both, at the centre and core, shared the same mystical and contemplative vision

of the unity of all things.

Thomas Merton, like Alan Watts, was in search of the contemplative way. Merton, unlike Watts, was a monk. Watts became an Anglican priest for a few years, but this was never to be his final stopping point. Both men thought the role of the priest, at the deepest and truest level, was to know and be one with God, and, in a most significant way, tell others how they might taste of the same fruit. The publication of Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949) emerged at almost the same time as Watts *Behold the Spirit*. There is no doubt both men were thinking the same contemplative thoughts at the same time, and both men were not quite understood for thinking such thoughts. Contemplative theology was not front and centre at the time. Both men, interestingly enough, did much to revive contemplative theology as a valid and vital aspect of the Christian journey. *Seeds of Contemplation* was a much more cautious, tamer and safer work than *Behold the Spirit*. Watts was venturing into areas that Merton would not reach until the late 1950s and 1960s. Merton dug, throughout most of the 1950s, ever deeper into the Western contemplative way. There were hints of more to come, but they were only hints. Books such as *Bread in the Wilderness* (1953) and *Living Bread* (1956) walked the extra mile to unpack and unravel the contemplative way, but such books were thoroughly grounded in the Roman Catholic tradition. There were hints in these books that something was afoot, but it would take a few more years for one and all to see just what that was.

Alan Watts by the mid-late 1950s had, increasingly so, turned from the

West to the East. Watts had become somewhat cynical of the Western way, and he became, for many, a guru of the East. Watts became, for many, the leading interpreter of Zen Buddhism for the West, and he became a spiritual mentor for the "beat generation," the "hippy culture" and the Human Potential Movement. Watts spoke often at the major counter-cultural sacred sites of the time such as Esalen and Big Sur. He very much rode the crest of the 1950s and 1960s interest in the Oriental contemplative way. Books such as *The Art of Contemplation*, *The Way of Zen*, *The Spirit of Zen*, *The Way of Liberation in Zen Buddhism* to name but a few rolled off the press in a hasty and rapid manner. Watts, at this period of his life, did not turn totally against the Western Tradition. He merely attempted to argue that the West and East needed to come together in a more harmonious way. The mystics of the East and West, Watts argued, were thinking many of the same core thoughts. The fruit from the tree of Watts' life did bear a thick harvest, and the fruit appeared early. Watts moved more in the direction of a mystical unity between religions, and he had less and less interest in the institutions and dogmas that were an integral part of most of the religions he spoke so convincingly about. In short, Watts, like many in the past and present, tended to pit the contemplative, mystical and spirituality against dogmas, creeds, doctrines and institutions. The former was idealized and elevated, whereas the latter was either denigrated or subordinated. This, of course, is just another dogma and creates its own institutions.

Merton was, like Watts, in the 1950s

and 1960s, keen and eager to probe more deeply the contemplative depths and the Western and Eastern Traditions. Merton was as drawn to Zen as was Watts. Merton's friendship with D.T. Suzuki, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama are well known. Merton also had a great deal of interest in Sufism, the Kabbalah and First Nations (Native American) spirituality. Merton could be as critical as Watts of the debilitating nature of religious institutions and an inadequate understanding of the role of dogma, creeds and doctrines, but he never brushed them aside in quite the same way as Watts. Merton remained, until the end, a Cistercian monk and Roman Catholic. Watts left behind his Episcopalism and entered more and more into the trendy mystical and contemplative eclecticism of the time. This is something Merton could not and would not do.

Merton, unlike Watts, also took a passionate and responsible interest in some of the larger social, political and economic questions of the time. He had a great deal of affinity with the work of Dorothy Day, the Catholic Worker, the Berrigan brothers and Roman Catholic protest and advocacy politics. This was something that did not really hold Watts in quite the same way it held Merton.

There is little doubt that in the last decade of Merton's and Watts' lives they were moving in different directions. Watts' autobiography, *In My Own Way: An Autobiography: 1915-1965* (1972) tells its own tale. Watts had turned against Christian creeds and dogmas; he had little patience for Christianity as an institution. Watts was an evangelist, like Huxley, for the *philosophia perennis*. Christianity, from

within such a perspective, at its deepest, was mystical and contemplative. All the other great religions were the same. At the core and centre, so this argument goes, all the mystics agree and are one. Watts wrote a final book on Christianity in the last few years of his life. *Myth and Ritual in Christianity* (1968) was a fine and sensitive probe of the deeper mythic meanings within the much older Christian Tradition and how such myths, when rightly understood, were embedded in the liturgies and rituals. Watts also argued, like Joseph Campbell, that such myths and rituals, at their deepest and most pertinent and pressing levels, were the same in other religions.

Thomas Merton inched more and more, in the 1960s, to ever deeper levels of Western and Eastern contemplative ways. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, *Mystics and Zen Masters* and *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* tell their own convincing tale. Merton turned to the East for wisdom and insight, but, unlike Watts, he remained firmly grounded and rooted in his own tradition. We can also seriously question how far Merton would have gone down the *philosophia perennis* path. Merton died in 1968, but he died still a Cistercian and Roman Catholic. It is important to note that Merton in *The InnerLife: Notes on Contemplation*, makes it quite clear, in a thoughtful and probing way, where and how Christian mysticism and Eastern mysticism converge and diverge. There is a very real sense in which *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* is Merton's most thoughtful work of comparative spirituality, and it is obvious, in this missive, where and why Merton and Watts part company.

Thomas Merton was, probably, the finest Roman Catholic contemplative theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Merton was both a critic of the church but committed to it. Merton was also concerned about many of the injustices in the 1950s and 1960s, and he never flinched from facing such things. It was Merton's Roman Catholic contemplative theology that grounded him in the church and the world in a way that Watts lacked. Watts had an interest in the East, but his interest tended to stay a safe distance from the actual people of such a tradition. Watts was a highly individualistic anarchist. This seems quite ironic given the fact that most mystics in the West and East are about unity in thought and deed. Watts' Oriental anarchism played quite nicely into a highly romanticized view of the East and a Western individualistic appropriation of the East.

I suspect Merton's more grounded and rooted contemplative catholicity will wax, and Watts will wane and fade. There is something more sound in

Merton than in Watts, and it is this soundness that Merton held high.

It is interesting to note, by way of conclusion, that Monica Furlong wrote biographies of both Thomas Merton and Alan Watts. *Merton: A Biography* (1980) and *Zen Effects: The Life of Alan Watts* are, true to form, well crafted and written, but there is no doubt where Furlong tips her hat. She sees in Merton a much deeper and more rooted man than Watts, and, for many reasons, Furlong, I think, can be trusted in her evaluation on this matter. There is a depth, breadth and groundedness in Merton that cannot be found in Watts, and this is why Merton will have a greater appeal and holding power, over the long haul, than Watts.

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