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The Gospel, Reinvented: A New Addition to the Jesus of Alan Watts

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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

Portland, Maine

THE GOSPEL REINVENTED: A NEW ADDITION TO THE JESUS OF ALAN WATTS

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Honors Program Requirements

Weston Masi

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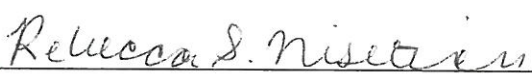
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Table of Contents

Abstract	4
Autobiographical Introduction	6
A Brief Overview	11
Part I: Alan Watts — A Brief Biography	13
Part II: Who Am I?	30
Part III: Jesus and Cosmic Consciousness	36
Part IV: The Gospel of Thomas — A New Addition	41
Discussion	63
Bibliography	72

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze and expand the ideas of one of the most widely acclaimed religious thinkers of the twentieth century, Alan Watts. Watts attempted to use Eastern religions as a lens for reinterpreting the message of Jesus's gospel. Watts proposed that Jesus's experience of consciousness was not unique unto himself; furthermore, he asserted that any person can achieve Jesus's level of divinity once he understands that everything, oneself included, is a manifestation of God. To further Watts's claim I bring in an ancient Christian source which was unavailable to Watts during his lifetime — the Gospel of Thomas. Using Watts's theory as a method of interpretation, I analyze select verses from the Gospel of Thomas in which Jesus's assertions appear to support Watts's arguments. In my analysis of Watts and the Gospel of Thomas, I suggest that Watts's perceptions of Jesus have religious, historical, and scriptural backing beyond the evidence he was able to present during his lifetime. Furthermore, once Jesus is considered in this manner, certain verses within the New Testament Gospels, particularly the Gospel of John, can be understood quite differently than how they are traditionally interpreted. My addition of the Gospel of Thomas to Watts's argument reveals that the message of Jesus may be about the existence of God within all things — that is, that you too contain the same level of divinity as Jesus.

Dedicated to my Mother and Father.

I have been blessed with two parents who have done more than I can ever imagine to give me an education and the freedom to pursue my passions. Without your love and support I would be half the man I am today.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the solitary and elect, for you will find the kingdom. For you are from it, and to it you will return"

Autobiographical Introduction

Religion has always fascinated me — specifically Christianity. I grew up going to church every Sunday, attending Christian youth groups every week, and spending many nights reading the Bible or books related to the Christian religion. Not a summer went by when I did not attend at least one week-long Christian camp where I could hang out with friends, enjoy the weather, and further my knowledge of God. There was something about Christianity that always came easy to me. Regardless of which church I attended (as my family and I changed churches every few years or so) I always aimed to learn something new every Sunday. By the time I was in middle school I had found that Sunday school classes could no longer curb my insatiable appetite for theology; so I began to sit in the “grown-up” church services with my mother. Despite missing out on quality social time, I was able to achieve at least some intellectual stimulation which carried me throughout the week. I was a diehard Christian and remained so for the majority of my childhood. But as happens to so many kids, once I began to attend high school, secularism seeped in. During most of high school, I decided not to attend church — it just wasn’t the “cool” thing to do. And so I gave up my passion for Christianity and religion in general for more materialistic pursuits.

But eventually religion came back to me; however it was not in a way I anticipated. Having a very curious mind, I spent many of my nights throughout the first few years of college scouring the internet for iconoclastic ideas; whether it was about the ancient alien hypothesis, conspiracy theories, or lost secrets of history, I attempted to learn about them all. My religious interests often guided this scavenger hunt through the depths of the internet, and I would more often than not focus on taboo topics regarding religion — especially Christianity. I do not

remember when, or how, I came across the Gospel of Thomas, but I do remember my utter fascination with the most famous Gospel of which I had never heard. The Gospel was a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus, sayings that were uninterrupted by narrative or authorial embellishment (at least that I could see at the time). It was very raw, very pure, and very, very weird. Never before had I heard Jesus say things like, “the Kingdom of Heaven is inside of you,” or saying 7, “Jesus said, “Lucky is the lion that the human will eat, so that the lion becomes human. And foul is the human that the lion will eat, and the lion still will become human.”

While I had no idea if these sayings were actually attributable to Jesus, I came to find later in my religious courses here at USM that scholars do not know either. Through my readings of Thomas I found a different Jesus, a Jesus that did not just give the answers away. It was a Jesus who understood that philosophical thought and contemplation were very important to spirituality, and it was thus that a new world of theological thought was opened up to me. I never quite knew *what* to think, or *how* to think about the verses I read in Thomas, so I searched for interpretations of these sayings that would reveal a different Jesus to me, a Jesus that conveyed a different “gospel” than the one I had been taught in church all those years.

It was so that one quiet evening I came across a lecturer on religion and religious experience — Alan Watts. Immediately I became immersed into the clarity and succinct diction of the British philosopher. Never had I encountered a man who took subjects about religion and could phrase questions and answers with clarity that made my mind run wild with new information. He spoke of all aspects of religion, mostly interpreting Eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism for a Western audience; and yet, it was his lectures regarding

Christianity that captivated me the most. He had a different understanding of Jesus and his teachings than I had ever before heard. Watts interpreted the message of the Gospel on his own, using philosophical arguments which I had never considered compatible with Christianity. Watts attempted to illuminate Jesus and his teachings from the perspective of pantheism wherein there is no separation from God. That is to say, that God is everything, and even though you may not feel like God, somewhere deep deep down inside of yourself there It is. On the same note, Watts theorized and argued using a small selection of verses from the New Testament's Gospel of John that this was the true message of Jesus. Put simply, Watts's argument about the message of the gospel is that Jesus did not proclaim himself as the sole medium between man and God — that is, Jesus did not intend to start a religion about himself. Instead, Jesus's message was the we are all “sons of God,” therefore there is no separation from God. So in the same way that Jesus could say, “Before Abraham was, I Am,”¹ so too can we all assert this iconoclastic notion. I became hooked on the philosophical constructs presented by Watts. I held onto his every thought and word. And it was in this manner that I had a certain revelation — Watts might be right, but he did not use enough textual evidence from Christian canonical and non-canonical sources to back up his claim.

And so the idea for this thesis was practically given to me; although it took much writing, re-writing, and help from my advisors to see it. Watts was on to something. Perhaps the message of Jesus is far more complex than the teachings handed down through the Christian

¹ Here Jesus is referencing his divine unification with God, using the Old Testament phrasing “I Am,” which refers to the words spoken by God to Moses wherein God conveys his everlasting existence in the most simple of wordings. This wording (“I Am”) was considered to be the most blasphemous of sayings in the ancient Judaic world, for if a person states “I Am,” then he is asserting to be God, or, using the name of God in vain.

tradition. However, it seemed to me that Watts had one major weakness in his argument. He had limited knowledge of the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas — the Gnostic Gospel that, when approached from Watts's proposed pantheistic outlook, asserts many of the points Watts was trying to make.

Without the Gospel of Thomas much of Watts's assertions are not based on scriptural exegesis — which is the evidence I believe he requires to assert such a claim. It is therefore the purpose of my thesis to expound upon Watts's argument of the “good news” of Jesus using the Gospel of Thomas as his missing evidence. This thesis analyzes Watts's position and then explains how it is affected by the inclusion of the Gospel of Thomas. Through analysis and interpretation of select verses within the Gospel of Thomas I reveal that Jesus can in fact be considered from the perspective of pantheism. And, once this position is considered and applied to the canonical Gospels, Jesus's message can be viewed as the revelation of God within all things. This is to say, the elevated level of consciousness which Jesus appears to have experienced can be attained by any person, which means that Jesus's proclamation of divine unity with God is no longer subject to himself but can be proclaimed by any person who realizes that everything he sees, feels, experiences, and perceives is simply a manifestation of God Itself.

In doing so, I suggest that Watts's perceptions of the gospel have religious, historical, and scriptural backing beyond the evidence he presented. This is not to say that I wholly agree with Watts on all of his arguments; nevertheless, because I am adding to his ideas, this thesis will contain many thoughts and assertions that Watts made during his lifetime. At the same time, this thesis is not aimed at presenting arguments for the “historical Jesus” or for the historicity of the Gospel of Thomas. Instead, this thesis is an examination of Watts's ideas with inclusive

speculation of what Watts could have done with the Gospel of Thomas. I use Watts as a means to problematize Jesus, and Christianity itself, in an effort to convey both the complexity of religion in general, and to convey that the message of Jesus presents more similarities to other world religions, specifically Eastern religions, beyond just “treating your neighbor as yourself.” I hope that you, the reader, using this thesis as a guide, will further question religion, and see alternative methods of spirituality beyond what any one religion simply tells you to believe. Perhaps sources not included in traditional canons will intrigue you and cause you to reconsider previous notions ascribed to particular religions. Religion and spirituality are not, in my opinion, as clear cut as preachers and gurus may lead you to believe. I wish that you may seek your own path of spirituality away from the dogmas of religions in an effort to achieve spiritual knowledge on your own. Of course following philosophers and spiritual thinkers is necessary to reveal certain information, but I hope that you do not remain fixated upon one guru in particular. For much of the chaos which engulfs our planet is derived from playing the game of “my guru is better than your guru.” Perhaps then, once you take your own path towards spirituality, and begin to look inwards for guidance rather than outwards, can you truly realize the immense scope of spiritual doctrines the world over, and find for yourself, within the chaos of theology and opinions, *thou art that*.

Jesus said, “Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the all.”²

² Gospel of Thomas, saying 2.

A Brief Overview

This thesis is divided into six primary sections. The first section, as you have just read, is my own autobiographical analysis of the evolution of thought which led to my thesis. This autobiographical section is a way for you to understand better who I am, as well as why I have chosen to write about Jesus and Watts. It outlines my thesis and explains that I seek to convey how Watts's connections of Christianity and pantheism are in fact compatible once the inclusion of the Gospel of Thomas is considered.

In an effort to understand who Watts is, I have designated Part I of my thesis to a brief overview of the life of Alan Watts. Part I, while providing biographical details of Watts, also describes Watts's three main works which I will use to present the foundation of his theology. This section helps provide context for the evolution of Watts's ideas and also outlines important concepts which will be reiterated throughout the primary argument of this thesis.

Part II begins to explain the most important question to Watts — “Who am I?” This section breaks down the understandings of the Self within Hinduism and Buddhism, and then applies this concept to understanding oneself as an integral function of the universe. Once the question of “Who am I?” is addressed, the notions of cosmic consciousness can be fully understood as an experience available to those who look at the universe through a certain paradigm of unity.

Part III applies the concept of cosmic consciousness to Jesus's experience, and seeks to convey that, as Watts argues, Jesus' experience of cosmic consciousness is not unique unto Jesus.

This section outlines the few select verses Watts uses to support this idea and reveals much of the missing argumentation I believe Watts requires to assert his claim.

Part IV is where my new addition to Watts is revealed. In this section, with the aid of modern scholars who are academically versed in ancient Christianity (specifically Gnosticism), I discuss the Gospel of Thomas by briefly outlining its history and theological angle. I then use select verses from Thomas in an effort to reveal how these verses could be directly applied to Watts's notions of a pantheistic Jesus. Through this new addition to Watts's argument I propose that, once the Gospel of Thomas is approached from Watts's perspective of pantheism, the Jesus of Thomas is in fact revealing that we have the ability to achieve the same consciousness as Jesus; and that we are in fact of the same divine nature as Jesus.

Finally, my last section is the discussion of my thesis. I chose not to call this segment a "conclusion" per se because I have found through my studies that there are no real conclusions in religious conversations — there are only discussions. In this final section I briefly outline the entirety of my thesis to condense my argument into a more digestible format. From here, I mention further points of discussion, as this thesis will not encapsulate all aspects in which the Gospel of Thomas is compatible with Watts's work. Here I also explain how this pantheistic outlook on Jesus allows the canonical Gospels, specifically the Gospel of John, to be viewed in a different manner than has traditionally been presented. Then, in the last few pages of this thesis I explain why I decided to elaborate on such a complicated and hushed topic, finally ending upon what I hope you, the reader, will take away from this thesis.

