

**You're A Bodhisattva All the Time:  
An Exploration of Buddho-Catholic Syncretism in the Works of Jack Kerouac**

A Senior Honors Thesis

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### **Introduction: You Don't Know Jack**

Because of his ability to define the intellectual and ideological growth of postwar America, Jack Kerouac is one of the most important and influential writers in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. His prose has been published worldwide and read by so many that the mere mention of his name conjures up images of quintessential American bohemianism: spontaneous travels across the West, contemplating jazz and poetry, hiking through the wilderness with friends and without them, ascetic poverty, intellectual exchange, copious amounts of drug use, and indiscriminate sex. His associations with an ideal, literature-based conception of America made Kerouac a symbolic representation of resistance to white-washed conformity and spiritually bankrupt corporatism. Based on his writing, many envision Kerouac as the forerunner of a movement of 'rucksack revolution,' a shedding of the conservative views of contemporary American society for something less materialistic and more focused on the spiritual self.<sup>1</sup> However, taking into account Kerouac's practiced political beliefs shows that there is a tension between the beliefs that appear in his writing and those of his personal life. How could a self-identified "Catholic Conservative" that denied the political motivations of his own writing be the locus for such extreme change, and direct opposition to the status quo?<sup>2</sup>

One of the major recursive themes of Kerouac's writing is the schism and balance between Catholicism – the religion in which he was raised – and Buddhism – the religion he adopted later in life. Some Kerouac scholars believe that his adoption of Buddhism was merely tangential in the progression of his religious belief, and that his reversion to Catholicism toward

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase "focused on the self" suggests understanding the self as an isolatable unit from the greater social apparatus, but also in terms of its relationship to that system. This idea is distinct from 'selfishness,' (which leads to materialism, a defining property of postwar America) but such considerations will arise later, in *Chapter 3*.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter to Bill Mitchell dated February 15, 1961, Kerouac wrote: "Original members" of Beat Gen. means it started out in 1948 as a group of poets, beardless, with no political beefs, no idea of "non-conformity," just poets... "Beatniks" are Henry Wallacenijs jumped on the movement for left-wing reasons. I am a Catholic Conservative" Ann Charters, ed. *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters 1957-1969* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 324.

the end of his life showed that he was an average Catholic stricken with guilt.<sup>3</sup> However, a careful reading demonstrates that Kerouac was practicing syncretism, combining aspects of Catholicism and Buddhism into a new highly individualized sect (referred to hereafter as Buddho-Catholicism), to meet his specific philosophical, spiritual, and political needs. This essay argues that the religious themes, imagery, and content that appear in Kerouac's novels are a manifestation of a nascent new religion that is intertwined with statements of political ideology. Because of Kerouac's dissatisfaction with the contemporary political values of America, his use of syncretism is fundamentally a tool for cultural criticism. Through his constant experimentation with Buddhist and Catholic imagery in his written life-narrative, Kerouac exposes the schizoaffective state of the individual attempting to conform to the idealized, unrealistic social beliefs espoused by 1950s society.

### **What is Syncretism?**

As humans, we naturally construct meaningful borders – such as religious, national, or cultural traditions – around ourselves as a means of defining who we are, where we come from, and what we stand for. However, in order to prevent the stagnation or expiration of a culture, we also open these borders by blending different ideas from disparate sources into a constantly evolving well-defined whole. It is essential that the perimeters both exist and remain open. The exchange of ideas is essential for facilitating a dialogue between the individual and the overarching social schema, but concrete boundaries prevent the individual from blurring together into the collective consciousness of society. This process of sociocultural self-discovery and exchange is called syncretism. It is the conflation of two distinct belief systems with seemingly opposed aspects that serves as a heuristic example of human experimentation, the fluid interactions between diametrically opposed sources.

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<sup>3</sup> See Emily Patricia Simpson's "*Religious Turmoil: The Conflict Between Buddhism and Catholicism in Jack Kerouac's Life and Writing*" (North Carolina State University: 2003).

Syncretic forces tend to be creative and transformative; that is, embellishing currently existing thought patterns and simply inventing new ones as a means of explaining the world around us. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the speed at which media and communications moved afforded average people the means and the ability to do existential or spiritual research. Individuals had the capacity to blend different ideas, creating their own unique brand of belief system. Translations of formerly esoteric texts allowed the layman access to mystical knowledge that was formerly off-limits and – by comparing and contrasting with careful consideration – had the potential to show the inherent similarities in most (if not all) existing dogmatic systems.

However, this notion of denominations borrowing from or spawning out of one another is a very old idea, and predates written history. Sometimes – as seen when native cultures are forced to embrace Christianity by colonizers – syncretism occurs as a form of superimposition, where the original customs and practices are assimilated into the belief system of the state apparatus. Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart believe that “conundrums of agency and intentionality make syncretism very slippery, but it is precisely its capacity to contain paradox, contradiction and polyphony which makes syncretism such a powerful symbolic process in [context].”<sup>4</sup> Another way of reading syncretism is through the intersection between myths across cultures. Even across dissimilar societies, people have somewhat related ideas about how their realities are structured, so it is easy for one set of beliefs to be mapped onto another, as a philosophical or metaphorical extension.

Fundamentally, syncretism functions as a means of attempting to balance and blend together formerly discrete traditions, asserting a rhizomatic unity between differing schools of thought as they are reshaped and reprocessed in their perpetuation through time. Syncretism

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw. Introduction to *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, edited by Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (New York: Routledge, 1994), 21.

tends to be a sociopolitical reaction to encroaching change, and tends to be based on power dynamics but – in every context – it is important to ask to what linking the essentially different ideas will fulfill.

**Political Art: Behind Every ‘is,’ There’s an ‘-ism’<sup>5</sup>**

In modern society, the individual is called to conform to an ideological state that is deeply embedded in the framework of the governing body (i.e. the State). The State produces rules that an individual must follow in order to be a functioning member within that society. The people in control of the State protect this framework and work within it to maintain the reality of society, which we experience in every facet of our day-to-day lives. Conforming to social mores creates the specter of freedom; that is, the individual appears free to perform certain actions, but in reality does not have the ability to do so.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately there is a specific set of circumstances under which one is allowed to reject conforming to the State-sponsored ideology: namely, artistic production.

Through art, individuals externalize their fears and anxieties that come with conforming to social norms, in an attempt to mediate problems. Artistic production serves as a dialogue with the self, under which one can understand the relationship between self and society. Art gains a political, reactionary element that manifests itself when social patterns shift. Bearers of narrative and producers of cultural texts (that is, storytellers, musicians, artists, poets, novelists, and anyone who creates something that is a relic of a specific time period) are left to re-imagine some semblance of social reality when social patterns shift. They are in a never-ending process of reacting to the thought patterns and beliefs of the periods in which they were creating, developing some sort of schema that the individual can use as a tool for self-actualization.

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<sup>5</sup> James Kinkaid, text message to author, April 28, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> An excellent parallel here lies in the materialism of the 1950s; an individual did not have the freedom to associate with whomever they wanted (socialism begat communism begat anti-Americanism), but they were able to express themselves by buying whatever they wanted.

The Duluoz Legend – Kerouac’s literature/life project – functions as an attempt to encode his life experience in such a way that his audience can arrive at some greater philosophic understanding.<sup>7</sup> This realization-based project manifests itself not only through Kerouac’s religious beliefs, but also on the literary level, through his choice of imagery and content. Overall, the goal of this paper will be a study of the precarious mediation between Kerouac’s religious, political, and philosophical beliefs, and how each notion arises in three of his works: *Visions of Gerard*, *The Dharma Bums*, and *Some of the Dharma*. *Some of the Dharma* is Kerouac’s personal journal of Buddhist study, detailing his understanding of Buddhism and adherence to the main tenets of the religion, as well as inflections of syncretic manipulations of Catholicism and philosophical theorizing of its place in his spiritual life. *The Dharma Bums* serves as a documentation of Kerouac’s time with Gary Snyder, and real-world experimentation with the beliefs espoused by *Some of the Dharma*. *Visions of Gerard* is Kerouac’s homage to the short life of his older brother. While describing Gerard’s brief life as beatific and saintly, the novel also contains some unique Buddhist imagery, which works as a direct contrast to the overdetermined capitalist existence that Americans experienced during the period in which Kerouac was writing.

Throughout this essay, Jack Kerouac will be considered as not only an author, but also as a social critic who comments directly on American society through his writing. Looking at the works in their historical context will make it possible to appreciate their artistic and political

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<sup>7</sup> The Duluoz Legend is defined by Kerouac as the conceptual continuity (in terms of narrative, content, characters, etc.) that links each of his novels. Jack sought to blur the lines between the prose he wrote and his real life as much as he possibly could. Such actions raise questions of how autobiographical the actual content of his writing was. Because of my close study of his material, it is my understanding that Kerouac’s writing is an attempt at providing context for the processes of spiritual revelation that he went through. As Jack notes at the beginning of *Big Sur*, “My work comprises one vast book like Proust’s except that my remembrances are written on the run instead of afterwards... [all my books] are chapters in the whole work which I call *The Duluoz Legend*... The whole thing forms an enormous comedy... the world of raging action and folly and also of gentle sweetness seen through the keyhole of his eye.” Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (New York: Penguin, 2008), ii.



merit, as well as the connections that arise within each text. Chapter 1 will be a discussion of Kerouac's biography and religious beliefs, noting specific people or works that were influential to his spiritual development. Chapter 2 will be a characterization of McCarthy-era 1950's, laying out the social mores of the time period and (in terms of Chapter 1) the way that they lay in opposition to Kerouac's philosophical beliefs. Chapters 3-5 will be a discussion of *Some of the Dharma*, *The Dharma Bums*, and *Visions of Gerard*, in terms of Kerouac's belief system. The final chapter considers what political conservatism meant to Kerouac, ending with a brief conclusion.

