

Roots & Wings
Thomas Merton & Alan Watts
as Twentieth Century Archetypes

by Peter C. King

INTRODUCTION

The first idea for this paper came to me at the inaugural weekend of the Thomas Merton Society, held nearly seven years ago in Winchester to coincide with the twenty-fifth anniversary of Merton's death.

The original idea was quite simply this: that Merton and Watts were actually mirror images of one another, each being what the other could have been. On a very trite level, it has been said of Merton that if he had not become a monk he would have become an alcoholic. Well, Watts didn't (become a Monk) and did (end up with a serious drink problem).

But the connections are much more profound than that, and I would like to explore these with you in this paper. And I should like to do so not exhaustively, but suggestively – more as a beginning than a finished product.

Before I proceed any further, however, I should like to make one thing clear. My reason for exploring this comparison between Merton and Watts is not in order to claim that one is in any sense "better" than the other. They were different people, and their journeys can only be evaluated each in their own right – and with far more knowledge, insight and charity than is possible for any human being to possess. Yet, that having been said, I have to admit that there are aspects of Watts' private life which I find unacceptable and unpleasant. But Merton, too, was no saint – who is? Therefore, whilst I do not wish to deny – nor to condone – the truths about Watts' undoubtedly flawed private life, neither do I want to be seen as using them to make a point about the superiority of someone else's. What I do seek to do, however, in the course of this paper, is to ask whether in fact Merton's monastic vows were actually a very necessary regulative framework for a life-intoxicated sojourner, and whether in turn the answer to that

question poses us a challenge for our spiritual living and exploring in this new millennium.

I have long been fascinated and enriched by reading Merton, I am similarly fascinated and enriched by reading Watts. Indeed, sometimes I am surprised at the relative lack of interest in Watts as compared with the massive continuing interest in Merton. I am surprised, too, that I can find no significant reference to Watts in Merton. This isn't to say that there isn't any – so if anyone here knows of one please let me know! I wonder, though, how it was that these two paths seem never to have converged. Monica Furlong's biography of Watts states that 'he knew, or corresponded with, Thomas Merton ...' But there are no letters on file in the Merton archive.¹ Nor, for that matter, can I find any reference to Merton in my limited reading of Watts. Again, if anyone here knows more – please let me know!

At Oakham last year I had the privilege of meeting William McNamara from the Holy Hill Hermitage in Ireland. McNamara knew Merton – and recalled to me how Merton had warned him about Watts. Watts, according to Merton, was self-centred not Christ-centred. Nevertheless, for William McNamara both figures are united in a shared vision of God in all things.

There are certainly comparisons to be made between Merton and Watts, and in this paper I should like to draw your attention to a few of them. Look for example at their bibliographies. In 1951 Merton published a study of St. John of the Cross. Seven years before, Watts had published a translation of the *Theologia Mystica* of St. Dionysius. Furthermore, one of Watts' most important works, published in 1947, is subtitled *A Study in the Necessity of Mystical Religion*. Then, the year before he died, Watts published a monograph entitled *The Art of Contemplation*. You don't need me to tell you the titles of Merton's works on contemplation, or on Zen and Tao. Looking again through Watts' titles, we also see many works on eastern religions: *The Way of Zen*; *Essays on Zen & Spiritual Experience*; *Tao: The Watercourse Way*; even an introduction to a work by D.T. Suzuki.

I hope by now I have made it clear why I believe that it is rewarding to look at these two figures from the mid-twentieth century religious landscape, and to explore their diverging lives but converging journeys.

MERTON & WATTS
DIVERGING LIVES CONVERGING JOURNEYS

Both men were born in January 1915. Merton in Prades, France. Watts in Chislehurst, Kent, England. Both were living in New York at the time of Pearl Harbor, and America's entry into the war in 1941, and both moved away from the city in the latter half of that year: Merton to the Abbey of Gethsemani as a novice monk; Watts to Chicago to train for the Episcopal priesthood. For both, decisive commitments had been made less than 80 blocks apart in the same city: Merton was baptised a Catholic at Corpus Christi Church on West 121st Street in 1938; three years later, at St. Mary the Virgin Episcopal Church on West 46th Street, Watts first confided his desire to be a priest. For Merton, the Trappist vocation was to be the framework within which the rest of his eventful life was to be lived, and from which he was to address the social and religious state of the world. For Watts, by contrast, the priestly vocation was to last for less than ten years; unlike Merton the structures of conventional Christianity were unable to contain his searching soul – or roving eye . . .