Part I: Alan Watts — A Brief Biography

Born in 1915, in a small town just outside of London, Alan Watts grew up immersed in Protestant Christianity. Both his mother and father were devout Christians, as such they sent Alan to attend multiple religious schools as a child. Despite his immersion into Christianity there was little anyone could do to stop him from exploring other world religions. Watts's admiration for the East began at an early age when he encountered a book titled, Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan by Lafcadio Hearn.³ Finding a deep fascination with the practices of Japanese art and storytelling, Watts took an interest in Buddhism, particularly Zen Buddhism. Shortly after his discovery of Buddhist thought, Watts wrote to the local Buddhist Lodge in London and soon was in steady contact with the founder, Christmas Humphreys, who would later become one of Watts's greatest influences. It was in this manner that Watts began to defy the teachings of his parents, teachers, and priests who asserted that Christianity was the only one true religion. As Watts would later go on to state in his autobiography,

I simply couldn't get along with the Christian God. He was a bombastic bore, and not at all the sort of fellow you would want to entertain for dinner, because you would be sitting on the edge of your chair listening to his subtle attempts to undermine your existence and to probe the unauthentic nature of your life. He was like a school chaplain who took you aside for a VERY SERIOUS TALK. He had ...no *gaiété d'esprit*, no lilt, no laughter and no sensual delight in the world of nature which he had supposedly created. At least, this was the version of that God

³ Alan Watts, *In My Own Way* (New York: Random House, 1973), 71.

conveyed to me by preceptors, who were busily preoccupied in keeping virile young men off the labor market and from sowing their oats to the begetting of unfamilial bastards.⁴

To Christian believers of all denominations, this frame of thought was (and still is) extreme to say the least, yet we must keep in mind that the Christianity preached from the pulpit today has taken lesser dogmatic forms of pious reverence than what Watts was subjected to as a child. Thus, to a curious young boy forced into a certain paradigm of belief, it is no wonder that Watts began to look elsewhere for religious comfort — somewhere far away from the “bombastic bore” he felt the Christian God had become.

As evidenced in the previous quote, Watts felt the indoctrination of Christianity he experienced did not encourage laughter and awe at nature; instead he found the Christian fixation upon sin and eternal damnation to have the most dreadful and anxiety producing effects on a person. Being forced as a child to recite passages about the dangers of sin, coupled with the regular practice of confessions, Watts did not like the Protestant and Anglican Church’s methods of communication with God. He claimed this branch of Christianity to be a talkative institution achieving little spiritual guidance. As he says in his autobiography,

[Christians] tell God what he ought and ought not to do, and inform him of things of which he is already well aware, such as that they are miserable sinners, and proceed then to admonish one another to feel guilt... If God were the sort of being most Christians suppose him to be, he would be beside himself with

⁴ Ibid., 74.

boredom listening to their whinings and flatteries, their redundant requests and admonitions.⁵

Thus, Watts's qualms with Protestant forms of worship were based upon what he deemed to be their invalid methods of communication with God.

Eventually, Watts would try formal schooling at the King's School in Canterbury, England. There he came to find the structure restricting and the educational content irrelevant and unnecessary. So Watts continued to educate himself in various world religions outside of school. He maintained a steady connection with the Buddhist Lodge of London, providing him the rigorous comparative religious thought he longed for and needed without the rhetoric and boring readings of scholastic work he encountered in school. And yet, despite the seemingly dreadful time Watts had in Canterbury, it would prove to be a beneficial location for him, as it was there in London that Watts met a young American woman, Eleanor Everett, whose mother was married to a Zen master. Given Eleanor's fascination with Buddhism, the two took to one another rather quickly. Eleanor and Watts married in 1938, and shortly after, they moved to New York to escape the inevitable draft of World War II. There, in New York, Watts began to write for the Review, more formally called, the Review of Religion which later became the Columbia Review of Religion.

His first article written in America was published in 1941 titled, "The Problem of Faith and Works in Buddhism." The article is centered around parallels between Mahayana Buddhism's adherents of self-power (*jiriki*) and the followers of Jodo Shinshu who assert that enlightenment can only come from faith in Amitabha, the transcendental Buddha of Boundless

⁵ Ibid., 49.

Light. Watts saw that the two separate schools of thought could be reconciled in their differences if the concepts were understood as experiential rather than theoretical. The differences were based in contrasting understandings that one can attain enlightenment either through one's own will power (Mahayana) or through the help of other sources outside of oneself (Jodo Shinshu). Watts theorized that once Amitabha is understood as the true or real Self (that is, the Self from which there is no other, comparable to the Hindu concept of Self) then Amitabha could no longer be considered as "other," thus reconciling the differences between the two Buddhist philosophies. Amitabha would then become the equivalent of the Tao within the following Buddhist dialogue:

Joshu asked Nansen, "What is the Tao?" "Usual life," answered Nansen, "is the very Tao." "How can we accord with it?" "If you *try* to accord with it, you will get away from it." ⁶

The message of this quote is also a major point of Watts's essay. The premise being that enlightenment does not mean a person is alleviated from *samsara* —which is the way of suffering, or the path birth, death, and rebirth — instead, enlightenment is the realization that *Nirvana* is the same as *samsara*, for a person can never escape the reality of suffering. But, Watts asserts through common Buddhist teachings, this realization does not come from an external source, or Western notions of God per se, but from within oneself. On the same note, Buddhahood is not something attained through religious practice; instead, Buddhahood is

⁶ Alan Watts, "The Problem of Faith and Works in Buddhism," *The Columbia Review of Religion*, vol. 5. (New York: Columbia University, May 1941), 396.

something which all beings possess and can only come from having an “ordinary mind.” As Watts quotes from a Zen text,

You must not be artful. Be your ordinary self...*You yourself as you are—that is Buddha Dharma.* I stand or I sit; I array myself or I eat; I sleep when I am fatigued. The ignoramus will deride me but the wise man will understand.⁷

Eventually, the lack of attempting to attain and understand something greater than oneself would play a major role in Watts's perception of Christianity and God in general. This notion will be discussed later in the section about the Gospel of Thomas, and will become a defining point of addition to Watts's interpretive lens of apophatic theology — a type of theology which states what God is *not* rather than its cataphatic counterpart which states what God *is*.

Continually, in an underlying theme of “The Problem of Faith and Works in Buddhism,” Watts juxtaposes the self reliant path of Buddhism with that of Christianity’s concepts of faith and grace. Beneath the surface there is an examination of how the Christian ideal of faith is not entirely compatible with that of Buddhist thought. As Watts says in the beginning of his essay,

In Christianity there is no human power which can, of its own resources, make for righteousness and salvation, for by reason of original sin it is impossible for man to move upwards without the gift of divine Grace. Buddhism, however, would appear to be a method of lifting oneself up by one’s own belt...⁸

But after Watts came to the realization that Amitabha could be viewed as the true Self, he began to question the Christian understanding of Jesus, which was strikingly similar to that of Jodo

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 385.

Shinshu's understanding of Amitabha as "other." Here, the two were similar in that the followers of Jodo Shinshu believed enlightenment came from the grace of Amitabha. In the same manner, Christians believe that heaven is only achievable through the divine grace of Jesus Christ. But, as Watts would later remark:

[T]his work ("The Problems of Faith and Works in Buddhism") had momentous consequences, because I saw that if you substituted "Christ" for "Amitabha," Zen, Jodo Shinshu, and Christianity were all approaching the same point by different routes. It might thus be possible to develop a deeper and more intelligible form of Christianity which would, however, have to bypass that religion's imperialistic claims to be the one true and perfect revelation.⁹

Here Watts looks back on his earlier works to show how monumental this frame of thought became for him. He began to see there was more to Christianity than he had been taught as a child in Britain. The comparative religious framework gathered from "The Problems of Faith and Works in Buddhism" propelled Watts into a new era of theological thinking that would transform his scholastic work, predominately focused in Buddhist thought, back into Christianity, the very religion Watts had disliked as a child.

Watts found this interpretation of Christianity to be strikingly similar to the notions professed by mystics and theologians, both Christian and non Christian, such as Meister Eckhart, Saint Teresa, Ramakrishna, Saint Dionysius, and Giordano Bruno (amongst others).¹⁰ After the realization that Christianity could be connected with various religions through a deeper level of

⁹ Watts, *In My Own Way*, 153-154.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

understanding of the Self, Watts began to wonder if he could survive in Western cultural theology. He was well aware that his ideals were iconoclastic to say the least; nevertheless, he moved to Chicago and was accepted as a graduate seminarian student at Northwestern University.

On top of his school work Watts began his own independent study of the great philosophers and thinkers of previous ages. He took great interest in trying to discover if Christianity had “any forgotten secrets.”¹¹ On his own he studied works such as Harnack’s *History of Dogma*, or works by Clement and Origen, the remains of the Gnostic writings (which at this point in time were somewhat limited), Saint Athanasius, Saint Irenaeus, Saint Gregory Nazianzus, Saint John of Damascus, and the apocryphal literature excluded from the New Testament that was available to him at that time. From there he immersed himself in Saint Thomas Aquinas and his modern interpreters, Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson.¹² Then in 1943, Watts met Aldous Huxley who became a major influence on Watts's methods of speech and pronunciation — this would later become important in Watts's career when he began his lecture series, as Watts's ability to remain succinct, articulate, and rhythmic during his lectures was a major attraction point for his audience.

Watts's intricate personal studies accentuated his inner personal conflict between Buddhism and Christianity. He found that he was at great odds with his colleagues at seminary who were more emotionally invested in Christianity than he was. Watts made the observation that his colleagues’ infatuation with sin and “belief in forgiveness of sins seem[ed] to aggravate

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

rather than assuage the sense of guilt, and the more these people [Watts's colleagues] repented and confessed, the more they were embarrassed to go creeping to Jesus again and again for his pardon.”¹³ Because of this repetitive action observed by Watts, he found himself unable to take up any idol of God. In this case, an “idol” to Watts is not just about physical idols, but is primarily concerned with conceptual ideologies. Watts would later remark in one of his lectures that although it is no longer socially acceptable to uphold images of wood and stone as incarnations of the divine, it is still acceptable to uphold a set of ideas with, or as, God.¹⁴ Furthermore, within his 1947 essay (which was later published as a book), “Behold The Spirit: A Study of the Necessity of Mystical Religion,” Watts states that “religion as it is generally practiced is idolatry. God cannot be held in theologies; theism, deism, pantheism—none of them can grasp his truth...”¹⁵ Thus Watts felt “utterly silly” speaking of God as a “He,” so far as Watts was concerned God was “It” or “That” rather than an anthropomorphized masculine being.

Then on Ascension Day, 1945, Watts became formerly ordained as an Episcopal priest by Northwestern University. Despite his new position, Watts preferred not to consider himself as a “priest” per-se, as he never felt a sense of identity in the title as felt by his colleagues. Watts would later remark in his autobiography that “I am not so much a priest as a shaman. The difference is that whereas a priest is a dully ordained corporate officer and caste member in an agrarian culture, a shaman is a loner who gets his thing from the wilds... Priests follow traditions

¹³ Ibid., 181-182.

¹⁴ Alan Watts, *That Funny Feeling Part 1* [Video File], (Mar. 3, 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ikjLi82Sz8> [accessed September 2014].

¹⁵ Alan Watts, *Behold the Spirit: A Study of the Necessity of Mystical Religion* (New York: Random House, 1947), 92.

but shamans originate them.”¹⁶ While it may seem odd to our contemporary culture for Watts to have become a priest given his interest in Buddhism, we must bear in mind that during Watts's lifetime varied theological studies were limited, and any religious studies outside of Christianity or Judaism were deemed taboo in American culture. Thus Watts chose priesthood “because it was the only formal role of Western society into which...[he] could even begin to fit.”¹⁷

Almost immediately after receiving his degree in seminary studies, Watts became University Chaplain at Northwestern and set out to transform the celebration of the Episcopal Mass into what Watts deemed to be an *actual* celebration of God — a celebration that would not make God bored.¹⁸

We banned all corny hymns, and I never let a sermon run for longer than fifteen minutes. I told the students that a celebration of Mass was indeed a celebration—a joining with the Cherubim and Seraphim, the Archangels and Angels, in the celestial whoopee of their eternal dance about the Center of the Universe — and that we wanted no skeletons at the banquet coming merely out of a sense of guilt or duty. I tried to exorcise their idea of God as a Victorian paterfamilias, saying instead that Creator and creation were an outpouring of reckless and ecstatic love, to be seen in Christ “as poor, but making many rich; as having nothing, but possessing all things,” a love which had no other object than to share its own

¹⁶ Ibid., 185.