## Chapter 1: A Spiritual Biography

### Catholicism

Jack was born Jean Louis Kerouac on March 12, 1922, in Lowell, Massachusetts.<sup>8</sup> His parents were two French-Canadian immigrants, Leo Kerouac and Gabrielle Levesque, who lived in one of the richest French sections of Lowell. He had two older siblings, Gerard and Caroline. The heads of the Kerouac family each invested faith in different institutions. Religion was very important to Gabrielle (known as Mémère), who could be seen going to church not only on "all required days, but would go to pray or light candles every day of the week."<sup>9</sup> Leo, on the other hand, believed in the power of fiscal salvation; he was a printer and publisher who saw religion as a scheme for taking money from foolish people. Each parent instilled something vital to Jack's later outlook on the world. For Jack, religion and spirituality are an adequate means of discovering oneself, but one should pursue the American dream, accrue material wealth and become successful. Financial success would ebb and flow throughout Jack's childhood, peaking around the death of Gerard and dwindling as Leo became a depressed alcoholic whose businesses were torn apart by the Great Depression and gambling debts.

Jack simultaneously idolized and resented his older brother Gerard, which may have been a contributing factor in his profound Catholic guilt in later life.<sup>10</sup> In the version of Catholicism that the Kerouacs practiced, there was a tradition of child saints – children that were expressions of the Lord's piety and grace, martyred by an untimely death. They were seen as being absolved of the weight of the world, angelic, and wise beyond their years. Whereas Kerouac was a hyperactive child, Gerard was mild and relaxed. He was a favorite student of the nuns at the school that both he and Jack attended.

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<sup>8</sup> Ann Charters. *Kerouac: A Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), xxi.

<sup>9</sup> Gerald Nicosia. *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 24.

<sup>10</sup> Kerouac's feelings for Gerard show an ever-present duality in Catholicism: sinfulness and longing for salvation.

Towards the end of his life, Gerard was relegated to bed because of his sickness, and - from it - taught Jack the ways of the world; as Gerald Nicosia notes, "Gerard grew increasingly tranquil. He would feed hungry neighbor children and explain the importance of kindness to four-year-old Jackie as if Jackie were his mental equal. In the eyes of both his mother and the nuns who taught him, Gerard was progressing into martyred sainthood."<sup>11</sup> Because Gerard was championed as a martyr by the French Catholic community in Lowell, it is evident that Jack was surrounded by Catholic mysticism from an early age, and – since it was such a profound part of his upbringing - understood the world in a different way because of it.<sup>12</sup> For example, upon hearing of Gerard's death, Jack ecstatically ran to Leo with the news. Jack was so steeped in teachings that suggested the corporeal body represents a sinful burden, that he thought his brother's death to be a well-deserved release from the pain of the terrestrial world. Leo scolded him mildly, in an attempt to make apparent the fact that young Jack lost his brother, which "may well have been the beginning of Jack's guilt over Gerard's death."<sup>13</sup>

After Gerard's death, Leo's lack of religious fervor made Jack seek a father figure in the Catholic dogma. He desired a paternal God that would care for him and his family, making sure that his saintly brother would dwell in heaven. Jack began attending church in earnest and had his first confession in 1938. His faith gave him something tangible to believe in; he understood there was a link between the rituals he performed in church and eventually achieving the salvation that he desired. Eventually, Jack became the surrogate religious icon of the Kerouac family, experiencing beatific visions of Mary and other saintly figures brought on by his newfound Holy Father. Also, around this time, he began to grow creatively, making his own

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>12</sup> With the loss of his brother, Kerouac began to realize what he would later declare to be the most important of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism: that all life is suffering.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 27.

scripts for movies, writing and illustrating novels.

Like taking control of his religious faith, learning English was a major cornerstone of Kerouac's life. Until six, he spoke a dialect of Quebecois called Joul. Learning English allowed him to expand his vocabulary, and was able to read widely from texts he would not have been exposed to in French.<sup>14</sup> As Nicosia<sup>15</sup> suggests in his critique of *Visions of Gerard*,

Kerouac came by double vision early. It is but one step from learning that your language is not the only language to grasping that language itself is but one means of understanding, that beyond the rational there is an irrational, and beyond the material a spiritual. This learning was reinforced by a strongly mystical Catholic education, itself immeasurably aided by Kerouac's kinship with a child saint, whose presence grew increasingly vital after his death.

Though he had trouble in his first experiences with writing in English, he kept at it, reading both the classics and comic books, not discriminating between D.H. Lawrence, Plato, or *The Shadow*. The young Jack was struck by the process of writing as a tool for understanding the self, for psychological development and cultural criticism. As he grew older, he also excelled at devoting himself to physical tasks until he mastered them, including baseball, football, and track. In high school, he became the talk of the town as a sportsman and a scholar, but retreated inwards when his family issues (Leo's drunkenness and bankruptcy, his sister's marriage) became too much for him to deal with. A schism began to develop between him and the rest of the town; Jack was unable even to confide in his friends anymore. As Nicosia<sup>16</sup> suggests,

It wasn't the fact of his being stronger and faster than others that was separating him from community, friends, and even his own parents, it was his sense of loyalty to what was unique in himself. In the close-knit world of Lowell, writing your own rules - which was the equivalent to considering yourself better than others - was a much worse sin than ordinary drinking and whoring. Perhaps people sensed that he was not going to remain small-town, that he was too honest and thoughtful to live by manners and moralities he

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<sup>14</sup> Acquiring another language may have been the first instance of syncretism in Kerouac's life; he was able to – in a way he had never been able to do before – combine the French patois with which he was raised with English, creating new associations and patterns of thought that would carry throughout his literary life.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 502.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

had not tested firsthand.

There was a need within Jack to test the rules of the society in which he found himself, rather than having rules handed down to him on high. Just as a teenager rebels against their parents, so was Kerouac rebelling against the social beliefs that constrained him from developing into the person he thought he would become, as he began experimenting sexually, questioning his religious faith, and writing in earnest. His success with football would prove to be his ticket out of Lowell. Jack signed with Columbia University and spent a year at Horace Mann preparatory college. He would soon find that – in Lowell – he was a big fish in a small pond; he would spend his first football season on the bench. One day, at practice, he fractured his leg, and quit the team the next season. While waiting for his bones to heal, he met some of the people that would change his life – in a literary and a spiritual sense – forever.

Jack befriended William Burroughs, Lucien Carr, Allen Ginsberg, and Herbert Huncke when he moved to Manhattan. Each of the men possessed an intellectual drive that Jack had never experienced before. They were faithful friends, suggested reading material to him, and were generally inspirational:

They were all leading thoroughly intellectual lives, and every day were stimulated by the discovery of some new truth. The period of discovering the power in books is usually full of hope – especially for young people – but there was a certain negative bias in the books Jack and his friends were reading. The works that excited them were almost all critical of conventional ethics.<sup>17</sup>

Jack began reading an eclectic selection of books “contain[ing] imaginative schema for ordering civilization”<sup>18</sup> including the psychological, philosophical, poetic and dramatic; Rimbaud, Kafka, Dostoevsky, Freud, Nietzsche, and many others. He also analyzed nonliterary texts as a means of creating links between the ideas he saw in literature, and the content of music, film, and the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 134.

culture at large.

Jack was constantly seeking out new experiences as a means of understanding his life, and began to synthesize his ideas by writing long-form fiction (his first published attempt was the novel, *The Town and the City*). He and Ginsberg were particularly struck by Rimbaud's profound visionary realizations, but were taken aback by declarations that life was meaningless, preferring to see look at the universe as an enormous organism or functional machine:

Allen and Jack resolved to attain "Supreme Reality."... To go on living, it was essential to believe that one could – as Jack would later put it – "see God's face." Such was the ultimate goal of their "New Vision."... That "panoramic awareness" of themselves in space became a philosophical and artistic touchstone for both Jack and Allen... That revelation put the first serious crack in their provincial consciousness; they were no longer just Americans, with a particular tradition to live up to, but ghosts in the living room of space, forced to admit the superfluousness of all human culture and of their own existence too.<sup>19</sup>

Both the authors that Kerouac read and his friends would later influence his borrowing of religious beliefs from disparate sources. At this point in his life, Kerouac's spirituality began to be shaped externally by thinkers that emphasized the interconnectedness between all things, historical recursivity, and the importance of individual introspection and realization as a means of reaching higher understanding. During this period, he also met Neal Cassady, whose writing style and outlook on life would go on to influence Kerouac profoundly. Kerouac saw Neal as a spiritual brother; both were Catholics tortured by their faith, seeking a new lens with which to look at the world. It was through Neal that Jack discovered Buddhism.