Here perhaps is another point of contact between Merton and Watts. Watts married his first wife Eleanor when she was already two months pregnant, in April 1938. Some four years earlier, Merton's sexual escapades at Cambridge had left a girl pregnant and had resulted in his being removed from the University by his uncle. But their respective reactions are very different. Merton was to struggle with the implications of what he had done, and his choice of the monastic life seems – at least on one level – to be a form of active atonement. By contrast, Monica Furlong notes that on receiving Watts' letter of resignation from the priesthood, occasioned by his adultery, his Bishop 'must have felt rather as a judge might if he received a moral lecture from a prisoner when about to pass sentence.'²

Watts went on to marry twice more, at the same time carrying on casual affairs. By contrast, Merton's only further serious relationship was that with the young nurse 'M'. Yet even in that essentially platonic relationship, Bonnie Thurston notes that Merton is 'compulsive, selfish, and dishonest', going on to remind us that at the time 'M' actually had a fiancé in Vietnam.³

The essential difference between the two comes down to a question of honesty. Whereas both Watts and Merton (perhaps surprisingly) eschewed psychoanalysis for themselves, Merton's life and writing is marked by an at times painful honesty about himself and his struggles. By contrast, Monica Furlong notes that Watts' autobiography was 'honest as far as it went, but it didn't go nearly far enough.' A truthful autobiography would have been well-nigh impossible without alienating his admirers and distressing his family.⁴

Despite this significant difference in attitude, what the two men shared was a preoccupation with the same fundamental question of identity ("Who am I?") and a concern (in Watts case, at least in theory) to live authentically. Yet even here there is an interesting difference. Despite Watts' incisive and thoughtful writings, Gary Snyder believes that the 'dynamics of his life had gotten beyond his control and he didn't know what to do about it.'⁵ The very stability that so frustrated Merton, especially in his final years, yet mediated for him the parameters of what living authentically could actually mean in his life. Could it be that self-imposed – even externally enforced – boundaries are in fact necessary for authentic living?

Another area of common ground between Merton and Watts is summed up in the word 'homelessness'. In the process of seeking their true selves, both experienced a sense of homelessness. As Michael C. Brannigan writes of Watts:

When Watts went to Japan, he considered it his "home", and his work represents a strange synthesis of Britain and Japan, and yet he did not feel totally comfortable in either culture. Homelessness in its richest sense portrays a genuine pilgrimage of the soul to ultimately discover its native land. For Watts, the only home we can truly call our own lies within us. This discovery bears with it the realization that home has always been with us from the start in every living, present moment.⁶

For Merton, too, there is a similar sense of 'homelessness' in his lifelong struggle with his vocation. Even though he was consistently rooted in the monastic context of Gethsemani – despite all its apparent frustrations – his increasing restlessness indicates a similar process to that going on within Watts. The difference for Merton, of

course, being the vows he had made, and which he remained faithful to throughout his life. Yet, as Monica Furlong writes of Merton's formative visit to the giant Buddha statues at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka during his last Asian journey, the experience gave him the feeling that there – thousands of miles from Gethsemani – 'he had come home, and the home was God.'⁷

Despite their very different outward circumstances – Watts latterly outside any established religious framework or discipline, and Merton clearly within – both ranged far and wide in their search for and exploration of authentic religious existence. But the dynamics of their respective journeys differed. The order, discipline and stability of Gethsemani offered to Merton a rooting in one religious and social context which Watts did not have. Yet both leave us an exciting and wide-ranging legacy of work which continues to challenge us even in this third millennium.

MERTON & WATTS UNTIMELY DEPARTURES

The final point of similarity between our two subjects is the fact that both left us suddenly, unexpectedly, and – at least in human terms – before their time. Merton was only 53. Watts just five years older. If they were still with us, they would be elderly men of 85 – they might even still be writing!

Yet part of the fascination of those who exit before their time is the question of what might have been. Where would Merton have settled bodily after his return from the east? Back into Gethsemani? California? Alaska? Where would his spiritual and intellectual journey have taken him next? Where too would Watts have ended up? Neither leaves behind a life and legacy neatly and tidily completed – yet perhaps that is not what the role of explorer of the spirit is all about.

Yet again, perhaps, if they had lived we might not be here discussing their lives and legacies in quite the same way.

MERTON & WATTS INTOXICATED WITH LIFE

When I read Robert Inchausti's fascinating study, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, I was captured by his description of Merton as 'Jack Kerouac's monastic older brother'.⁸ For, yes, there is a kinship between them. Apart from the common ground of Catholicism and Zen, there is a celebration of life. Commenting on Jack Kerouac's early journals, Bill Buford wrote in *The Guardian* that: 'The appeal of the journals is in the unabashed, unapologetic vitality of its narrator – naive, irrepressible and utterly unembarrassed. It is a sloppy Walt Whitman-like celebration of being young and American and in New York'. He goes on to quote from an entry for Summer 1949:

I want to communicate with Dostoevski in heaven, and ask old Melville if he's still discouraged, and Wolfe why he let himself die at 38. I don't want to give up. I promise I shall never give up, and that I'll die yelling and laughing.'⁹

But, of course, as we know, Kerouac was never to keep that promise to himself. He died at 47, intoxicated not by life but by alcohol. Yet what Kerouac shares with his 'monastic older brother' is precisely this life-intoxication. As J.S. Porter writes:

In his free-falling tumbleweed prose, Merton can sound like Kerouac, and Kerouac in his meditations on the world can sound like Merton.'¹⁰

Perhaps the reason that religious institutions and traditions such as the church have lasted so long is that we need them to stand with us as we too become intoxicated with life. It is not that they have all the answers, but that they offer us a framework within which to live and celebrate this precious and wonderful gift called life.