¹⁷ Ibid., 186.

¹⁸ Here Watts attempted to do what he saw Roman Catholicism did during its liturgy of the mass. Watts felt that the splendid Gregorian chants were ways that kept Mass interesting both to the attendee and to God; thus, when Watts was finally given the chance to transform worship, he seized the opportunity, and made it as impressive as he could imagine.

delight, and which (as Saint Athanasius put it) had in Christ become man that man might become God.¹⁹

The transformation from traditional Episcopalian Mass into the ecstatic worship and celebration of God made Watts very popular amongst his students, as Mass was no longer something to attend out of necessity, but rather a means of emotional release from the repetition of their daily studies. Under Watts's guidance, attendance began to increase sharply, and yet, his methods were deemed inappropriate by many.

Eventually the Dean of the Seminary school told Watts that his standards of worship were too high. Since his direction of Mass was far different from the Mass practiced outside of the school, the Dean felt that Watts was not accurately preparing his students for the real world. After pressure from the Dean and from the parents of students, Watts was encouraged to give up his position as head of worship on Sunday Mass. Watts unwillingly accepted, though he still maintained the title of Chaplain. This instance would soon become a catalyst for Watts to write his essay titled, "Behold the Spirit: A Study in the Necessity of Mystical Religion," which contained Watts's current understanding of Christian doctrine, ethics, and liturgy, as well as ascetic and mystical theology.²⁰ The ideals presented were quite different from the standards of Christian doctrine at that time; thus Watts bent "over backward[s] to speak from within the Christian tradition and to use theologically acceptable language."²¹ It is for this reason that Watts considered this book to be for those who wished to explore Christianity with a different

¹⁹ Watts, *Behold the Spirit*, 188.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

²¹ Watts, *In My Own Way*, 74.

mindset and with a very “hushed voice.” Within this work Watts argued that both mysticism and contemplation were necessary for religious life to be fulfilling and authentic. Though this may not seem different from Christian culture, through this work Watts attempted to reconcile his Buddhist and Taoist beliefs/assumptions with those of Christianity. In doing so he argued that pantheism (the doctrine that defines the universe as a manifestation of God) and Christianity were compatible.²² Thus, the content was edgy to say the least.

Behold the Spirit was an attempt by Watts to address what he saw as Christianity's struggle to feed the people's “vast hunger and impoverishment of the spirit.”²³ Watts sees that Christianity, taken as a generalized religious whole, could not convey a sense of connection or unity with God. The main problem, Watts asserts, is that Christians deem themselves to be separate entities from God — that the physical universe is something with which God can interact but still remain utterly different from. Watts sought to dispel the illusion of separation from God using a more or less Buddhist philosophy of living in the here and now. As he argues in the second chapter of *Behold the Spirit*, “To be alive spiritually man must have union with God and must be conscious of it. Apart from this union...religious life will be...a mere imitation of true spirituality.”²⁴ Watts felt through his knowledge of Buddhism that God could not be entirely recognized through religious ideological practices, as discussed briefly in the explanation of “The Problem of Faith and Works in Buddhism.” Recognition of divine oneness is not attained through holding onto ideas of God, but rather floating amongst them like water.

²² David Clark, *The Pantheism of Alan Watts* (Downers Grove Illinois: Inter-varsity Press, 1978), 13.

²³ Watts, *Behold the Spirit*, 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

Watts often used the metaphor that faith is like swimming. If a person holds onto water, much like they do with ideologies of God, then that person drowns. Instead, faith is about relaxing in the water and allowing oneself to float amongst ideologies rather than grasping at them and holding them as absolute. In the same manner, to enjoy life and living a person must seek true detachment from holding on to notions of the world. “[W]e must let go of it and let it be free to be itself. This is true detachment.”²⁵

And yet, to come to this understanding many have attempted to create methods of detachment. Again, Watts, building upon the frameworks established in “The Problem of Faith and Works in Buddhism,” elaborates that there is no method of detachment.

[T]here is no method, no formal technique for attaining the mystical state and realizing union with God. For a method is an attempt to possess, and has its origin in pride and fear. And as there is nothing that we can *do* to realize God, we must not fall into the error of quietism, which is trying to realize God by doing nothing; for inaction is merely an indirect form of action; it is trying to possess God by doing nothing instead of by doing something, and neither course will succeed since He cannot be possessed at all.²⁶

Watts's ideas of detachment to recognize God may appear too complicated and arguably dreary to grasp, for if a person cannot recognize union with God through action or inaction, then how is detachment supposed to be achieved? The answer, Watts argues, lies within the present moment. Simply put, “the Reality which we term union with God simply IS... Any attempt to grasp it, by

²⁵ Ibid., 93.

²⁶ Ibid., 93.

action or by inaction, suggests that it is not absolutely present.”²⁷ The present moment is the place in which all things are. The future is only a concept, the past no longer exists; thus, God, cannot be found in either the past or the future — He, or It, can only be recognized in the eternal and ever fleeting present moment. As a result, God is always here, always now, no matter the place a person may be in.²⁸ Continually, since Watts is speaking within scholastic Christianity, he makes it clear how this notion of presence is not absent from the Christian or even Jewish tradition:

Where can I go from Your Spirit?
 Or where can I flee from Your presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, You are there;
 If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.
 If I take the wings of the dawn,
 If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
 Even there Your hand will lead me,
 And Your right hand will lay hold of me.
 If I say, “Surely the darts will overwhelm me,
 And the light around me will be night,”
 Even the darkness is not dark to You,
 And the night is as bright as the day.
 Darkness and light are alike *to You*.²⁹

Watts's attempt to reconcile his Buddhist interests within Christianity was warmly received by his fellow Seminarian colleagues. *Behold the Spirit* was considered by many, as Watts tells in his own autobiography, to be one of the most important books on religion of the

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁸ While Watts addressed his audiences with verses from the Bible, there are other religions around the world which would have also sufficed to help explain the presence of God in *now*. Islamic Sufism is one such religion. However, because Watts was addressing audiences whose only theological knowledge was derived from Christianity and Judaism, he chose to use scriptural sources which were familiar to his audience.

²⁹ Psalm 139: 7-12

twentieth century.³⁰ While Watts is certainly self representing his own work, he was awarded an honorary masters of Theology by the faculty of Northwestern's Seminary institute soon after *Behold the Spirit's* publication. Contemporary colleagues of Watt such as F.S.C. Northrop and Canon Eddings Bell commented that they believed this work was "one of the best — in fact the only first-rate — book in recent years in the field of religion;" and that *Behold the Spirit* would "prove to be one of the half-dozen most significant books on religion published in the twentieth century."³¹ Watts was later invited to give lectures about his book around the country; it was deemed a great success amongst the academic community, and was widely received as a great contribution to twentieth-century Christian theology.³²

Despite the seeming acceptance of Watts's carefully worded outlooks on Christianity, Watts still struggled with many ideologies within the institutional church. For example, Watts could never fully come to terms with the widely established view that Jesus was the one and only incarnation of God. On the same note, he also struggled with the idea that Christianity was the only religion to offer spiritual salvation to humanity. It was thus after five years as a priest that Watts left the Church in 1950, divorced his wife, Eleanor, because the two no longer saw eye-to-eye about material issues such as money or politics (amongst other issues, of course), and moved to San Francisco after taking a brief break in the mountains of New York. There in San

³⁰ Watts, *In My Own Way*, 185.

³¹ Watts, *Behold the Spirit*. Note: These quotes are found on the back cover of Vintage Book's most recent publication. The comments which I have just quoted from are cited as being "comments upon original publication of *Behold the Spirit*."

³² I have searched for other reviews of this work that date back to the time of its publication besides those presented on the back cover of Vintage Book's recent publication. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find any sources. Thus, I cannot be certain that the entire academic community held *Behold the Spirit* in the same high regard that Watts appears to have held his own work.

Francisco, Watts was invited by an old friend to join the faculty at the then newly established American Academy of Asian Studies as a professor of religion. Thereafter he became a “philosopher-at-large” and began giving lecture series and seminars around the country. He spoke mostly of his interpretations of religion, both Eastern and Western, and also gave his own philosophical world views. Though many call Alan Watts a mystic and a philosopher he never considered himself in these terms. Because, as Watts says, “I have difficulty in taking myself and my work *seriously*,” he preferred to consider himself as a fake mystic coupled with the self proclaimed title, “philosophical entertainer.”³³

Separating himself from the institution of Christianity allowed Watts the freedom to articulate his theological views without the hindering necessity of using cautious language. It was so that in one of his final books, *Beyond Theology*, Watts threw caution to the wind and outright stated his perception of Christianity by claiming what he deemed to be the gospel or “good news” of Jesus. Watts attempted to portray Jesus within the Hindu concept of pantheism. That is, instead of viewing Jesus as a separate entity to oneself, once a person recognizes that there is no separation from God he/she can better understand Jesus as a spiritual extension of him/herself. In the most blatant of explanations, Watts argued that Jesus's message — the gospel — was the recognition of oneness with God. As Watts states in *Beyond Theology*,

[W]hat the Christian says about the “Three in One and one in Three” relationship of the Trinity is almost exactly what the Hindu says about the “Many in One and

³³ Watts, *In My Own Way*, 218.

One in Many” arrangement of the universe. If the latter makes love between the members unreal, so does the former.³⁴

It was so that Watts attempted to compare Christianity to Hinduism by showing that the Trinity and the pantheistic view of Hinduism were in fact compatible. To show how Jesus could be approached pantheistically Watts used one set of verses from the Gospel of John to further his argument — John 10: 31-39 — in which Jesus is attempting to reveal through scripture that the experience of singularity with God can be understood and felt by anyone. This will be discussed in further detail in the section of this thesis titled, “Jesus and Cosmic Consciousness,” because, as the next section outlines, Watts’s perceptions of the Self must first be analyzed and applied to various religions in order to understand fully the context of how a person can experience Cosmic Consciousness.

Watts published *Beyond Theology* in 1964. From that point on he continued his lecturing, teaching, and occasional book writing, but he never did return to any one specific religion. And, while many people upheld Watts as a guru of sorts, there were many who deemed his lifestyle to be counterintuitive to his teachings. Watts was known for his heavy smoking, drinking, and love of sexual pleasures. So while many admired Watts for his popularization of Eastern thought in the West, there were many people in the religious community who believed that his lifestyle counteracted any theological credence he may have had.³⁵ Nevertheless, Watts was a major

³⁴ Alan Watts, *Beyond Theology* (New York: Random House, 1964), 18.

³⁵ Frederick J. Heide, “A Lamp Unto Himself: Alan Watts and the Illumination of Spirit.” A review of *Alan Watts — Here and now: Contributions to Psychology, Philosophy, and Religion*. (Albany, NY: State university of New York Press, 2012), 263.

figure during the counterculture of the 1960's, and although Watts's lifestyle was not ideal for many, his theological teachings still resonated with millions of people, even up until today.

Watts spent the remainder of the last few years of his life lecturing and spending time in his study up in the mountains near San Francisco. There he died in 1973. Although much controversy still surrounds his life and works, Watts still remains arguably the greatest interpreter of Eastern philosophies for the Westernized world that has ever lived. Without his amazing contributions to theology much of Eastern thought would still remain illusive and difficult to grasp for many. Thus, Watts's legacy still lives on within his thirty plus books and hundreds of lectures.

Part II: Who Am I?