### **Buddhism**

At this point, Kerouac was almost constantly traveling across the United States, visiting friends, getting 'kicks,' and frenetically documenting as much as he could. When he needed money, he would work as an itinerant railroad man. Sometime toward the end 1953 or in early 1954, when Jack was out west visiting Neal and Carolyn Cassady, he discovered Dwight

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 157-158.

Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible* at the San Jose library. Both the year and the book marked Kerouac's descent into his Buddhism.<sup>20</sup> The book was a collection of assorted translations from several different schools of Buddhism. Nicosia<sup>21</sup> states:

In Kerouac's own hand we have testimony that by the end of 1953 he too was a "big Buddhist" who "stayed home and read Asvaghosha." There is some evidence that he was at least familiar with the story of Buddha's life as early as 1951. He would have acquired some knowledge of Buddhism simply from Spengler's *Decline of the West*, and Thoreau's *Walden* familiarized him with a number of Indian and Chinese religious texts.

For Jack, Buddhism was an escape from the Catholic guilt he felt as a young man and a means of breaking the ties that bound him to Lowell. Ironically, he began his intensely focused study of the religion at his mother's house:

In late April, 1954, Jack returned to his mother's home in Richmond Hill, convinced that only a monastic life studying and practicing Buddhism would keep him from suicide. "Assured" by Buddha that life was a dream, he renounced all activity, including sex and writing, except for "who-cares-anyhow" drunken binges. In his newfound tranquility he set about to counsel all his friends to give up their worldly ambitions and passions... At the same time, he was adding to his journal of Buddhist realization, *Some of the Dharma* (which he began in February of that year), containing allusions between Buddhism and Catholicism, translations of Buddhist texts from French, and reflections on his life.<sup>22</sup>

He would go on to study Buddhism for the next decade, allowing *Some of the Dharma* to grow to several hundred pages in length. He mailed parts of the manuscript to anyone who would read it in an attempt to convert his friends to Buddhism. Allen Ginsberg – also taken with Buddhist philosophy<sup>23</sup> – provided notes on Kerouac's manuscript, and would later introduce him to another practicing Buddhist: Gary Snyder.

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<sup>20</sup> Decent is used here for two reasons: because Kerouac's Buddhism became the major focus of his life, sometimes influencing his decisions in an extremely negative way, and because it was a Buddhism informed largely by Kerouac's own beliefs rather than preexisting Buddhist dogma.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 451.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

<sup>23</sup> It seems that Jack had adopted Buddhism before Allen and was his spiritual mentor for quite some time, as Kerouac wrote a letter to Ginsberg – dated early May 1954 – citing a bibliography for "[Allen's] beginning study of Buddhism," where Allen should "listen to [Jack] carefully and implicitly as though [Jack] was Einstein teaching [Allen] relativity or Eliot teaching the Formulas of Objective Correlation on a blackboard in Princeton," and also discusses the beginning manuscript of *Some of the Dharma*. Ann Charters, ed. *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters 1940-1956* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 415.

In September 1955, Kerouac and Gary Snyder met through Allen Ginsberg. Though they became fast friends because of their devotion to Zen, the men could not have been more different. Snyder had spent time in graduate school and in Japan studying Buddhism academically and recreationally, while Kerouac's Buddhism was structured more like a long-form argument; he held specific beliefs before adopting Buddhism, but later drew from a large body of different works in order to assert that his way of looking at the world was valid. Kerouac's Buddhist beliefs were focused on the illusory nature of the external world, and divesting oneself of the attachments that bind one to corporeal life. Gary interpreted Kerouac's belief as using Buddhism as a crutch, believing "that all Jack really got out of Mahayana was its universal compassion and its sense of the vastness of space and time: the kotis (myriads) of chilicosms (galaxies) and kalpas (eons). According to Gary, the concept-reducing, theism-reducing cutting edge of Mahayana metaphysics never touched [Kerouac]."<sup>24</sup> From Snyder's statement, it could be inferred that – though Kerouac believed in Buddhism – he refused to forsake the theism with which he was raised. After some study of Buddhism, he was able to reinterpret the systems of thought to which he already oriented. Despite their disagreements about faith, the pair would cavort around the mountains together philosophizing, the depiction of which would become *The Dharma Bums*.

After Kerouac's travels with Snyder, he gained a manic energy and began to paint and transcribe his notebooks. Though he had a number of friends that took stock in his near-constant epiphanies about the nature of reality, some of his closest friends had little regard for Kerouac's Buddhism. William Burroughs dismissed it as cosmic foolishness, and though his agent Sterling Lord was initially interested in some of Kerouac's documentation's of the Buddhist faith (*Wake Up!: A Life of the Buddha*, for example), he would eventually deem it a dalliance from his

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<sup>24</sup> Nicosia, 494.



narrative writing and thus unprofitable.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, because of their association with the regulars at Caffè Mediterraneo, Ginsberg and Snyder were becoming popular in countercultural creative circles.

Kerouac was depressed; he attempted to quit drinking, traveled abroad for a while, and eventually moved to California. Writing soon became a chore, and nothing he did seemed to be significant or of interest to him. For a time, he took up with Mémère again, caring for her and traveling around the United States with her. In a letter to Philip Whalen on March 6, 1956, Kerouac discusses his friends' writing careers:

As for you going to NY and sucking asses to get published, dont worry, if you're any good I'll get you read by the Farting-Through-Silk set, you wont have to stir a bone... Dont be bugged and depressed. You are a bhikku of serenity, moral earnestness, and sweet reasonableness... the reason we are beings of highest wisdom is because we have discarded all imaginary judgments as to self, other selves, living beings, and a universal self.<sup>26</sup>

As we see in the previous passage, Kerouac was in the midst of a spiritual crisis. He believed that Buddhism said the individual and life itself were imaginary, but he was also incredibly worried about making money as a writer, being able to take care of his mother, and being successful within the 'square' world. He attempted to reconcile his philosophical proclivities toward Buddhism with his need for the paternal Abrahamic God, but because of Mémère strict Catholic beliefs, she reacted in the following way:

She would continually throw up to Jack the fact that Gerard would never have done the things Jack was doing, and on occasions of exceptionally bitter disappointment she would say "It should've been you that died, not Gerard." The guilt she generated in him could then be relieved only by her coddling and flattering... she infantilized him, [but] she glorified him as a genius.<sup>27</sup>

Kerouac began to worry about sinfulness; his womanizing and drinking were not behaviors of

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<sup>25</sup> Indeed, a great majority of Kerouac's poetry, Buddhist writings, and other ephemera would not be published until sometime after Kerouac's death.

<sup>26</sup> Charters, *Letters 40-56*, 565-566.

<sup>27</sup> Nicosia, 551.

the saint that he aspired to be. He felt that he was being forced to choose between his family and his friends, between community and ascetic isolation. He was afraid he would not know the true nature of God, or that he did already and that it was truly awful. In a letter to Allen Ginsberg on May 20, 1955, Kerouac writes “it seems to me I have reached the point beyond Enlightenment now and can abandon Buddhism now because Buddhism is an arbitrary conception. I mean, in reality, there is no difference between Ignorance and Enlightenment, they are both different forms of the same thing which is that unknowable unpredictable shining suchness.”<sup>28</sup> Kerouac saw himself as the head of a movement that did not exist yet, a leader with no flock, and began to doubt the gospels that he was preaching. That was soon to change.

Jack sold the rights to *On the Road* in 1957 and, by September of that year – when *The New York Times* lauded him as being the voice of a new generation – he had entered a new crisis: dealing with fame. He had finally achieved the attention he constantly desired, but was forced to become a caricature of himself; whenever he was in public, he had to play a character hybrid of Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty – the sodden drunk, philandering, bohemian madmen – rather than the quiet writer Jack Kerouac. In the years following 1957, he used his newfound status to publish a large number of manuscripts he had been holding onto for some time, but his writing was seriously hampered. As Amburn<sup>29</sup> notes, during this time period, Jack was pleased about the changes that were occurring in American society:

[Jack] was convinced that a small group of Buddhist thinkers – including himself, Whalen, and Snyder – had already had a calming effect on the American temperament, and that by 1958 the transformation would be complete. Surprisingly, some of the earliest symptoms of cultural change occurred in the mainstream of society rather than on its Beat

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<sup>28</sup> Charters, *Letters 40-56*, 483.

<sup>29</sup> Ellis Amburn. *Subterranean Kerouac: The Hidden Life of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 235. The calming of the “American temperament” of which Amburn speaks is a decline in the fear of communism. Because Buddhism had entered the national discourse, people were given an alternative way of conceptualizing their state of being, outside of the rigorous bounds of the state-sponsored ideology. D.T. Suzuki's essays and translations of Buddhists texts were extremely helpful in cultivating the religious marketplace of the 1950's.

fringes.