To say that Merton stayed in Gethsemani throughout his life, despite all the possibilities offered by life outside, is not to claim him as above those who chose not to. It is not to say that he got it "right", whilst Watts got it "wrong". Yet it is undeniable that the very monastic 'stability' which so frustrated Merton at times, as he himself was aware, actually gave him the freedom to pray and to write. By

contrast, the later Watts often found himself in a position where he had to write or speak just in order to make ends meet. As Monica Furlong comments in her biography: '... for Watts to meet his commitments meant a life of almost unceasing industry ... the periods of idleness, which permit inner development and change, became fewer and fewer.'¹¹

It is suggested that the main reason Watts presented himself for ordination into the Episcopal priesthood was the fact that it offered a 'convenient way of earning a living' for one with his religious interests (Furlong, p. 78). The fact that Watts chose to do so is itself an illustration of the saying that as we sprout wings we need also to dig roots.

ROOTS & WINGS

"As you bring up children," he said, "you want them to have roots and wings. You want them to feel grounded and secure, to feel connected with things that count. But you also want them to think new thoughts and feel new feelings, to be able to fly in new directions."¹²

This story is quoted by Jay McDaniel in his excellent book *With Roots & Wings: Christianity in an Age of Ecology & Dialogue* (Orbis, 1995). I think it sums up the main lesson which I draw from the lives of these two spiritual explorers of what we must get used to calling 'the last century'!

As we enter not just a new century but also a new millennium, it is imperative that we sprout wings and set out on journeys of exploration both within ourselves, within our own traditions, and in the spiritual traditions of others. Yet, at the same time, it is no less imperative that we dig deep roots in our own spiritual and personal place.

Wherever your roots are, dig deep! Merton dug deep both physically – half his life in Gethsemani – and spiritually in his Catholic and Christian tradition. Yet he also sprouted powerful wings – all the more remarkable when you recall his geographical stability for over a quarter of a century! Therefore, we too can sprout powerful wings – wherever we are rooted.

Alan Watts also sprouted powerful wings. Some of his insights into religion and spirituality are still ahead of their time over 25 years after his death. He raises questions for those of us who are Christians that have still not been faced – let alone answered: Do we take our religious language too literally? What can we learn from eastern concepts of God? Is Christianity inescapably dualist? If so, should it be?

Yet we know too much about Watts' life not to question his lack of roots. I wonder what difference stronger roots would have made to the life and legacy of this exploring soul? On one reading, his life is a reminder to us all of the need for spiritual and personal roots.

MERTON & WATTS ARCHETYPES OF OUR TIME

There is something almost archetypal about our two subjects. Merton is the brother who sows his wild oats then settles down to a life of sober devotion. He is the one who puts down roots where none were before (remember his unsettled childhood), and then, quite surprisingly, sprouts wings – and soars high into the skies. Watts, by contrast, is the brother who never quite settles down. He is the one who never manages to put down roots, who sprouts wings and flies – or is it flits – higher and higher, yet without anywhere to call 'home'.

I personally am indebted to both Thomas Merton and Alan Watts. Together with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Teilhard de Chardin and a few others, I believe that they have an important contribution to make to questions of God in this twenty-first century. If you are not acquainted with Watts' work, I commend it to you! It is worth getting into!

My reason for offering this paper, however, goes beyond my personal interest in, and indebtedness to, these two figures from 20th century spirituality. My intention has been twofold: Firstly to make the connection between these two men, which has preoccupied me for these past few years; and secondly, to explore the significance of their lives and legacies for our own lives. As I stated at the outset, I have sought to be suggestive rather than definitive, and welcome any further thoughts and reflections you may be able to contribute.

Notes and References

1. See personal letter from Jonathan Montaldo of the Thomas Merton Center in Louisville to the writer.
2. Monica Furlong, *Genuine Fake: A Biography of Alan Watts* (London: Heinemann, 1986), p. 110
3. Bonnie Thurston, 'Epiphany and Eden Human Love and the Love of God', in *Thomas Merton: Poet, Monk, Prophet* (Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 1998), p. 68
4. Furlong, p. 180
5. Gary Snyder, in Furlong, p. 167
6. Michael C. Brannigan, *Everywhere & Nowhere: The Path of Alan Watts* (New York, Bern: Peter Lang, 1988), p. 2
7. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (London: SPCK), p. xix
8. Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* (Albany: SUNY, 1998), p. 5
9. Bill Buford, 'Not Laughing But Dying', *The Guardian* (London), 19.06.98
10. J.S. Porter, 'Farewell to a Monk' in *The Antigoneish Review* (108), pp. 59-68
11. Furlong, p. 170
12. Jay B. McDaniel, *With Roots & Wings: Christianity in an Age of Ecology & Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), p. 23