While this thesis is centered around Watts's interpretation of Christianity, we must first seek to understand Watts's fascination with the question, “who am I?” For Watts, questions such as: who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here... Why is anything here? and, Is it serious? — were of the utmost importance. This is because Watts's ultimate goal was to have his audience question the basis of their own identity and to question received facts, traditions, and institutions. These questions are the foundation of religious anthropology, as all religions seek to answer them in some way, shape or form. Thus the quest for religion and theology for Watts was the quest to understand oneself. Ironically the self for Watts is not found just by looking inwards; instead it is also characterized by what lies outside of the self — or that is, what lies outside of the body.

A prevalent idea in Western thought is that the world exists as a separate entity from the body, mind, and spirit. While we as human beings are capable of interacting within the world, we are still removed from it. We view occurrences in this life, particularly negative ones, as things that happen to us — even if these occurrences happen within our own bodies, like cancer for example. Thus, even though Westerners tend to perceive themselves as a body, the things that occur within their physical body are still paradoxically separate from themselves. In Western religions God functions in the same manner. Although God created the universe and acts upon it, He, or It, is still somehow separate from it. Thus, the universe is predominately viewed as dualistic, or platonistic, in Western societies. In this way the human animal is viewed as conscious — we think, reflect, calculate, and reason. And, while we are separate entities from

the universe under this platonistic view, it is our consciousness or soul that acts as the connector to the divine realm. Yet, Watts argues this paradigm is quite problematic, especially when we take into account the philosophical arguments presented by Eastern traditions, specifically Buddhism and Hinduism.

Put bluntly, Watts proposes that the Western idea of being a “lonely island of consciousness” that floats and meanders in a sea of physicality separated from the world it acts upon, is simply an illusion — or as the Hindu’s put it, *maya*, the illusory vision of reality.³⁶ Because Watts translated Eastern philosophies for a Western audience he points out that Western religious thought about the self is disconnected from the ultimate reality of Self, as proposed by the *maya* of Hinduism, which he believed to be a higher form of cosmological belief than Western theologies. Watts asserts that religions such as Christianity and Judaism have placed the utmost emphasis on man’s separation from God. Many a Christian has admitted it, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Therefore, to the Christian mind, God and man are two separate entities and will remain so forever and ever, even after death. Watts found this notion not to his liking, as he more often than not aspired to Eastern teachings rather than Western teachings mainly because he consistently refused to acknowledge Christianity as the “supreme religion.”

In Hindu theology, there is no separation once one perceives that everything is connected together as one. Within Hinduism there exists separation only so far as one refuses to lift the veil of *maya*. Once this veil has been lifted a person can recognize that the physical world, represented in Hinduism as *Atman*, is the same as God, which is represented as *Brahman*, the

³⁶ Watts, *Beyond Theology*, 6.

ever purveying essence that was and is and always will be — The Great I Am. So, while Hinduism can outwardly appear to be dualistic, in fact, once *Atman* is understood to be *Brahman*, Hinduism becomes a monistic religion, meaning that all physical bodies, both animate and inanimate, are at a higher level of understanding, all one being — *Brahman*. *Brahman* is often referred to as “Self;” and when Watts uses this phrasing he is referring to God or the being from which there is no separation. Watts uses two variations of the word “self,” the uncapitalized word meaning the physical body each one of us considers ours; however, the capitalized “Self” is not limited to a single body, but is understood in a larger context as God, or as the Hindus would put it, *Brahman*. The ancient Hindu doctrine of *Tat Tvam Asi* furthers this notion.³⁷ *Tat Tvam Asi*, translated literally as, “that art thou” or “thou art that,” is a verbal representation of singularity with *Brahman*. That is to say, the Self (the ever purveying primordial essence) is identifiable, and indeed is exactly the same as the ultimate reality, or *maya*.

Continually, in Buddhism we find that although there is no concept of the Self, as Buddhism is strictly a “no self” philosophy, it is still firmly grounded in the teachings of the interconnectedness of all things. The refusal of a definition of God is not an assertion that God does not exist, but holds the understanding that characterizing God does not allow a person to understand God because no human can ever fully comprehend God through characterizations and concepts. Instead, it is simpler to put ideas of God to the side and focus on what is — the very presence of every moment. And so, Watts places great emphasis on questioning what the self really is. Is it a body, a spirit, a consciousness? Or is there simply one Self, one all purveying

³⁷ Watts, *Beyond Theology*, 16.

eye of conscious attention and presence that can only perceive itself one organism at a time? As Watts asserts in *Beyond Theology*:

The importance of these questions lies in the fact that Western cultures have bred a type of human being who feels strongly alienated from everything which is not his own consciousness. He is a stranger both to the external world and to his own body, and in this sense he has lost his connection with the surrounding universe. He does not know that the “ultimate inside” of himself is the same as the “ultimate inside” of the cosmos, or that, in other words, his sensation of being “I” is a glimmering intimation of what the universe itself feels like on the inside. He has been taught to regard everything outside human skins as so much witless mechanism which has nothing whatsoever in common with human feelings and values. This style of man must therefore see himself as the ghastly and tragic accident of sensitive and intelligent tissue caught up in the cosmic toils like a mouse in a cotton gin.³⁸

Watts focuses his attention throughout his books, lectures, and articles on dispelling the illusion of separation to bring his audience to the understanding that there is nothing which is separate from oneself. Let us take for instance a bee and flower. We have been taught that both exist as separate entities which act upon each other but are separate organisms. And, while that may be true to an extent, if we look at each organism we see both are dependent upon each other. That is, the flower cannot exist without the bee to pollinate it, and likewise, the bee would not exist if it did not have the flower for nectar. Although the two organisms are separate, their

³⁸ Ibid., 6.

dependence on each other means the two exist as a single organism. Now, of course nature consists of more than just bees and flowers. Nevertheless, the entirety of nature consistently relies upon all of its parts to continue a harmonious balance. That is, bees would not exist without flowers, forests would not exist without soil, soil could not exist without plants, humans could not exist without any of these things, and the list goes on.

So then, if we take the metaphor of the bee and the flower and apply it to all of nature, we begin to see that nature is dependent upon all of its parts. Thus, it could be argued that the earth, and nature itself, exists as one functioning organism. So, when humans consider themselves to be just a simple body that interacts with the world, they fail to recognize how their bodies are just as much a part of the environment as they deem animals to be. Moreover, to say, “all beings are interconnected,” is to recognize how one cannot exist without the other, therefore, the two are in actuality one. Once a person comes to this realization he has transcended the *maya* of seeming separation and has evolved his consciousness to understand the self (the individual body) to be, in actuality, the Self (all things).³⁹

This experience of self-transcendence, that is, evolving from viewing the universe as a multiplicity to viewing it as a singularity, is frequently described by Watts as “cosmic consciousness.” As Watts says, “Cosmic consciousness is a release from self-consciousness, that is to say from the fixed belief and feeling that one’s organism is an absolute and separate thing, as distinct from a convenient unit of perception.”⁴⁰ This term, however, was not coined by

³⁹ While this metaphor is intriguing to think about, there is no way to prove it to be true. This philosophical reasoning was promoted by Watts and is also promoted by Eastern religions like Hinduism. It is simply a new mode of thinking about the world, and should not necessarily be considered as “true,” but instead, should be perceived as a possibility.

⁴⁰ Alan Watts, *This Is It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 35.

Watts; Canadian psychiatrist, Richard M. Bucke was its original creator. And although Watts used this phrase often throughout his works, he found the wording did not entirely hit the mark because it took a seemingly ineffable experience and tried to make it effable; but due to the lack of better choices Watts decided to stick with the phrase.⁴¹

Cosmic consciousness is not so much an ideology or concept as it is an experience. While cosmic consciousness can be taught as an idea, the real defining point of it is to experience the paradigm of unity. Thus it is meant to be experiential rather than theoretical, much like Watts's notions of Jodo Shinshu Buddhism within his first theological work, "The Problem of Faith and Works in Buddhism." And, much like Watts argued about Jodo Shinshu's perceptions of Amithaba as not being "other" but instead realizing this "other" as the Self, Watts proposes this same notion of Christianity, saying that Jesus is as much the Self as Amithaba, and that Jesus himself in fact professed such notions of cosmic unity within his teachings. Watts takes this a few steps further by saying that the message of Jesus, or "good news" of the gospels, is in fact the revelation of divine unity amongst all beings.

⁴¹ Watts, *This Is It*, 17. "There is no really satisfactory name for this type of experience. To call it mystical is to confuse it with visions of another world, or of gods and angels. To call it spiritual or metaphysical is to suggest that it is not also extremely concrete and physical, while the term 'cosmic consciousness' itself has the unpoetic flavor of occultist jargon... But from all historical times and cultures we have reports of this same unmistakable sensation emerging, as a rule, quite suddenly and unexpectedly and from no clearly understood cause." It is still unclear why Watts never decided to create his own phrasing for this type of experience.

Part III: Jesus and Cosmic Consciousness

First, let us suppose that Jesus had such an experience of unity with God. But, Jesus has a limitation. He does not know of any religion other than those of the immediate near East. He may know something about Greek religion, perhaps a little about Egyptian religion, but there is no evidence whatsoever that Jesus knew anything about Eastern philosophies. So, to a man confined to the Jewish culture of Palestine at the turn of the millennium, who comes to the revelation of unity with God, he is hindered by the social, cultural, religious, and theological language available to him to express his experience of unity — or cosmic consciousness.⁴² If Jesus were publicly to come out and say, “I am the son of God,” or, “I am God,” that would be like saying “I am the boss’s son,” or “I am the boss,” and everyone would immediately say that is blasphemy because no man has seen God.⁴³

Watts points out that Jesus in his exoteric teaching (his teachings to the public) as recorded in the synoptic gospels was cautious about this unity. He did not come right out and say, “I and the father are one.” Instead, within the synoptic gospels he attributes himself to the messiah alluded to in the book of Isaiah, “the suffering servant who was despised and rejected by men.”⁴⁴ Watts argues that it was convenient for Jesus to make this identification, even though he knew it could cause trouble. But, as Watts believes, in the Gospel of John Jesus is talking to his elect disciples, which allowed him the freedom to come right out and say, “before Abraham was,

⁴² Alan Watts, “Jesus and His Religion” [Audio file]. (2012, May 10), Retrieved from <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTIVrFV3S2c>>

⁴³ Alan Watts, *Cloud Hidden Whereabouts Unknown: A Mountain Journal* (New York: Random House, 1974), 148.

⁴⁴ Isaiah 53:3

I am;”⁴⁵ “I am the way the truth and the life;”⁴⁶ “I am the resurrection and the life;”⁴⁷ “I and the father are one;”⁴⁸ “he who has seen me has seen the father.”⁴⁹ So the Jews found out and had Jesus put to death for blasphemy, for being only a man he was professing himself as God.

Watts proposes that the disciples did not quite get the point Jesus was trying to preach. Clearly the disciples were awed by the miracles of Jesus, and worshiped him as people have always worshiped gurus. And so the disciples and early Christians said, “ok, ok, Jesus of Nazareth was the son of God, but let it stop right there! Nobody else.” In this manner Watts proposes that Jesus was pedestalized — “he was put in a position that was safely upstairs so that his troublesome experience of cosmic consciousness would not come and cause others to be a nuisance.”⁵⁰ Basically, the early Christians represented Jesus as the *only* divine being so that others could not come after Jesus and also proclaim to be the messiah or the Son of God. This pedestalization, Watts proposes, further separated man from God, and only impeded any sort of conscious experiential feelings of unity with God. And those who have had this experience of cosmic consciousness, or cosmic unity, and expressed it at times when the Catholic Church was in power were almost invariably persecuted in the same manner as Jesus. Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for his pantheistic beliefs. Meister Eckhart’s theses, which stated that one’s own soul must be united with God to attain salvation, were condemned. Johannes Scotus

⁴⁵ John 8:58

⁴⁶ John 3:16

⁴⁷ John 11:25

⁴⁸ John 10:30

⁴⁹ John 14:9

⁵⁰ Watts, “Jesus and His Religion” [Audio file].