Kerouac was happier than he had been in a while, but it was not to last. He began drinking more heavily than before, and became a burden to his friends – the same friends he was more than willing to renounce in the name of Buddhism. He felt that he was being torn in two, forced to decide between his mother and his friends, and the distinct sets of beliefs that each represented.

In a letter to Allen Ginsberg on October 28, 1958, Kerouac predicts the deleterious effects that his philosophies will have on his psyche: "What with being pulled apart on earth by you and my mother, in heaven by Buddha and Christ, none of whom can get together I dont know why except over my suffering carcass, wow, this will be the end of me."<sup>30</sup> In the summer of 1960, he went to a cabin in Big Sur to clean up, but wound up in San Francisco drunk and depressed. The disintegrative exploits of his time in the wilderness were chronicled in *Big Sur*, which shows – in an almost terrifying way – a person on the brink of madness, aware of the forces acting on him but powerless to stop them.

The mid-sixties marked an era that – for Kerouac – was based on reorientation to the past. He cut off contact with most of his Beat friends in 1961, and was preoccupied with testing the limits of his friendship with the ones he still held onto. He married Stella Sampas, the sister of his childhood best friend, in 1965. In the latter part of the decade, Jack published a few more books, but had all but disappeared from the literary stage for quite some time. He and Stella moved to Florida to care for Mémère, and would remain with her until Jack's death on October 21, 1969.

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<sup>30</sup> Charters, *Letters 57-69*, 185

## Chapter 2: Introducing the 1950's

As with Kerouac's biography, it is very important to look to the culture and family in which he was raised. Gerald Nicosia begins *Memory Babe*, his biography of Kerouac, by discussing the French-Canadian immigrant population of the northeastern United States. When they first moved to the northeast, French-Canadians were seen as threatening. Because of their tenacity and work ethic, they were relegated to jobs that other New Englanders would not do: arguably an attempt to keep them in their place in the Protestant world of the United States. However, Nicosia argues that the French Canadians kept themselves subservient by preserving their own communities; they made their religion the center of their society, and created an enclave of exiles from a government that did not care for their presence, within another society that did not respect them. Nicosia<sup>31</sup> even establishes some of the ways that Leo Kerouac influenced a young Jack:

Leo bequeathed to his son a social animosity, a feeling that the civilized world was arranged for the exploitation of poor minorities like the Canucks, and this sense of injustice led to a rebelliousness against the standing order. Not that Leo Kerouac ever became a criminal, but he never lost the dream of leaving wife and family to wander the country fancy-free. With the right gambling system, he told Jack, he could travel from race track to race track, making a good living without ever having to work.

Within the French-Canadian population, there was an innate syncretic power. The French Canadians that settled in Lowell were a hybrid culture, isolated from the rest of American society on their own terms. It is from this society that Jack Kerouac grew. Even before his birth, there was a highly politicized agenda of opposition instilled within his community. There was an implicit refusal to acquiesce to become a member of the larger cultural body by assimilating into the rest of the United States. Paradoxically, there was a need to remain loyal to one's community by following their ideals, and remaining subservient to the smaller-scale status quo.

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<sup>31</sup> Nicosia, 37.

**Economic Determinism**

Before the Depression, the scope of economic influence for the typical United States citizen was much narrower. The marketplace was smaller and more localized, and – though there was mass-production and trade on a global scale – the average citizen tended to be more active in consuming or producing goods for the local markets. World War II led to a massive increase in goods-based production (which in part bolstered our economy after the Depression) and a booming capitalist lifestyle for Americans. Households began bringing in much more money than before. Because America had begun to shift away from production of goods to consumption of goods, people funneled their money back into the economy. The middle class's newfound status caused people to simultaneously compete with their consumption in an attempt to achieve the values with which they were raised. Because of the bleak economic situation of the Depression, children were taught by their parents that material success would provide spiritual success. Young adults were driven to become financially successful, to move out of the city and to the country, and get a house with a white picket fence; the quintessential American dream.

Since he was born in 1922, Kerouac's spent his formative years in a world shocked by the Great Depression, a time where the bear-like global economy was entered a state of hibernation and traditional American ideals of individualism and free enterprise were questioned. The fear of the failure of the capitalist system raised a number of questions in the national discourse of the 1920's and 30's: namely – since the individual breadwinner could no longer provide for their family – whether there should be an external system of support for the collective at large, provided by the state.<sup>32</sup> The government intervened, creating a set of programs known as the New Deal, but people still struggled. Communism had become a viable option for the working- and middle-class people, who felt that they had the right to do more than

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<sup>32</sup> We see this manifest directly in Kerouac's life through Leo's business problems and self-medication with alcohol.

subsist while the income gap between the rich and poor became wider. However, Communism did not have the mainstream influence that politicians in Washington believed. As Philip Rahv puts it, “Communism was a threat *to* the United States... but it was not a threat *in* the United States, where the danger was wildly overestimated.”<sup>33</sup>

After World War II, though there were large gaps between the rich and the poor, income became more equally distributed among the middle class. Whitfield presents Thomas Hine’s suggestion that “there was more wealth to go around and a decline in the number of people to share it. Nothing like it had ever happened before, and nothing like it has happened since.”<sup>34</sup> People were urged to pour their newfound wealth back into the system that created it. Being a consumer was an ideological statement of support for the economic and political freedoms of American society. Through one’s purchasing power, it was possible to keep the American machine alive. The political discourse in the United States government is expressed thusly: there was a major crisis that caused unrest and dissatisfaction in the working classes. Since tragedy causes the people in power to adhere more directly to the existing patterns of thought in an attempt to maintain normalcy, politicians began to bolster their campaigns by relying on rhetoric denouncing anything that may have contributed to the welfare of the working class as subversive. There was a shift toward object materialism: the fetishization of commodities and defining oneself in terms of the things that one owns. Instead of being encouraged by community-centric social discourse to be self-fulfilled or succeed on one’s own terms, the mass media began to dictate taste and political beliefs.

In the late 1940’s and the entirety of the 1950’s, Communism was a major focus in the media, as well as in politics. It was the scapegoat for a great many of society’s problems, and

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<sup>33</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

was pronounced as an affront to the American system in its entirety. If a person was discovered to be a communist, they might be suspected of any manner of “deviance”; a pervert, a homosexual, a political dissident, and affiliated with a non-Western religion. Whitfield<sup>35</sup> notes a Protestant church preaching an apocalyptic message that suggests the same:

Do you know that the Fifth Columnists, called Communists, are more rampant in Los Angeles than any other city in America?... God is giving us a desperate choice, a choice of either revival or judgment. There is no alternative... The world is divided into two camps! On the one side we see Communism... [which] has declared war against God, against Christ, against the Bible, and against all religion... Unless the Western world has an old-fashioned revival, we cannot last!

Billy Graham, one of the most popular public preachers of the era, also conflated Communism with religion, suggesting that it was satanic and opposed to the American way of life. In the 1950's, church affiliation was also the highest it had been (or would be, to date) in America's history. A sinister caricature of the capitalist mentality had directly exerted its motives on American society, causing people to read Communism as a polluter of social good. The specter of perverse capitalism was entrenching itself more and more into American society.

### **Jack and Joe**

Because religion had saturated the American political and economic spectrums, religious conviction was not seen as a metaphysical, philosophical, or spiritual belief, but a way of contributing to patriotism and nationalism. Stewart and Shaw<sup>36</sup> draw a direct link between consumerism and religion, stating that political economy is a major factor in shaping thought:

...processes of capitalism and cultural hegemony transformed not only relations of power and production but also experiences of personhood... and religion. The appropriation of totalizing and globally spread processes such as capitalism, commodity consumption and ‘rationalist’ models of development is often inseparable from the appropriation of totalizing and globally spread religions.

Similarly, as Whitfield suggests, the religious revival in the 1950's was “not so much religious

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>36</sup> Stewart and Shaw, 20.

belief as belief in the *value* of religion.”<sup>37</sup> Christianity had become a tool for supporting the discourse of the day, a positive signifier for the contemporary American system. There was most certainly a ‘with us or against us’ mentality afoot; if one did not rally around the concept of God – or his political analogue, the President of the United States – and genuflect to the Church of the American System, they were a communist and should be deported or blacklisted.<sup>38</sup>

Under the pretense of Communism, the United States involved itself in a number of clandestine liaisons both at home and abroad, invested in the newly formed military-industrial war machine, and wasted countless dollars of taxpayer money through Communist witch hunts and senate trials. The overall goal was to protect a lifestyle of accepting mass-media discourse as gospel, though consumerism and suburban sloth had existed for a meager amount of time. In America’s schools, there was a suggestion that history was immobile, stagnant, and would remain in perpetuity emblematic of contemporary ideology. As Frances FitzGerald<sup>39</sup> notes, the 1950’s version of American history changed in a major way from the one that came before it:

...the belief system to be transmitted to the young constituted a seamless vision of how Americans commonly conceived their past and present. “[Within textbooks], America was perfect: the greatest nation in the world, and the embodiment of democracy, freedom, and technological progress. For them, the country never changed in any important way: its values and its political institutions remained constant from the time of the American Revolution.”