Eriugena, who believed that all beings, including animals, were reflections of God, was excommunicated. And, in a similar manner which would likely be deemed heretical by many denominations of Christianity, Watts argues that if you pedestalize Jesus you strangle the gospel at birth. Because, as Watts asserts, the pedestalization of Jesus distracts from the true message of the Gospel, which Watts took to mean unity with God for all humans, not just Jesus.⁵¹

Watts's interpretation of this new message of the Gospel is centered around one set of verses in particular — John chapter 10 verses 30-36:

“I and the Father are one!” Again the Jews picked up stones to stone Him. Jesus answered them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these works do you stone me?” The Jews replied to Him, “We do not stone you for a good work but for blasphemy, and because you, being a man, make yourself God.” Jesus answered them, “Isn’t it written in your law that ‘I have said: you are gods’?⁵² If he called those [people] gods to whom the word of God came (and the scripture cannot be broken), how can you say to him whom the Father has made holy and sent into the world, ‘You blaspheme!’ because I said, ‘I am a son of God’?”

The aforementioned verses are not from any modern translation available in bookstores. The translation was Watts's own because he found the standard translation to be at odds with the

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² The quotation within these verses is from Psalm 82, “I said, ‘You are gods, and all of you are sons of the most high. Nevertheless you will die like men and fall like any one of the princes.’” It is unclear if Watts translated Psalm 82 as well; however, given how he never mentioned any knowledge of Hebrew it is unlikely that he translated those verses himself.

original Greek.⁵³ The NRSV and the KJV all interpret John 10: 36 as saying, “I am the Son of God;” the New English Bible skips this entirely by saying, “I am God’s son.” However, Watts found the KJV to mislead readers by using such a definitive word as “the.” For here, “the” means that there are no other sons of God; no man can ever achieve the level of divinity as Christ. But, within the NEB version, we see that “I am God’s son” has the potential to mean the opposite. There is no definitive wording here in regards to the number of sons; and so the message of John 10: 30-36 is changed entirely by one tiny word, “the.” As such, Watts found the message of the gospel to hinge upon the translation of this word, for if Christians believe the Gospel to be that Jesus is the only “Son of God,” then “the” would have to be the correct translation here. Watts, however, found the opposite to be true. Through his own translations of these verses, Watts found that “a son of God” was the most accurate. Watts even states in his lecture, “Jesus and His Religion,” as well as in his book *Beyond Theology*, that the word “the” in the KJV is in italics, meaning that word is an interpretation by the translators — that is, it is not a literal translation from the Greek.⁵⁴ Yet, even without abiding by the exact Greek translation, we can deduce from context that “a son of God” is the most likely translation because if Jesus were to say that “you too are gods” and then go on to say that he is *the* only son of God, then he would have contradicted his quotation of Psalm 82. According to Watts here Jesus is trying to show that his experience of cosmic unity is not unique unto himself; by saying, “is it not written in your law, ‘I have said you are gods?’” Jesus is attempting to take his experience of cosmic

⁵³ Watts's own interpretation of these verses can be found in *Beyond Theology*, 122-123.

⁵⁴ Watts, *Beyond Theology*, 123. While Watts proposes “the” in the KJV is in italics, I have yet to find a copy to verify that claim. This, however, is not enough reason to dismiss his claim as false, because the various differing translations of this verse reveal to me that there are in fact various ways of interpreting the phrasing from the original Greek.

consciousness and convey that Jewish scripture supports the idea that we all have the right to claim, “I Am.” Thus, Watts finds his own interpretation of the Greek to be much more fitting towards the meaning of these verses, his perception of Christianity, and to better accentuate the original Greek text.⁵⁵

To Watts, the message of John 10:30-36 was the message of the Gospel in a nutshell; that is to say that we are all “sons of the Most High” in the same manner as Jesus. The “good news” is recognition of unity with God. The expression, “son of,” simply means “of the nature of,” or “of the essence of.” So that is to say, if we are all “sons of the Most High” then we are all of the nature of God. Watts connects this with Isaiah 45:6, “That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides ME. I am the Lord, and there is no other...” Thus Watts approaches these verses not from the standard Christian perspective of seeing oneself as a separate entity from God, but as seeing oneself as God and recognizing God within all other beings and things. “This means to be *in* Christ, to be one body with him, to be in union with the Word made flesh, and to be partakers of his flesh and blood, is to realize one identity with him.”⁵⁶ So we as individuals have as much right as Jesus to claim “before Abraham was I Am;” for the spirit that dwells within Christ is the same spirit that dwells within each of us.⁵⁷ As a result, the message of the gospel as professed by Watts begins to take the shape of Hindu and Buddhist thinking of *Tat Vam Asi*. Perhaps Jesus's recognition of unity with God — cosmic consciousness — is not unique to him, but can be potentially found by anyone.

⁵⁵ I have also been unable to find any reviews of *Beyond Theology* to help me better understand how this idea was perceived in the theological community. Without such knowledge I cannot be sure if Watts was perceived well for promoting this revolutionary idea. Further research is needed on this subject.

⁵⁶ Watts, *Beyond Theology*, 123.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Part IV: The Gospel of Thomas — A New Addition

Of the points gathered about Jesus by Watts, it is only John 10: 31-36 that Watts uses to assert his interpretation that Jesus's message was meant to convey unity with God for everyone. There are, however, other verses Watts could have used to establish further his thesis that the message of the Gospel is about divine unity with humankind. However, these verses are not found within the canonical gospels, nor were these verses readily available to Watts during his career as a lecturer or a writer. Here, I am referring to the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, a lost early Christian text that was not discovered until 1945 in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. The Gospel of Thomas was discovered amongst a large collection of other Gnostic sources which are collectively known today as the Nag Hammadi Library. Although these texts were discovered in 1945, it took well over two decades before scholars were able to translate them for both the academic community and the public alike. The Nag Hammadi Library was officially published in 1977.⁵⁸ Thus, by the time the Gospel of Thomas would have been available to Watts, he had been dead four years.

The Nag Hammadi Library contains a total of 52 texts.⁵⁹ Some of the documents discovered have been hotly debated since their discovery. While there were many texts in this collection, only a small handful were found to be completely intact — the Gospel of Thomas is, as far as scholars can tell, one of these sources.⁶⁰ What sets the Gospel of Thomas apart from the

⁵⁸ Tobias Churton, *The Gnostics* (Barns & Noble Inc, June 1999), 18.

⁵⁹ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), xv.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

other sources found in Nag Hammadi is its lack of narrative. Virtually every other text discovered contain some sort of narrative about Jesus, or they tell of “the origins of the human race in terms very different from the usual readings of Genesis: the *Testimony of Truth*, for example, tells the story of the Garden of Eden from the viewpoint of the serpent[.]”⁶¹ And, while there are many texts amongst the Nag Hammadi collection that have upset the academic and religious communities alike,⁶² the Gospel of Thomas has been at the forefront of academic debate since its availability to scholars.

Although there are many other Gnostic sources within the Nag Hammadi Library which discuss Jesus, the narratives within these texts are profoundly different from any canonical gospel. For instance the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (unrelated to the Gospel of Thomas) contains narratives of Jesus's miracles in boyhood. The stories depicted are quite far fetched since there are no academically verifiable sources which discuss Jesus as a child. And, although many of the miracles of Jesus in the canonical Gospels may seem far-fetched, they are still culturally and academically held to be more likely than many of the stories in the Nag Hammadi texts. One such story tells of Jesus collecting water as a boy, but when another child from his town disperses the water, Jesus curses him causing the child to wither away to nothing. Now, no scholars believe this story actually happened; and since it is impossible to prove if any of the narratives within the Nag Hammadi texts were true, their lack of historical and textual value cannot aid this thesis in any way. But, because the Gospel of Thomas contains no narrative, the verses or sayings within this source become much more important for historical scholarship

⁶¹ Ibid., xvii.

⁶² For instance, the theory that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene originated from the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* which tells of Jesus often kissing Mary.

because there is no way to say that Jesus did or did not say these words. Thus, for this thesis the Gospel of Thomas holds more historical and theological importance than the other texts found at Nag Hammadi.

We must also bear in mind that the Gospel of Thomas opens with the lines, “these are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down.” Here the Gospel of Thomas immediately states who allegedly wrote this gospel — something which no canonical gospel does. And, while there is no way of verifying if Thomas wrote this source himself, it stands to reason that naming the author of the text as a close disciple of Jesus lends more credibility to the words within this gospel than a person who did not know Jesus. Therefore, because we have at least a vague idea of where these sayings may have originated, the historicity of these verses becomes somewhat more likely than a text from the Nag Hammadi collection that has no correlations to other Christian works from that time period. It is for the aforementioned reasons that the Gospel of Thomas will be used exclusively within this thesis.⁶³

The Gospel of Thomas is believed by scholars to have been written around the turn of the first century, or maybe even the second century, by a group of early Christians known as the Gnostics — one of the early factions of Christianity.⁶⁴ Similar to the canonical gospels, we do not know who wrote the Gospel of Thomas. While tradition upholds that specific disciples wrote each gospel, scholars have no way of confirming the original author(s) of each text; however Thomas provides slightly more context for its author than the four canonical gospels.

⁶³ Also, I believe that bringing in other Gnostic sources would likely further complicate an already complicated topic.

⁶⁴ Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into The New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 20.

The word “Gnostic” is derived from the Greek word, *gnosis*, meaning knowledge, “or one who ‘knows’.”⁶⁵ Generally *gnosis* is meant as a form of individually attained spiritual knowledge that allows a person to achieve transcendence into a higher level of understanding and being. *Gnosis* is not gained through social affairs such as school or church; it is a type of knowledge that can only be figured out by an individual who seeks his/her own path to spiritual understanding. While the means of achieving this knowledge can be given to a person, it is up to that person to find the meaning of the knowledge himself. The Gnostics, however, do appear to have upheld certain religious and spiritual beliefs. For instance, people were thought to be spirits that had fallen from heaven only to become trapped in physical bodies. To the Gnostics, alleviation from the suffering and turmoil of physical existence could only come by acquiring the knowledge necessary to transcend oneself out of the physical through purification of thought and existence. We see many verses in the Gospel of Thomas that discuss the physical and the spiritual realms — the physical universe is represented as a masculine gender, and the spiritual, feminine.⁶⁶ The spiritual universe was considered by the Gnostics to be pure while the physical universe was considered to be impure. Jesus is supposed to reveal the knowledge of salvation, alleviating the soul from the antagonism of physicality.⁶⁷

The Gospel of Thomas records 114 verses, or sayings, of Jesus uninterrupted by the accounts of Jesus’s life. That is, unlike the canonical gospels which are all narrative accounts of the life of Jesus, the Gospel of Thomas contains 114 verses attributed to Jesus without any

⁶⁵ Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House 2003), 33.

⁶⁶ Saying 15: Jesus said, “When you see one who was not born of a woman, prostrate yourselves on your faces and worship him. That one is your father.” Translation from: Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 21.

⁶⁷ Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 20.

narrative in between. There is no mention of the virgin birth, miracles, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. So within the Gospel of Thomas we see only mysterious and enigmatic teachings that Jesus may have delivered. Many of the sayings are similar to verses found throughout the canonical Gospels. Below are a few examples of compatible verses.

Saying 9: Jesus said, "Now the sower went out, took a handful (of seeds), and scattered them. Some fell on the road; the birds came and gathered them up. Others fell on rock, did not take root in the soil, and did not produce ears. And others fell on thorns; they choked the seed(s) and worms ate them. And others fell on the good soil and it produced good fruit: it bore sixty per measure and a hundred and twenty per measure."

Saying 20: The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like." He said to them, "It is like a mustard seed. It is the smallest of all seeds. But when it falls on tilled soil, it produces a great plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky."

Saying 26 Jesus said, "You (singular) see the mote in your brother's eye, but you do not see the beam in your own eye. When you cast the mean out of your own eye, then you will see clearly to cast the mote from your brother's eye."

Saying 33: Jesus said, "Preach from your (plural) housetops that which you will hear in your ear. For no one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel, nor does he put it in a hidden lace, rather he sets it on a lamp stand so that everyone who enters and leaves will see its light."

Saying 34: Jesus said, “If a blind man leads a blind man, they will both fall into a pit.”

Given the similarity between verses in the Gospel of Thomas and those found in the canonical gospels, it is highly likely that some of the verses within the Gospel of Thomas may be somewhat accurate accounts of what Jesus may have actually said, at least to an extent. So despite the difference in content between the Gospel of Thomas and the canonical sources, the textual resemblances amongst these different sources provide a connective link which lends further credibility to the apparent words of Jesus within the Gospel of Thomas. As for the verses attributed to the Gnostic beliefs of the spiritual and physical world it is unclear if Jesus preached such notions, or if they are included in this gospel simply out of Gnostic influence. For the sake of this thesis I will not be concerned with historicity of the verses presented because historical accuracy of scriptural verses falls under another category of religious studies, often referred to as the “historical Jesus.”⁶⁸ Instead, I will approach the sayings within the Gospel of Thomas from their relation to Watts’s position, in that I will be illuminating certain verses which could have aided Watts's belief that the gospel was meant to communicate divine unity with God for all.

Alan Watts was well aware of Gnosticism during his literary lifetime; however, his knowledge of scriptural Gnosticism was limited due to the lack of available textual sources. Within the two major works by Watts used in this thesis, *Behold the Spirit*, and *Beyond Theology*, Watts mentions Gnosticism only a handful of times, mostly in relation to Gnostic understandings

⁶⁸ To research the authenticity of each verse both in the Gospel of Thomas and within the canonical gospels, see the approach of: R. Funk, & R. Hoover, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* (New York, NY: Polebridge Press 1993).

of the physical and spiritual universes and how those understandings allow spiritual interpretations of biblical narratives rather than simply literal interpretations. As Watts says:

Speculations as to the nature of an esoteric Catholicism, which might claim Meister Eckhart or John Scotus Erigena as its spokesmen, are usually constructed along the lines of Gnosticism, with its heavy emphasis upon the gulf between the spiritual and the material, upon the sole reality of the former, and upon disciplines which lead to release from material existence. This is the rationale whereby, say, the doctrines of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection of Christ's body can be understood spiritually rather than physically...⁶⁹

For Watts the Gnostic perspective of material and spiritual understandings was a lens which allowed him to look beyond literal interpretations of the New Testament, much in the same way that "Origen rationalized the mythology of the Old Testament" by placing more emphasis on the meaning of the stories rather than their historicity.⁷⁰ Take Jonah and the whale for instance; instead of viewing Jonah's story solely as a literal event, it could be taken as an allegory for the life and crucifixion of Jesus.

Watts also discusses Gnosticism in a lecture titled, "*Do You Do It, Or Does It Do You?*" Here Watts attempts to address the problem within religion wherein each religion upholds that its understanding of God is superior to all other beliefs. To further this point Watts uses the elimination of Gnosticism by the Catholic Church in an effort to convey how certain religious societies fight and destroy ideologies which differ from their own. Of the many speeches I have

⁶⁹ Watts, *Beyond Theology*, 176.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

heard from Watts, this is the only one I have found in which he mentions Gnosticism. From the very beginning Watts outlines what he deems to be the three main positions of Gnosticism, or that is, the three main human classifications of Gnosticism: pneumatic, psychic and hylic (derived from the Greek word meaning *wood*). Basically, people were spiritual, psychological, and wooden. The “wooden” people being those who were most absorbed in materiality and most closely identified with their bodies; thus, they were believed to be people who could not attain or learn high spiritual knowledge due to their materialistic practices.

Now, Watts also points out that “orthodox Christianity rejected this (hylic) distinction because of the perfectly correct idea that material existence is not inconsistent with spirituality.”⁷¹ According to Watts the destruction of Gnosticism was an effort by the early Christian movement to ensure that material existence was in agreement with spirituality; from this, the later Protestant Church was able to emphasize that people were spiritually saved not by works, but instead by faith. This was because it was believed that “you can never know God, God can never become an object of knowledge. And, in this funny round-about way, the Christian theologians were saying exactly the same thing as the Hindus. Only the Hindus call this knowledge of God through faith, *Jnana*, which has the same meaning as the Greek word, *gnosis*.”⁷² Now here, the main point is not about the similarities of Hinduism to Christianity, although this will be elaborated upon later, but instead that Watts's knowledge of Gnosticism is strictly based on his ideological understandings rather than scriptural exegesis of Gnosticism.

⁷¹ Alan Watts. “*Do you do it, or does it do you?*” [Audio File]. (N.D.) Retrieved from <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULz16EvH5kg>> NOTE: while the title of this full lecture is called “Do you do it, or does it do you?” the file name on this youtube page is called, “Beliefs (Different Views).”

⁷² Ibid.

Watts missed a large part of Gnosticism described within the Gospel of Thomas which accords with his purpose of preaching — that is, to convey that self instigated spiritual knowledge is what allows a person to achieve spiritual prowess and to fully understand unification with God.

In general, gathering verses from the Gospel of Thomas to back up the claim of unification with God is easier than finding verses within the canonical gospels because of the lack of narrative and overall theme of the Gospel of Thomas. First, the lack of narrative in this Gospel takes away any context about Jesus. This is important because the meaning (or interpretation) of each verse is not deducible by context; it is entirely up to the reader to figure out each enigmatic saying for himself.⁷³ Without narrative to guide meaning, each phrase sits on its own and does not depend on what comes before or after it. Therefore, the reader cannot say that Jesus meant X because he was talking to Y; or, the reader cannot say that the previous verse says X which helps lead into Jesus's overall point of Y. Without context and narrative visualizations we, as readers, are left with our own wit and knowledge to create meaning, something which Watts would have greatly appreciated — especially if we take into account one of his most famous and well used metaphors regarding the need for individual personal contemplation on spirituality. “Anybody who tells you that he has some way of leading you to spiritual enlightenment is like somebody who picks your pocket and sells you your own watch.”⁷⁴ In the same manner, when we look at the Gospel of Thomas it is easy to see from the very beginning that the Gnostic Jesus is trying to convey individualized contemplation on spiritual matters, versus being told what to believe by another person:

⁷³ Of course, here we are assuming that there is a correct interpretation to be had for the verses within the Gospel of Thomas.

⁷⁴ Alan Watts, “That funny feeling part 1” [Audio File].

Saying 49: Jesus said, “Blessed are the solitary and elect, for you will find the kingdom. For you are from it, and to it you will return.”

Professor of Religion at Princeton University, and author of many books and articles on Gnosticism, Elaine Pagels, writes in her book *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* that the gospel or “good news” of the Gospel of Thomas is different than the “good news” of the four canonical gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, being entirely centered around the narrative of Jesus's life and teachings, appear to depict the gospel as proclaiming the coming of the kingdom within the lifetime of the disciples — in other words, the gospel is partially about understanding that the kingdom will come to earth in the future. On the same note, the Gospel of John focuses upon these same notions, but instead reveals the arrival of the kingdom in the present moment.⁷⁵ Moreover, it places emphasis on Jesus's divinity using theological language not seen in virtually any other canonical gospel. Certainly the synoptic gospels characterize Jesus as God’s human agent; however, within these gospels Jesus hardly ever claims to be God or claims to be God’s son in the sense of divinity.⁷⁶ This type of language, specifically the many “I am” sayings attributed to Jesus (i.e. “I am the way the truth and life,” “I and the Father are one,” “I am the good shepherd,” etc....) only appear within the Gospel of John. Therefore, as Pagels eludes to, the divinity of Christ, as professed by Christians, is a theological paradigm deduced only from

⁷⁵ John 5:25

⁷⁶ Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 37-38, 43. The titles given to Jesus used to promote his divinity such as, “son of Man,” “son of God,” or “messiah” were not originally supposed to denote divinity. They were human roles to the authors of the early Gospels, like Mark. The phrase “a son of man” is nothing special in ancient Arabic culture, in fact it was commonly used to talk about a man/human being. But half way through the second millennium, when the New Testament began to be translated into English, the authors believed these titles to be of importance, so they capitalized them, and henceforth they have been attributed to Jesus's divinity. The contemporaries of Mark (believed to be the earliest of the gospels) thought of Jesus as a *man*, though a very spiritually gifted man, but a man nonetheless.

the Gospel of John — in other words, the Gospel of John functions as a lens for Christians to interpret Jesus as the divine figure he has become today. Pagels continues this argument by claiming if “Matthew, Mark, and Luke had been joined with the Gospel of Thomas instead of with John...or both had been included in the New Testament canon, Christians probably would have read the first three gospels quite differently.”⁷⁷

According to Pagels, the “good news” of Thomas is not centered around the life of Jesus, nor is it concerned within the divinity of Christ, although it is clear that Jesus is viewed by the Gnostics to be of similar, perhaps divine, standing — “It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the all. From me did the all come forth, and unto me did the all extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.”⁷⁸ The good news of Thomas is the realization “that the kingdom of God is embodied not only in Jesus but in everyone.”⁷⁹ Therefore, the kingdom is not something which will come in the future, but instead can be recognized within the present moment. Perhaps this is the very point the following quotations from both the Gospels of Luke and Thomas reveal:

Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or, ‘There it is!’ For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁷⁸ Gospel of Thomas, saying 77.

⁷⁹ Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 51.

⁸⁰ Luke 17: 20-21 (NASB)

His disciples said to him, “When will the resurrection of the dead come, and when will the new world come?” He said to them, “What you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it.”⁸¹

Simply put, if you believe the kingdom will arrive in the future, then you will miss the kingdom which is occurring *now*. On the same note, the Gospel of Thomas describes the kingdom as existing within oneself;⁸² hence, to recognize the kingdom one must first recognize oneself. And, since “the Gospel of Thomas teaches that recognizing one’s affinity with God is the key to the kingdom of God,”⁸³ according to Pagels, the message of the Gospel of Thomas begins to look a lot like the ancient Hindu philosophies of *Tat Tvam Asi*⁸⁴ — and to my own eye, the Gospel of Thomas resembles many sayings which relate to Watts's idea of cosmic consciousness.

Watts upholds that the nature of the spiritual is not something affirmed through institutional dogma — spiritual evolution can only come from internal contemplation, not from externalities. The notion of pantheism within Watts's lectures and books conveys to us that if God is everything, and there is nothing that is not God (including ourselves), then, clearly, searching outside of oneself for spirituality is to attempt to reach further than one needs to go. For if God resides in all things, then the best place to find Him, or It, is within. Through scriptural verses professed by the the Apostle Paul such as: “I am crucified with Christ. Nevertheless I live; yet no more I, but Christ lives in me,”⁸⁵ Watts holds that self criticism and

⁸¹ Gospel of Thomas, saying 51.

⁸² Ibid., Saying 3.

⁸³ Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 75.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Galatians 2:20

self contemplation are the best methods for achieving any sort of spiritual prowess.⁸⁶

Regardless, in my opinion only using verses from Paul and an occasional verse from the canonical Jesus are not sufficient enough to lend scriptural support to Watts's theory that the message of the Gospel is the divine within us. I believe Watts needs Jesus to be the main voice of reason here, and the only way to do this, I argue, is to look beyond the Bible and search for it in the words of Jesus that were not included in the Christian canon.

Now, perhaps the most obvious of verses within The Gospel of Thomas that reveal how the divine is centered within, is the third saying.

Jesus said, “If those who lead you say to you, ‘See, the kingdom is in the sky,’ then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.”

While it is widely established across all Christian denominations that the “kingdom” is outside of the physical world (i.e. something you can only achieve or go to after you have died), within saying three we see a revelation of Jesus that is not found in any common translation of the Christian canon — the kingdom of heaven also lies within. Interestingly, Watts’s position is so close to Thomas that Watts could be accused of quoting Thomas if he had written the following passage from *Beyond Theology* only a few years later. Here, Watts discusses the meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus:

⁸⁶ Watts, *Beyond Theology*, 122-125.