The political climate of the era was predicated on obfuscation, trickery, and deceit. In the same way that the conception of history suggests that American society had not changed in the entirety of its history, the McCarthy Era’s politics conveyed the idea that it was upholding the tenets of American society, when actually progressing toward something that had never been seen before;

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<sup>37</sup> Whitfield, 56.

<sup>38</sup> Effectively, blacklisting – being prevented from working due to one’s affiliation with subversive organizations – was excommunication from the American system. One was required to find an alternative means of supporting oneself, and was unable to achieve the so-called American dream.

<sup>39</sup> Whitfield, 56.



nascent neo-conservatism.<sup>40</sup> Kerouac's support for Senator McCarthy should be viewed through the lens of his opposition to the prevailing discourse of the 1950's, and his opposition to the saturation of the national media with Communism as a "religion."

But where does this fit in for Jack? His religious beliefs – something that he was extremely emotionally invested in – were catapulted to the level of national politics very abruptly. Because of Kerouac's fervent religiosity, it seems apparent that he would want to propagate what he considered to be the actual beliefs of Catholicism and Buddhism, rather than an economic philosophy masquerading as spiritual dogma. The Catholic persecution that was occurring in the USSR led to major Catholic support for Senator Joseph McCarthy. At the beginning of McCarthy's political tenure, Jack was probably smitten with him because of the Catholic support, and because there was a suggestion that McCarthy would return America to the pre-Depression mindset – the romanticized idealism of his youth. For example, Nicosia creates a tableau from one of Kerouac's first phlebotomy attacks in the mid-1940's:

Kerouac's vision of death in the hospital was not limited to his mortality; for the first time he was clearly that all life bore the same burden of imminent dissolution. ...For Jack this realization was combined with a Spenglerian view of the inevitable darkness closing over all civilizations, a cosmic phenomenon which narrow-sighted "city intellectuals" tried to grasp in terms of jargon like "existentialism," "hipsterism," and "bourgeois decadence."...He saw city dwellers living in ignorance because they were cut off from the fundamental knowledge of life and death stored in folk traditions, which were preserved in the country and small towns.<sup>41</sup>

Kerouac put immense stock in the power of small towns as a means of creating a proper set of individual beliefs, since he came from one himself. Small town morality would be his reference point for the meaning of conservatism.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> For the purposes of this essay, neo-conservatism is effectively imperialism. It is a political system based around the idea that the United States should use its economic and military power to go abroad, build democratic nations, and propagate the capitalist system.

<sup>41</sup> Nicosia, 162.

<sup>42</sup> Thanks to the lens of history, we know the McCarthy era's politics were hardly conservative. Politicians from the

### Chapter 3: *Some of the Dharma*

Before examining Kerouac's novels as a source of mediating philosophical-religious decisions, we come to *Some of the Dharma*, the closest thing Kerouac produced to an academic study of his Buddhist practice. *Some of the Dharma* began in 1953 as a series of detailed reading notes, but later expanded to encompass dreams, prayers, stories, and a myriad of other experimentalist writings. It is essentially a notepad or sketchbook, an attempted realization of a guidebook to Buddhist thought that was never published. Even *Some of the Dharma*'s title is a direct manifestation of Buddho-Catholic syncretism; the book contains only some of the dharma, the aspects relevant to Kerouac's life.

The combination of belief systems that we see in *Some of the Dharma* illustrates the way that Kerouac adds and subtracts different practices from his Buddhist and Catholic practices. Though Kerouac uses the terms Buddhism and Catholicism throughout the work, neither is a concrete set of religious ideals. Each is in flux as he attempts to negotiate a proper balance between the two systems of thought within his personal schematic for understanding reality.

The tome begins with a discussion of Buddhist principles and aspects of its dogma, but its content varies greatly in scope. At one point, Kerouac creates an aphorism about the nature of the two religions: "Christianity, a THEODICY, religion about God... Buddhism, a COSMODICY, a religion about the universe."<sup>43</sup> Rather than attempting to grasp Buddhist thought in totality, *Some of the Dharma* follows Kerouac's crises of faith, disillusionment with religion, and rationalization of belief systems, ending finally with a fairly cogent manifestation of what it means to be a Buddho-Catholic. Before examining the text, there are a few major

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era caused extremely polarized deviation from the norms and values that they claimed to support. The burgeoning system of global capitalism had become a system of belief into which citizens of the United States were indoctrinated.

<sup>43</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma* (New York: Viking, 1997), 81.

distinctions that must be apparent in order for one to understand why it was so important that Kerouac adopt Catholicism and Buddhism simultaneously.

### **Dualism vs. Monism**

Like American society, Catholicism is innately formed around the ideal of dualism.<sup>44</sup>

There is a community-centric component in Catholicism that is a reflection of the capitalist superstructure. There are a number of rituals in the Catholic faith that are used as a means of purifying the body or attempting to escape the body (including confession, elaborate systems of prayer, and so on) as a means of getting closer to God. Within the church, hierarchy is established as a means of stratifying or explaining the different systems of purity, and how to obtain those levels of salvation.<sup>45</sup> The Catholic community attempts to perpetuate itself by creating a family-like system amongst its followers (Catholic brotherhood, praying to the Holy Father) through syncretism, and actually encourages blending different traditions together if it will assist in absolving people of their sins.<sup>46</sup> The concept of original sin allows for one of the major tenets of the religion to arise: one must spend one's time on earth, in all its impermanence, attempting to realize salvation or become absolved from the world's woes. The Catholicism Kerouac practiced was a process of getting right with God, escaping the suffering and impermanence of the terrestrial world, and living forever in the heavenly realm.

Buddhism has several similar ideas, but is predominantly a monist religion. Buddhists believe that there is no centralized church, or head of state; every Buddhist belief system or

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<sup>44</sup> Theories of dualism discussed in this essay are informed by Kerouac's own writings in *Some of the Dharma*. In this situation, the particularly bleak dualism that Kerouac characterizes is a suggestion that the body is tainted by its existence in the world but the mind (or soul) is pure and transcendental.

<sup>45</sup> The Vatican's restructuring of the religion in the 1970's largely dealt with the issue of Catholics being overly reliant on the priest as an interpreter by holding mass in English rather than Latin. For the purposes of this essay, the natural extension of the Catholic Church is the manifestation of governmental hierarchy in McCarthy era society, as it suggests that damnation will occur without absolute faith in the prevailing institutional system and its leaders.

<sup>46</sup> In this way, Catholicism is related to the McCarthy Era's manifestation of society; during the 1950's, American society was willing to do anything to extend its power and reach, by striking out as many dissenters as possible, labeling them Communists.

tradition is sectarian.<sup>47</sup> Rather than accruing material wealth, they believe that one should divest oneself of material goods. There is no direct belief in sin. Instead, there is a process of doing good, called karma. If one commits bad deeds, one is reborn again on earth and is required to begin the cycle over again. Buddhism also suggests that the individual innately contains the imagery upon which the religion is founded, rather than having external practices that are essential for its practice.<sup>48</sup> For example, it is not literally believed that the individual – when meditating – is transported to a spiritual realm where they are among numerous Buddhas. Rather, meditational imagery is a means of understanding the different levels of enlightenment that one must obtain before Buddhahood. Because so many of its teachings are strictly metaphorical tools upon which people are able to base their own personal ideals, all people are seen as practicing Buddhism regardless of their investment in the Buddha's teachings.

Throughout *Some of the Dharma*, it becomes apparent that one of the major problems Kerouac has with Catholicism is dualism. Catholicism's use of dualism suggests that the universe is made up of two distinct systems of matter: that there is an ineffable spiritual being that exists independently of the individual body in which it is sinfully imprisoned. As both Heidegger and Buddhism suggest, the individual's physical manifestation within the world precedes the schism between subject and object that dualism suggests. Kerouac understands himself as born into a world where one is forced to find one's place relationally, and must grapple with the conscience as a controlling force.

The individual's conscience is representative of the Heideggerian term *das Man*, as it is

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<sup>47</sup> John Huntington, Class Lectures, 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Everything that occurs in Buddhism is internal, which allows the practitioner to focus on the interaction between themselves and their environment. Practitioners are not preoccupied with devotion to an image; we see in Zen Buddhism that the teachings themselves are even decried as not essential to practicing the religion - if you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him. Reliance on Buddhist doctrines as a spiritual crutch is viewed as a hindrance to spiritual progress (John Huntington, Class Lectures, 2010).

manipulated by forces like guilt, culture, and so on.<sup>49</sup> Kerouac, in his writing, is actively producing a split from the *they* that creates the discourse of the 1950's, attempting to conceptualize his authentic self outside the boundaries of the apparatus that has redefined, co-opted, and restructured the way he is perceived. In a short essay titled "A Refutation of Catholic Dualism," Kerouac<sup>50</sup> deconstructs a passage from Aquinas that discusses the nature of morality:

Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* (Q.49 Art.2) says: "The goodness of the fire causes evil to the water, and man, good in his nature, causes a morally evil act... This is by accident..."