To have faith in “Christ crucified” is therefore “that he may be *in* us, and we *in* him,” as the bird is in the air and the air in the bird. It is not to cling to the Cross or to reach out in the dark for the Savior’s hand. There is nothing to catch hold of, because “the kingdom of heaven is within you.” To be truly “in Christ” is to be less and less preoccupied with any external image of Jesus derived from the Gospels, as if the Christian life were the meticulous following of a pattern.⁸⁷

Watts continues this thought by stating his belief that every Easter the Bible should be ceremoniously burned because we need it no longer: “[F]or the whole meaning of the resurrection and ascension of Christ into heaven (‘which is within you’) is that Godmanhood is to be discovered here and now inwardly, not in the letter of the Bible.”⁸⁸ And yet, despite using nearly identical language as the Gospel of Thomas, Watts makes no mention of this source within this book, or any others. It appears for a split second, only to fade into the background. But such powerful words attributed to Jesus should not be backgrounded, for they should — must— remain in the forefront of Watts's theological discussion. The words of Jesus bear more weight than Paul or any other theologian/philosopher from proceeding centuries.

However, while it is unclear why Watts did not cite this quotation, it stands to reason that Watts knew of the Gnostic sources, as many scholars were aware of snippets from Gnostic texts, but he did not have the necessary sources to elaborate further; thus, he chose to leave the quotation anonymous. Still, it is possible that Watts was referring to Luke 17: 20-21. The NASB reads:

⁸⁷ Ibid., 111.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed;’ nor will they say, ‘look, here it is!’ or, ‘There it is!’ For behold the kingdom of God is in your midst.”

Some translations, such as the one used by Elaine Pagels in her book *Beyond Belief* (though the translation used by her is not specified in her notes) translate the last line of Luke 17:21 as saying “for the kingdom of heaven is within you.”⁸⁹ It is possible that Watts was referring to the translation of this verse; however, whether Watts was referring to the Gospels of Luke or Thomas is unclear. But given that the verse in Luke can be translated in various ways, and the third saying in The Gospel of Thomas is always translated as “the kingdom is within you” or “the kingdom is inside of you,” it seems likely that Watts could have been using a quotation from the Gospel of Thomas in this citation from *Beyond Theology*, but he could not cite it for lack of access to the complete text. Unfortunately, we will never know for sure.

To understand fully God as residing both internally and externally, the concepts and categorizations which say that God is solely an externality must be broken down and understood as only one part of traditional theological discussion. Within *Behold The Spirit*, Watts attempts to address his pantheistic view by eliminating the necessity of categorizing God. There are two main traditions within theological discussion: apophatic, and cataphatic.⁹⁰ The apophatic tradition is a form of negative theology of saying what God is *not* like. The cataphatic tradition

⁸⁹ Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 50.

⁹⁰ Peter J. Columbus, Donadrian L. Rice, *Alan Watts — here and now*. (Albany New York: State University of New York Press, 2012), 46.

is the opposite: it says what God *is* like.⁹¹ Watts often called the apophatic way, “atheism in the name of God,” because it was not about refusing to believe in God, but about refusing to accept and use arbitrary categorizations and nomenclatures of God. As Watts says, “God cannot be held in theologies; theism, deism, pantheism — none of them can grasp his truth.”⁹² So Watts attempted to dispel our obsessions with figuring out the nature of God, for he did not believe our categorizations helped us to understand and experience God. As Watts says in *Beyond Theology*:

Our various intellectual and emotional idols, our doctrines, holy books, sacraments, religious feelings, creeds and churches, are of use so long as they are understood as approximating and pointing to God. But when we try to possess him within them, they must sooner or later become millstones around our necks.⁹³

Thus, our perceptions of what we believe God to be, according to Watts, further hinder us from spiritual progress. And, while this may seem like an anti-intellectual point of view, Watts upheld that quietism, or “trying to realize God by doing nothing”⁹⁴ was the proper method of approaching God and spirituality in general. In a manner of speaking, this is like saying, “If you remain quiet God will come to you; but if you actively try to find God through nomenclature and categories, you will not be able to do so.”⁹⁵

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Watts, *Behold The Spirit*, 92.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 93.

⁹⁵ It should again be noted, however, that Watts was well known as a heavy drinker and also had multiple affairs. His quietistic notions are partially what allowed him to do these things without feelings of remorse. As a result, many academic and religious communities did not deem Watts a proper spiritual teacher. But, then again, Watts never claimed to be one, he simply spoke his mind about theological and philosophical issues under the guise of a “philosophical entertainer.” Nevertheless, Watts had a profound impact on the psyche of the 1960’s regardless of his habits.

Now, Watts's explanation of cataphatic versus apophatic traditions throughout his works was never accompanied by scriptural exegesis, it was simply based off of standard theological discussions. Within the New Testament gospels the cataphatic tradition is used by Jesus when he references God as "God the Father." And, while this cataphatic naming is still found within the Gospel of Thomas, saying 13 depicts Jesus promoting apophatic reasoning instead of its counterpart:

Jesus said to his disciples, "Compare me to someone and tell me whom I am like." Simon Peter said to him, "You are like a righteous angel." Matthew said to him, "You are like a wise philosopher." Thomas said to him. "Master, my mouth is wholly incapable of saying whom you are like." Jesus said, "I am not your (sg.) master. Because you (sg.) (Thomas) have drunk, you (sg.) have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring which I have measured out." And he (Jesus) took him (Thomas) and withdrew and told him three things. When Thomas returned to his companions, they asked him, "What did Jesus say to you?" Thomas said to them, "If I tell you one of the things which he told me, you will pick up stones and throw them at me; a fire will come out of the stones and burn you up."

Now, this saying reveals that Jesus, represented in this verse as God, or God's divinely placed agent of communication, cannot be categorized. This is evidenced by the two seemingly wrong categorizations stated by Matthew and Peter, as both Matthew and Peter attempt to describe Jesus using categorically symbolic language, "a righteous angel," and a "wise philosopher." But, when we look at Thomas, who refuses to give Jesus a description, we see that

Jesus's aim was to reveal that he could not be given a likeness. By being “wholly incapable of saying [what God is] like” Thomas was told by Jesus that he held the proper understanding of God — the apophatic tradition. Because Thomas could not, and arguably would not, state what Jesus was like, Jesus reveals that Thomas had fully understood the teachings that Jesus was trying to convey — teachings that seem to reveal less of an understanding of what God is, and more of an acceptance that one cannot fully comprehend God; therefore, categorizations and nomenclatures of God are deemed, within this verse, as being erroneous methods of spiritual thought. So here within saying 13, Jesus affirms Watts's notions of “atheism in the name of God.” This saying would have greatly aided Watts's notions about the importance of the apophatic tradition.

Watts, even if he had access to the Gospel of Thomas during his life, could not have used this saying within a Christian theological conversation because Gnostic sources were not deemed to speak within the Christian tradition. But, had Watts known about this verse, he could have used the alleged words of Jesus to strengthen his argument that God should not be categorized regardless of the religious community's opinions. The scriptural exegesis would have given Watts's argument an historical and religious foundation beyond simply using theological reasoning. Thus, Watts could have used this verse from the Gospel of Thomas to further his notions about God and Christianity.

Having explained the apophatic tradition and its importance to Watts, his most iconoclastic claim must now be tackled — that the message of the gospel was meant to convey the divine within us. Now, this thesis has already partially discussed saying three of the Gospel

of Thomas in relation to its revelation that the “kingdom” lies within and outside of ourselves;⁹⁶ thus it exists as a continuous constant singularity despite the fact that many people view the kingdom as existing separately from the physical universe. So then, if the kingdom exists within every one of us, then we must again seek to answer the question of “Who am I?”

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus takes on a somewhat self-centered tone absent from the other canonical gospels. As stated before, only within the Gospel of John does Jesus use the many “I am” phrases. And, throughout the past two thousand years of Christianity it has been widely established that when Jesus says, “I am” he is referring to himself, both in a physical and spiritual sense; for it was the physical action of crucifixion which Christians believe to have exonerated the sins of mankind, but faith in Jesus as a spiritual everlasting omniscient figure who is one with God is what allows a person to achieve heaven (much in the same way that followers of Jodo Shinshu Buddhism believe that faith in the transcendental Buddha, Amithaba, allows a person to achieve enlightenment). Therefore, the Christian perception of Jesus as the *only* son of God, that is, God in human form, and as the only path to salvation, is predominately derived from the Gospel of John because it is only within this gospel that Jesus claims to be God⁹⁷ — “I and the Father are one,” “He who has seen Me has seen the Father,” “I am the way; I am the truth; I am the light; I am the vine; I am the water of life.” As a result of the Gospel of John, the “formulations [of Jesus's sole divinity] have virtually defined orthodox Christianity for nearly two thousand years.”⁹⁸

⁹⁶ See page 53.

⁹⁷ Pagels, *Beyond belief*, 67.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

On the other hand, Jesus also claims divine origin within the Gospel of Thomas, but it is not in an effort to appear as the only divine human; instead he uses somewhat similar “I am” sayings as a means to communicate that the “I am” which Jesus is, is also the same “I am” as you and I. Now, despite the fact that the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas uses some “I am” sayings similar to the Gospel of John, these sayings do not insinuate that Jesus is the only divine being; instead, they resemble pantheistic notions:

Jesus said, “It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the all.

From me did all come forth, and unto me did all extend. Split a piece of wood and

I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.”⁹⁹

This verse reveals that Jesus does not identify his body with himself; that is, all things encompass what he views as *himself*. And, much like pantheistic expressions, in which it is believed nothing is separate from God, we see Jesus taking this stance within saying 77. To “find” Jesus one need not look far, for even turning over the stone along your favorite walking path can you find him there. This is a strikingly different revelation than what is professed within the Gospel of John. But how does this pantheistic view relate to the divine within? Well, it could be argued that if Jesus, existing as a transcendental being, is in places which many might deem God does not exist, then the location of God is not hindered by time and space, but instead, encompasses all things, ourselves included.

In an effort to convey a more pantheistic Jesus, Watts uses the following verses from John 10: 31-39:

⁹⁹ Gospel of Thomas, saying 77.

“Isn’t it written in your law that ‘I have said: you are gods’? If he called those [people] gods to whom the word of God came (and the scripture cannot be broken), how can you say to him whom the Father has made holy and sent into the world, ‘You blaspheme!’ because I said, ‘I am a son of God’?”

Here, Watts argues that Jesus is claiming the divinity which he holds is the same divinity found in each one of us. Therefore, just as Jesus could say, “I and the Father are one,” so too can you claim such an iconoclastic notion. But, this verse stretches the textuality of this verse and of Psalm 82 (the verse quoted by Jesus). Because Psalm 82 reads, “I said, ‘You are gods, and all of you are sons of the most high. Nevertheless you will die like men and fall like any one of the princes[...].’” we see a different form of understanding than what Watts wishes to take from this verse. Although we are all “sons of the most high,” it can be argued that this “son of,” because it is not capitalized like “Son of God” is within the New Testament, is not referencing divinity in the sense of understanding oneself as existing with unity with God. Thus, many contemporary Christians and theologians likely would not agree with Watts's interpretation of John 10:31-39.¹⁰⁰ However, had Watts had the Gospel of Thomas, the claim that we hold the same divinity of Jesus would have been easy to make.

Although Saying 77 might have allowed Watts to further his thesis, there is one other verse from the Gospel of Thomas that solidifies Watts's notion — saying 108:

¹⁰⁰ It should also be noted, however, that capitalizations of phrases such as, “Son of God” or “Son of man” are strictly modern interpolations of these ancient texts. The original Greek and Hebrew had no form of capitalized phrasing. Therefore, the capitalization of these phrases reflects the beliefs of the translators more so than those of the original texts.

Jesus said, “He who will drink from my mouth will become like me. I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him.”

Here exists the most blatant of verses in which Jesus claims the divinity which he holds can be attained by any human simply by fully understanding his esoteric theology: “[Jesus] said, ‘Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.’”¹⁰¹ So then, if Jesus exists as a being from which there is no separation from, as revealed in saying 77, and, as saying 108 depicts that once we understand the true teachings of Jesus we shall “become like [him],” Watts's argument that the message of the gospel is the revelation of unity with God begins to hold much more scriptural backing than the evidence he originally proposed.

¹⁰¹ Gospel of Thomas, Saying 1.