In the reality and purity of Universal Mind there are no dualistic differentiations such as good and evil, and fire and water are of the same essence, which is intrinsic emptiness. All is One. No good is battling any evil, but peace and permanency abide throughout the hosts of manifested Ignorance-phenomena everywhere... Catholic Dualism is behind the error of Western Civilization with its war of machines, each machine claiming the "Good"... the "dynamism" so-called of the West which is based on opposites reacting (such as magnet and coil, positive and negative)... *The Gothic spire aspires to its opposite*, by virtue of a deep disbelief in the ultimate principle of formless utility.

In this passage, Kerouac argues in support of the Heideggerian considerations of the utility of objects. The epigraph from Aquinas claims that we orient ourselves in our lives by interacting with objects, valuing them in terms of potential use and then dialectically defining their opposite through its inability to meet our requirements. Kerouac, on the other hand, believes that objects or concepts exist in the world in a brute sense, that there is no innate good, that we are simply imposing hierarchy on a nonexistent paradigm. He argues that conceptions of innate utility are a mirage based on misunderstood ideals. If the individual is able to realize that considerations like 'good' or 'evil' are merely products of the human subjective mental state (or as Heidegger posits, relationally constructed), and that everything is – in actuality – existent of the same undifferentiated mass, then they have reached a state of higher understanding.

### **Spiritually Anti-Capitalist**

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<sup>49</sup> In Heidegger's terminology, *das Man* (literally "the one") represents the forces external to the individual that exercise control upon it but not necessarily actively (e.g. "It is improper to do something because one should not.").

<sup>50</sup> Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma*, 26.

In the previous section, distinct parallels arise between Kerouac's Buddho-Catholicism and a rejection of capitalist materialism. By escaping the arbitrary nature of 'goodness' or 'badness,' a person begins to live outside of the institutions that establish themselves based on imposition, control, and violence; the rhetoric upon which a capitalist system is predicated. The natural conclusion of Kerouac's Buddho-Catholic project results in a return to values that he espoused in most of his literature: those that champion family life, friendships, concern for others, and philosophical thought, supplanting materialistic desire.

Kerouac's Buddho-Catholicism is a process of redefining the dialectic of Communism vs. the American system that was so prevalent in the 1950's, allowing for an escape from consumerism. Similarly, Marx's suggestion of religion being the opiate of the people is apt, as we see in this passage from *Some of the Dharma*:

The Worker-Priest's idea, of sharing suffering of workers... may become the unwilling tool of Totalitarian Capitalism, or Laborism, if he doesn't watch out---A nice science fiction society eerily divided into Suffering Pious Workers and Areligious Contented Employers---for sake of "Production"... The suffering of workers all over the world has never produced one loaf of bread or one apronful of stringbeans from off those bloody iron belts of theirs. It's a chimera, insanity. There is no need for cars, no need for radios, no need for metros, no need for cannons, no need for cigarette lighters, no need for oil or oil heat, no need for plastic cups, no need for cannons, no need for war and above all no need for need, which "Production" merely multiplies.<sup>51</sup>

Here, Kerouac is arguing against the process of institutions as a means of disseminating spiritual or philosophical beliefs. Kerouac believes that the priests are complicit in keeping the working classes oppressed. By preaching to them from a pulpit predicated upon dualism, religion becomes a support structure that prevents individual growth. The priest suggests to his followers that, if the poor toil relentlessly in this life, they will be rewarded in heaven. However, if the working classes were able to realize that they have the power to obtain higher understanding through simple meditation, they can buy out of the religious system of oppression, gaining

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 76.

control of the means of ideological production.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, as Kerouac suggests later, “There is only need for breath, food, rest and holy meditation.”<sup>53</sup>

Throughout *Some of the Dharma*, Kerouac decries religion as a means to an end. It is not for achieving salvation, but a process of understanding reality, and gaining control over the powers of one’s mind. Kerouac<sup>54</sup> writes:

RELIGION must be considered for what it really is, an insight into reality, and not as a wishful dream of hope---As soon as it is pointed out that there is but one Essential Thatness to all multiplicities of created things in all the directions of the Universe, One Tathagata (not one “God” which is always misleading people away from the simple understanding of the Essential Thatness, that Honey, that Gold that everything’s made of, that Formbliss Whichness), then people will stop wishful thinking and deluded human hoping and face the fact that there is no soul, no continuance of soul after life, indeed no life, no death, no beings, no creation, but only what appears of the mind itself and they will cease this hypocritical rationalization of their evil outflowing attachments... all things are different forms of the same thing, *and that same thing is perfect emptiness*. This is the Diamond Saying that cuts through “religions” and “personal God” and “divine spirit” and “love.”

This passage argues for a conception of religion that is not conjoined with the concept of God.

Because everything exists in a state of pure nothingness, it follows that believing in any aspect of religious considered as anything more than simple metaphor (a meta-language for talking about higher understanding) becomes an attachment, a tool for self oppression. In the creation of that metaphor is the boundary that one encounters when writing or trying to contextualize a concept that is entirely unnamable or unmanageable outside of the subjective experience.

Jack takes great issue with the fact that Catholicism – specifically Aquinas’s dualist brand – survived into the modern era, as its lack of evolution keeps the people from realizing their potential for change or more profound understanding. Kerouac is carving out a place for

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<sup>52</sup> That is, the working class must understand that they do not have to be complicit in a spiritual system that keeps them downtrodden. They can return to folk religions that do not require institutionalized hierarchy, as the passage from Nicosia suggested at the end of the previous chapter.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 319-320.

syncretism in his religious philosophy. Syncretism – as a tool for crossing boundaries, creating dialogues, and developing new ideas – is a means of escape from an intellectually sedentary lifestyle. As Kerouac<sup>55</sup> states in the following passage, Paul’s apocalyptic Christianity blossomed from Arabian thought, but then stagnated:

The Catholic Religion, of Aquinas, the Pope and the Eastern Patriarch is the only surviving primitive religion in the civilized world. The Vedics, the Shinto, the Aztec, the Apollonian, the Eddas... all were early expressions of a primitive culture, as Apocalyptic Christianity was the early (later-pseudomorphosed into the West by Paul) Arabian expression. It alone survives; explains why a faustian Jet-pilot can still believe in the Devil but an Indian student at Columbia can have put Buddhism behind him, know nothing of the Vedas, and complain of economic exploitation.

Kerouac suggests that people who grew up in the Western tradition are overly reliant on a system of belief that foists a burden of impending doom upon them. Conversely, those that subscribe to Eastern belief systems are able to use their faith as a stepping stone to political action.

Individuals entrenched in modern society, like his Faustian jet pilot, can hold primitive beliefs that perpetuate a state of emergency where freedom of thought is taken away and the individual is reduced to impulse-response. The Indian student, on the other hand, is able to move past the primitive aspects of his belief system – going so far as to deny knowledge of them – and function within modern society.<sup>56</sup> He has the capability within him to realize the forces that are acting upon him, and respond to them accordingly. Kerouac is overtly arguing for syncretism in this passage. Because he is writing in an era that was oppressive to those outside the status quo, he believes it is essential for a person to have some sense of the coming apocalypse to keep them motivated, inspired, and thinking critically, but to entirely embrace a void of such profound emptiness would prevent any sort of spiritual growth.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>56</sup> The Vedas that Kerouac cites in the passage above are the underlying philosophies upon which Hinduism and Buddhism are based.



#### Chapter 4: Rucksack Revolution and *The Dharma Bums*

While all of Kerouac's novels serve as attempts to conjure transcendence through prose, *The Dharma Bums* contains a marked idealism about the Buddho-Catholic project, as characterized in *Some of the Dharma*. Published in 1958, after Kerouac had been studying Buddhism for approximately four years, the novel was a marked progression from *On the Road*'s frenetic wandering. In *The Dharma Bums*, Jack (as Ray Smith) and Gary Snyder (as Japhy Ryder) are beatific bhikkus searching for states of enlightened activity in the forests of Southern California, through repetitive action, meditation, and careful study and discussion of Buddhist texts.<sup>57</sup>

The novel begins with Ray's declaration that his Buddhism used to be more intense; he was once more devout than he is at the time of writing. Like Kerouac, Ray was also raised Catholic and was brought to Buddhism because of philosophical considerations. As stated above, Kerouac had a crisis of faith after his travels with Snyder, when he felt unable to rationalize the way Buddhism was influencing his life. As we see here, even after that crisis, Kerouac<sup>58</sup> was very much invested in espousing the virtues of strictly Buddhist dogma through his writing:

I was very devout in those days and was practicing my religious devotions almost to perfection. Since then I've become a little hypocritical about my lip-service and a little tired and cynical. Because now I am grown so old and neutral... But then I really believed in the reality of charity and kindness and humility and zeal and neutral tranquility and wisdom and ecstasy, and I believed that I was an oldtime bhikku in modern clothes wandering the world (usually the immense triangular arc of New York to Mexico City to San Francisco) in order to turn the wheel of the true meaning, or Dharma, and gain merit for myself as a future Buddha (Awakener) and as a future Hero in Paradise.

Though this passage could be read as a statement of insecurity in terms of his spiritual beliefs, it appears that Kerouac is trying to say something more profound. The age and neutrality of which

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<sup>57</sup> Bhikku (or Bhikkhu) are ordained Buddhist monks who are essentially wandering mendicants. Their freedom from owning property allows them to focus on practicing or proselytizing their religion. (John Huntington, 2010).