Discussion

The gospel as presented by Watts is quite different from the gospel of various denominations of traditional Christianity. To say that we all have the same level of divinity as Jesus, and that we can attain the same level of consciousness as Jesus, goes against the Christian idea that Jesus is the only medium between man and God. For instance, one of the defining verses used by Christians to assert that Jesus is the only divine medium for humankind to know and interact with God is John 14:6 — “Jesus answered, ‘I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” But what this thesis does, in a somewhat roundabout manner, is seek to question this “I am” phrasing used all too often by Jesus in the Gospel of John.¹⁰² If we refer back to Part II of this thesis, the question, “Who am I?” is the main concern. And so, when Jesus uses the phrase, “I am...” we might now begin to question to whom is Jesus referring? Is Jesus talking about himself in the sense of his consciousness and physical body? Is Jesus talking about his spirit which is the same spirit as God but different from our own? Or, when Jesus says “I am,” does he mean *himself* in the greatest sense of pantheism — that is, is Jesus referring to himself as the essential spirit which resides in all beings? Each of these questions, when answered “yes,” has different meanings and allows for a different interpretation of the gospel.

¹⁰² Again, we must bear in mind that these “I am” sayings are not found within the synoptic Gospels; therefore to say that Jesus is the only medium between man and God is simply an assertion derived from the belief that the Gospel of John holds the true Jesus. But, as Elaine Pagels points out, the Christian concept of Jesus as the mediator between God and man comes only from the Gospel of John, not from the synoptic gospels.

According to Watts, when Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me[,]” this “I am,” this “me,” is the divine within us;¹⁰³ it is the all purveying essence of God from which there is no separation. So then, if we take Watts’s perspective, and add saying 77 from the Gospel of Thomas — “It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the all. From me did the all come forth, and unto me did the all extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there,” — Watts’s pantheistic notion becomes increasingly more plausible. It is possible that Jesus did not view himself as the sole medium between God and man, but simply recognized that his divine spiritual essence resides within all things. Using this pantheistic framework gathered from Watts and strengthened with the Gospel of Thomas, we are now able to look at the synoptic Gospels, and more importantly the Gospel of John, not as Jesus referring to himself in the sense that he is separate from each of us, but instead, that Jesus may be referring to the God he recognized within his own spirit and the spirit of those around him. This notion is simply an added addition to Watts’s use of John 10:31-36. For if Jesus can say that “[we] too are gods” then he must have recognized that his experience of elevated consciousness is not unique unto himself but is attainable by anyone who recognizes God within himself and within everything around him.

Elaine Pagels, within her book *Beyond Belief*, stresses that had the Gospel of Thomas been included in the Gospel of John’s stead, then the theological ideals within the synoptic gospels would have likely been interpreted differently. Pagels recognizes that the Gospel of Thomas is centered around internal contemplation and meditation, meaning the verses within Thomas are likely meant to be read and thought about independently. This type of thinking is comparable to the Japanese Zen term, Koan, which is a paradoxical anecdote that is meant to be

¹⁰³ Watts, “Jesus and His Religion,” [audio file].

contemplated and meditated upon in order to bring about enlightenment. A common example of a Koan is, “what is the sound of one hand.” Now, I do not believe that the Gospel of Thomas is a series of Koans, as more often than not Koans are meant to have no correct interpretation because they are simply meditation exercises. But, in the same manner, I believe that the verses within Thomas are meant to be meditated upon by an individual who seeks a higher level of consciousness and understanding. Therefore, the sayings in Thomas function somewhat like Koans, as “Thomas’s gospel offers only cryptic clues — not answers — to those who seek the way to God.”¹⁰⁴ And so, if Thomas is meant to be individualized, and promotes the divine spiritual power which resides within the individual, then, as Elaine Pagels eludes to, if Thomas were included in the Gospel of John’s place, the Christian gospel would have been centered around the spirituality of the individual rather than viewing Jesus as the only divine being. In this manner, the Gospel of Thomas, as I have laid out, is a defining point of inclusion to the literature of Alan Watts, and simultaneously, a lens which allows a new perspective on Jesus — a perspective which, although potentially thousands of years old, may once again find a place in society and theology.

Further Discussion: This thesis has connected the works of Alan Watts to the Gospel of Thomas in an analysis of apophatic and cataphatic theology, as well as analyzing Jesus from Watts’s perspective of pantheism; however, I do believe there are more concepts within the Gospel of Thomas which further other philosophical and theological notions of Watts. One such example is Watts’s unique view of Jesus’s many allusions to childlike faith. In part of a lecture titled, *A Funny Feeling Part I*, Watts illuminates child-likeness in a very apophatic manner: simply put, to become again as a child one must “check your ideas and opinions at the door. All

¹⁰⁴ Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 53.

your philosophical and religious views, all of your logic...” leave them in the doorway. Here, “at the door,” is simply a device of comfort used by Watts, for if you find the release of ideas and logic to go against intellectual thought, you can simply pick them back up on your way out.¹⁰⁵ We are not born into this world with ideologies, religions, political views, racism, etc.; we enter this realm only as *being* and nothing more. Thus, to reenter this state of childlike being we must resort back to a state of ideologically free existence. As Watts says, “View what is as if you did not know how to even talk. Red is not red. Blue is not blue. Hard is not hard. Soft is not soft. Male is not male. Female is not female. There is just this jazz.”¹⁰⁶ In the same manner, our notions of God fall under this category. It is certainly fine to accept the existence of God, as “God is the most obvious thing in the world. He is absolutely self-evident — the simplest, clearest and closest reality of life and consciousness...”,¹⁰⁷ but to attempt to categorize God into nomenclature and religious categorizations is to complicate that which simply *is*.

So here, Watts again stresses the importance of apophatic theology through Jesus’s metaphor of childlike faith. But I believe the Gospel of Thomas can also further this notion because there are many verses in Thomas in which Jesus discusses the importance of childlike presence. The first of which is saying 18:

The disciples said to Jesus. “Tell us how our end will be.” Jesus said, “Have you discovered, then, the beginning, that you look for the end? For where the

¹⁰⁵ Watts, “That funny feeling part 1” [Audio File], minute 5:50.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 6:40.

¹⁰⁷ Watts, *Behold the Spirit*, 91.

beginning is, there will the end be. Blessed is he who will take his place in the beginning; he will know the end and will not experience death.”

This verse I believe furthers Watts’s idea of apophatic theology. So, to understand the kingdom, or to enter into it, we must revert our experiential existence back to the beginning; back to when we were children joyously playing without ideological notions of the universe; back to when we were simply *existing* within the presence of the *now* and enjoying the adventure which we found in every new day and every new moment.

I also believe saying 37 drives home Watts larger apophatic point through visual imagery of children trampling upon their clothes, resembling the likeness of ridding oneself of ideologies.

His disciples said, “When will you become revealed to us and when shall we see you?” Jesus said, “When you disrobe without being ashamed and take up your garments and place them under your feet like little children and tread on them, then [will you see] the son of the living one, and you will not be afraid.”

Here we see more scriptural backing to strengthen Watts’ claim that to become again as a child means to “check your ideas and opinions at the door.” I believe the “garments” could be physical representations of our ideologies and opinions. Thus, to take them off and trample upon them *like little children* is to become again as a child, releasing yourself from all of the categorizations of God so that you can exist again within the state of awe and playfulness. Then you can trample upon categorizations and beliefs with the recognition that they are not necessary to truly see and experience God. Only once our conceptual ideologies are purged from our minds, can we view the singularity of all things hidden underneath the *maya* of multiplicity.

This example of childlike faith is simply one area of further discussion which I believe Thomas and Watts could connect. Other areas of discussion could connect the many sayings of Jesus within the Gospel of Thomas in which Jesus speaks of the pharisees as individuals who are hiding the keys to heaven. That is, Jesus is proclaiming the pharisees to actually hinder spiritual progress for the masses.

Saying 102: Jesus said, "Woe to the Pharisees, for they are like a dog sleeping in the manger of oxen, for neither does he eat nor does he let the oxen eat."

Saying 39: Jesus said, "The Pharisees and the scribes have taken the keys of Knowledge and hidden them. They themselves have not entered, nor have they allowed to enter those who wish to. You, however, be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves."

In my opinion, verses such as these are further connectors to Watts's ideas that spirituality is meant to be addressed through individual contemplative means. This is in contrast to following a fixed religion which has created a single set of beliefs which are professed to be the only way of attaining spiritual progress. As Watts says, "Anybody who tells you that he has some way of leading you to spiritual enlightenment is like somebody who picks your pocket and sells you your own watch."¹⁰⁸ Therefore, the verses within the Gospel of Thomas which discuss the spiritual hinderance of the pharisees are another example of how Watts's philosophies and theologies are further strengthened through the inclusion of the Gospel of Thomas. Such

¹⁰⁸ Alan Watts, "That funny feeling part 1" [Audio File].

examples, as I have just laid out, are means of further discussion which I believe solidify Watts's ideals and could provide further textual backing to his many postulations.

The idea that Jesus's experience of elevated consciousness can be experienced by anyone is not a new concept; however it is most notably known in Eastern religions rather than Western religions. Siddhartha Gautama, more commonly known as the Buddha, was arguably the first documented individual to experience enlightenment, or a state of elevated consciousness/existence. This state of enlightenment came about through Siddhartha's own individualized pursuit to rid himself of earthly suffering. After 40 days of unceasing meditation under a Bo tree, Siddhartha elevated his consciousness and became the first enlightened being — the first Buddha. The title of Buddha is not a single title only given to Siddhartha, he was simply the first to receive such nomenclature. There have been thousands of Buddhas since and there still currently are many Buddhas in existence today. Buddha-hood is achieved through intense meditation and spiritual pursuits which eventually lead to the expansion of consciousness called enlightenment; as a result, any person with enough perseverance and meditation can become a Buddha.

What Watts proposes is that Jesus's experience of consciousness functions in this same manner. No longer should Jesus be viewed as the only person to attain a state of elevated consciousness and existence; instead, as Watts claims, the consciousness Jesus attained can be achieved by any person who seeks the proper spiritual path of individual contemplation, rather than simply following the beliefs of a particular religion. And so, through the inclusion of the Gospel of Thomas to Watts's position, I have outlined the basic textual evidence which may in

fact show that Watts's thesis has textual backing beyond the evidence he was able to present within his lifetime.

My ultimate goal for this thesis was to convey the complexity of religion by shaking up the common conceptions of Jesus. This thesis is not meant to be an attack on Christianity or any religion for that matter. But it is meant to promote a new paradigm of looking at Jesus, religion in general, and the physical universe. For once you begin to understand yourself and everything around you as a manifestation of God, the entire universe becomes a much more funny place to be. It is all too common to feel lonely and isolated in a world full of people. But once you begin recognizing every person and thing you come in contact with as an extension of you, then the paradigm of unity becomes less theoretical and entirely experiential. If you simply consider for a short time that everything including yourself is a manifestation of God, then perhaps you will interact with others differently. With this paradigm, instead of looking at the stars and feeling small and tiny under the vast blackness of space, you can instead stare up at the stars and proclaim with utter giddiness and joyousness, "That's ME!" Everywhere you begin to look you will find Yourself there. Split a piece of wood and there You are. Overturn a stone, and there You are. Look into the eyes of any being, and there You are. This is the experience of cosmic consciousness, and this may very well be the same experience which Jesus encountered and preached about.

And so, to limit oneself to a single theological belief is to miss the point that the universe is much weirder than any one person or religion may be able to convey. Perhaps the answer to our spiritual questions and problems are not found within one teaching or idea, but are discovered when a person realizes that the true path of spirituality is defined by their own

intuition. Religion, as I stated in my introduction, is not as clear cut as preachers and gurus may lead you to believe. And so the purpose of this thesis is to help shake up your religious comfort zone, to get you to think about things differently. Philosophers, preachers, gurus, and scholars alike may help lead you down certain paths of spiritual revelation; but my hope from this thesis is that you consider other people's opinions but never forget that ultimately what you believe is up to you and your own analysis. I believe spirituality is best suited to be discovered on one's own through contemplative and meditative means. So then, in order to truly realize, *thou art that*, you must let go of your beliefs and ideas and bring forth your own inner drive to attain a spiritual state of being which surpasses all which you may have thought was possible.

Jesus said, "He who will drink from my mouth will become like me. I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him."

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