<sup>58</sup> Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 2.

he speaks are functions of the combination of the two religions. Through his adventures in California, he has grown wiser and less polarized. He realizes that Buddhism is not an entirely functional means of understanding for him, so he begins to consider believing more in the aspects that his two preferred philosophies have in common, rather than the systems of worship and spirituality that distinctly separate them. Throughout the novel, we see Smith consistently making allusions between Christianity and Buddhism, stating directly that he has problems with the dichotomous split between the two systems: “Japhy, there were things I wanted to tell Rosie and I felt suppressed by this schism we have about separating Buddhism from Christianity, East from West, what the hell difference does it make? We’re all in Heaven now, ain’t we?”<sup>59</sup>

Throughout the novel, Ryder derides Smith for being so invested in both Buddhism and Catholicism. He feels that Smith is not growing as spiritually as he should be, considering how much they are studying and spending time together. Toward the end of the novel, they have an exchange discussing the virtue of Smith’s equal weighting of the two religions, and the difference between the concepts of Tathagata and God:<sup>60</sup>

“Life’s already shoved an iron foot down *my* mouth. But I don’t think that’s anything but a dream cooked up by some hysterical monks who didn’t understand Buddha’s peace under the Bo Tree or for that matter Christ’s peace looking down on the heads of his tormentors and forgiving them.”

“You really like Christ, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. And after all, a lot of people say he is Maitreya, the Buddha prophesized to appear after Sakyamuni, you know, Maitreya means ‘Love’ in Sanskrit and that’s all Christ talked about was love.”<sup>61</sup>

Here, Kerouac is underscoring the metaphorical value of some of the teachings inherent to both religions, and creating a syncretic metaphor right before the reader’s eyes. Specifically, in the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>60</sup> Tathagata refers to a being that has transcended the human condition, and appears in Buddhist scripture as what the Buddha calls himself. God, on the other hand, is a singular being that is seen as the creator of the Universe. I believe that Kerouac latched onto the idea of Tathagata as God as a means of subverting the hegemonic patriarchal system associated with Christianity (and also with 1950’s American society); Buddha was simply a man that achieved greater understanding, unlike Christ who was predestined to be a deity.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 154.

preceding passage, he references both religious figures as signifiers for the abstract concept 'love.' Kerouac values pre-existing metaphors for familiarity of understanding ideological concepts; he really likes Christ because of the values associated with Christ-ness, and Buddha for his Buddha-ness. Kerouac latches onto the pair of symbols because he feels that there is a major link between each, and the experiences Kerouac had in his personal life and in his religious life; renouncing his family and leaving to travel, preaching the words of cosmic unity, while simultaneously suffering endlessly because of his ties to his family.

Smith's attempts to justify his religious beliefs to Ryder, who would much prefer to "spend hours every day in a lonely temple meditating in front of a sealed statue of Kwannon which no one is ever allowed to see because it's too powerful," are fruitless.<sup>62</sup> Snyder's character is suggesting that it is not necessary for Kerouac to strive to combine the two religions. The majority (capitalist-Christianity) and the minority (anarcho-Buddhism) will always be separate spheres and are dialectically necessary for the other to exist. Kerouac, however, understands the status quo differently than Ryder does, and believes that it is possible to achieve some positive combination of the two belief systems. By using the vocabularies of both religions (but not necessarily following their teachings directly), his system for political upheaval is accessible by a greater number of people, and thus will be successful. Implicitly, Kerouac is making a statement that it is possible for a person opposed to the ideology of the majority to work within the system to change it.

### **America Embraces the Dharma**

One of the most famous passages in the novel is a critique of materialism. Smith, Ryder, Goldbook, and their friend Coughlin meet up and discuss the Dharma, romanticizing the southwest through spontaneous poetry, and attempting to conceive of a new American dream.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 154.

Each of the men is extremely idealistic, suggesting that people will desire to meditate and better themselves spiritually, gaining self discipline to a degree that they previously had never before experienced. Ryder says:

I've been reading Whitman, know what he says, *Cheer up slaves, and horrify foreign despots*, he means that's the attitude for the Bard, the Zen Lunacy bard of old desert paths, see the whole thing is a world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't really want anyway... all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume, I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray... and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures...<sup>63</sup>

Essentially, the ethos of *The Dharma Bums* is direct opposition to the way that the McCarthy era's society constructed religious affiliation. As discussed in the previous chapter, because religion was so inseparable from the era's capitalist consumer/producer mentality, Kerouac's goal was to take back the religiosity that he desired through a new system of politicized religious philosophy.

Within the novel, Kerouac created an environment within the novel where consumerist Catholicism was constructed as the antithesis to Buddhist nonmaterialism and anarchic free-spirited wandering. As we see in the previous passage, the goal of the combination of thesis and antithesis here would result in 'rucksack revolution,' a schematic that – for American youth – would supplant consumerism, and imbue their lives with a newfound fervor for spirituality.

The first main tenet of the rucksack revolution is to separate Christianity and materialism from the dialectical system. If capitalist consumerism can exist as its own functional term without being paired with the 'pure' values Kerouac associates with his Catholic upbringing, Buddhism's ideal of nonattachment can overcome it, subverting the popular discourse that

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 73-74.

American patriotism means supporting institutionalized power economically. There are numerous contrasts between the materialism that we see in 1950's society and the values of Smith and friends. Toward the beginning of the novel, Smith and Goldbook idealize the ascetic home that Japhy keeps, suggesting that the objects with the most value are those with religious content:

Japhy lived in his own shack which was infinitely smaller than ours, about twelve by twelve, with nothing in it but typical Japhy appurtenances that showed his belief in the simple monastic life... He had a slew of orange crates all filled with beautiful scholarly books... all the great sutras, comments on sutras, the complete works of D.T. Suzuki... In fact if a thief should have broken in there the only things of real value were the books.<sup>64</sup>

Though it could be argued that Smith and Goldbook are fetishizing the books that Ryder owns (which would be in opposition to the Buddhist belief of nonattachment), it also seems that they are simply in pursuit of higher knowledge. However, books are simultaneously a commodity and a container for the thoughts therein. There is definitely a degree of schizoaffectivity in this passage, which suggests one of the main problems of subverting hegemony. Must an individual or group buy into some of the values of the institution in order to counteract them on a philosophical level? We see this problem throughout Kerouac's life and literature, which he tries to resolve by stating that everything is manifested emptiness, so it is feasible to do as one will. As Nicosia<sup>65</sup> notes, "Buddhism showed Jack that the only way to advance is by paradox, that is, by denying one's accomplishment and so increasing it."

Later in the novel, just before Ray's friend Rosie commits suicide, they have a dialogue informed by her paranoia. The two of them banter back and forth, she saying that there is going to be a police raid on their favorite poetry-reading gallery "The Place," and that all of their circle of friends will be arrested. However, Ray does not agree:

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>65</sup> Nicosia, 501.

...suddenly I had the feeling I always got when I tried to explain the Dharma to people, Alvah, my mother, my relatives, girl friends, everybody, they never listened, they always wanted me to listen to them, *they* knew, I didn't know anything, I was just a dumb young kid and impractical fool who didn't understand the serious significance of this very real world... [Rosie says] "Oh, they're going to destroy you, Ray, I can see it, they're going to fetch all the religious squares too and fix them good. It's only begun. It's all tied in with the Russians though they won't say it..."<sup>66</sup>

This passage suggests that any attempt at Kerouac explaining purely Buddhist belief to the rest of society – family and friends included – is a fruitless means of achieving his goals of subverting the existing politico-religious regime. Just as *Wail* was for Alvah Goldbook earlier in the novel, so must Kerouac's writing be jarring, yet comprehensible. In order for his new revolution to succeed, he has to use a vocabulary that is stratified; it has to be common and familiar, but also encoded to prevent his message from being co-opted and perverted by the media. Jack's message has to be understood through the lens of existing genre convention, but also press on those conventions enough to systematically restructure patterns of thought.

Rosie follows up Ray's epiphany with a very telling characterization of the McCarthy era, foreshadowing the end of several artists' careers due to censorship and blacklisting. Rosie also suggests that they will simultaneously fix the beatniks and the religious squares. Since both squares and beatniks are concerned with the proper interpretations of spiritual thought – and not the ones perverted by institutional discourse – they will be reshaped by the Heideggerian *they* into something that fits the proper social mold. Unfortunately, the specter of communism is afoot. Rosie's suicide shows the dissatisfaction that the counterculture has against being forced to exist along the margins of the majority and having their message mislabeled as communism, when communism has nothing to do with their ideology and is not the problem in the first place.

### Conclusions

On the whole, *The Dharma Bums* contains a marked interest in Buddhist philosophy and

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<sup>66</sup> Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 84.

the politicization of that apolitical philosophy as a tool for idealistic change. The novel shows Kerouac's first attempts at creating a synthesis between Buddhism and Catholicism, while simultaneously showing the first issues and contradictions within that system. Kerouac develops some of the hardships of establishing a movement through allegory and imagery at several points. In particular, the scene where Smith and Ryder climb down the mountain is characteristic of the rigor it takes to become a revolutionary. It takes a certain set of mental faculties to become well versed in religious ideology, but an entirely different set to turn it into political ideology, as Kerouac<sup>67</sup> illustrates with the following passage:

But every step was getting us bent, now, we were all really tired. With the heavy packs it was difficult to control those thigh muscles that you need to go *down* a mountain, which is sometimes harder than going up. And there were all those boulders to surmount, for sometimes we'd be walking in sand awhile and our path would be blocked by boulders and we had to climb them and jump from one to the other then suddenly no more boulders and we had to jump down into the sand. Then we'd be trapped in impassable thickets and had to go around them or try to crash through and sometimes I'd get stuck in a thicket with my rucksack, standing there cursing in the impossible moonlight. None of us were talking.

The end of the passage is particularly characteristic of Kerouac's relationships with his friends after writing *The Dharma Bums*. This period of his life was the first time since his childhood that Kerouac had been in a community where all of the members were engrossed with religion in the same way that he was. He had gone up the mountain and met people that were invested in the same ideals the he was. However, as Kerouac made his way down with his cohort of intellectual-religious peers, they encountered the thorny differences that separated their understandings of the world.<sup>68</sup> Amburn<sup>69</sup> shows us:

[Jack] felt completely empty, and in a perverse negation of everything Buddhism stands

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>68</sup> For example, Snyder and Ginsberg began to use Buddhism as a philosophy for progressive change – rather than a return to the familiar – Kerouac became dissatisfied and withdrew. See *The Gary Snyder Reader* and Ginsberg's *Journals Mid-Fifties* for a characterization of how the pair viewed Buddhist philosophy.

<sup>69</sup> Amburn, 234.

for, he wrote to Snyder that nothing really matters in life. In his alcoholic confusion he had twisted Buddhism into a justification for hopelessness. But Buddhism is not about devaluing life; it's about treasuring life and treating everyone with infinite kindness, tolerance, and understanding. . . . He reached the nadir of alcoholic denial when he claimed in *Some of the Dharma* that he'd experienced his "highest visions of Buddhist Emptiness when drunk," but added four pages later that, having overdosed on codeine and alcohol, his mind was so ravaged that he couldn't even think.

As Kerouac became more depressed from his lack of success in writing, the way he understood his own philosophies were reshaped and manipulated by the trials of living within American society.



### Chapter 5: *Visions of Gerard* and Nostalgia for the Future

*Visions of Gerard*, written from December 1955 to January 1956, was one of Kerouac's personal favorites.<sup>70</sup> The novel focuses on the role that family plays in Kerouac's life, depicting the life of the young Gerard Kerouac, both through the eyes of Ti Jean and Kerouac as an adult. Whereas *The Dharma Bums* contains excitement related to discovering and studying Buddhism and the beginnings of synthesis between it and Catholicism for political ends, *Visions of Gerard* contains an explanation of the way that the two systems of faith can intersect and provide a lens for examining one's life. In contrast to *The Dharma Bums*, the narrative of *Visions of Gerard* is not centered on the conflict and creative combining of his religions. Though written after he had become dissatisfied with strictly Buddhist thought, the novel is a return to the historical past through memory and reflection. Kerouac looks with nostalgic desire to the spiritual simplicity of youth, before his personal philosophy was bounded by rigorous institutional boundaries. Throughout the novel, Kerouac relies on the suggestion that the small-town American experience is transcendental in the same way that Buddhism and Catholicism are, dealing with themes of illusory reality and existence. By idealizing his youth (and his brother) through *Visions of Gerard*, Jack shows the reader a simplified version of America concerned only with spirituality. Though there are many tragic happenstances, the idealized era of youth is still preferable to the modern life where the most apolitical event is read as a direct political action.

#### **Beatific Brother**

Throughout Kerouac's life, Gerard was a signifier on par with any stock Catholic or Buddhist imagery for representing holiness. As suggested in Chapter 1, Gerard's understanding of the reality of the cosmos is a testament to the Catholicism in which Kerouac was steeped as a child. By citing his brother in his literary efforts, he aspired to contain all of the mystery

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<sup>70</sup> Nicosia, 500.

involved with growing older – discovering new things, and the epiphanic realizations that come with rereading old experiences in light of new ones. Childhood in *Visions* is associated with purity, with the stirrings of philosophy, with a romanticized notion of connection to a higher power. Early in the novel, reflecting back on a photograph of Gerard, Jack

...recalled the definite and immortal *idealism* which had been imparted me by my holy brother--- And even later with the discovery (or dullmouthed amazed hang-middled mindburnt waking re-discovery) of Buddhism, Awakenhood--- Amazed recollection that from the very beginning I, whoever 'I' or whatever 'I' was, was destined, destined indeed, to meet, learn, understand Gerard and Savas and the Blessed Lord Buddha (and my Sweet Christ too through all his Paulian tangles and bloody crosses of heathen violence)--- To awaken to pure faith in the bright one truth: All is Well, practice Kindness, Heaven is Nigh.<sup>71</sup>

Through Gerard, Kerouac understood the teachings of the religions he would later adopt in earnest. Ti Jean has childish conceptions of what faith and religion are, but Gerard has given him the proper vocabulary to articulate those considerations. Gerard's main function in this novel is as a conduit to whatever that higher power may be, to sermonize to Ti Jean as Christ or Buddha would to his disciples.

Though they seem to be on the same spiritual wavelength, Gerard is also a foil to Ti Jean. In one of his letters to Neal Cassady, Jack would speak of a vision he had on the street where Gerard was Christ and Jack was Judas. As Kerouac<sup>72</sup> puts it,

"I never asked to be Judas and I'm sure that Judas never did... if I hadn't been born then how could I have betrayed Gerard; for I betrayed him merely by living when he died. He was an angel, I was a mortal; what he could have brought to the world, I destroyed by my mere presence; because if I had not lived, Gerard would have lived... Isn't it mad, that I sense this now, and sensed it as a child, and all of it completely devoid of rational meaning; all of it merely a "sense" and a hidden conviction, and a fear, and perhaps a hope, and a thousand-and-one-mysteries.

Here, Kerouac is underscoring the way that his attitude toward religion fluctuates within the novel. At times, he looks to the church (and by association, his brother) with reverence, but other

<sup>71</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard/Tristessa* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 10.

<sup>72</sup> Charters, *Letters 40-56*, 282.

times with fear. Throughout the *Duluoz Legend*, he consistently preaches the merits of emptiness, nothingness, and unreality, but in *Visions* there are moments where he believes that the mortal individual can have major influence. Here, he goes as far to say that the fact that he exists betrays the memory of Gerard. Because he was not instilled with the divine grace of his brother, and did not understand the layers of significance associated with the things Gerard preached, he saw himself as complicit in Gerard's death. As the novelized version of Kerouac's mother cries at the end of Gerard's life "I haven't suffered like he did, that's what breaks my heart."<sup>73</sup> Gerard had achieved everything that the Kerouac family's French-Catholic ideals had espoused: a death before sin could take hold on his young life, an escape from the sinful life that Jack believed himself to have lived, and a martyr for all of the survivors of the Kerouac clan to idealize and raise to significance. At this stage in Kerouac's consideration of syncretism, he is escaping the bounds of institutionalized religion by investing the power for transcendental upheaval in his sick, fragile brother.

### **Breaking Down the Institutions**

Though *Visions* is consistently preoccupied with the nature of religious thinking, understanding, and practice, Kerouac does not look favorably on religious institutions. Though institutions are useful as a means of conveying information through ideology, once one has reached a state of higher understanding, they become an impediment to greater self-awareness. For example, Jack describes a scene where Gerard has fallen asleep in school. Gerard dreams and speaks directly with the Virgin Mary who gives him a premonition of his coming death:

And as the little wagon of snow ascends to heaven, Heaven itself becomes vague and in his arm with head bent Gerard is contemplating the perfect ecstasy when his arm is rudely jolted by Sister Marie and he wakes to find himself in a classroom... and the Sister's eyes astonished down on him...

Sister Marie's mouth is open---'Did you see all this in a dream?---? here now?--- in the room.'

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 102.

‘Yes, my good sister---dont be afraid, my good sister, we’re all in Heaven---but we dont know it!---Oh,’ he laughs, ‘*we don’t know it!*’  
 ‘For the love of God!’  
 ‘God fixed all this a long time ago.’<sup>74</sup>

Though Sister Marie is a representative of the church (and is thus aware of the possibility of beatific realizations), she is confused by Gerard’s vision, not expecting a child to have direct experiential communion with a higher level of understanding. Despite her interjection, Gerard still managed to attain an enlightened understanding of his lot. Through Gerard, Jack is underscoring his important belief in the illusory nature of earthly existence. If we are truly in Heaven but unaware or not able to comprehend its true nature (as Buddhist thought would dictate), then the suffering that we experience in our day-to-day lives is an unreal and unnecessary focus. One is to use one’s innate religious nature in order to contemplate the reality of their situation; by ignoring suffering and recognizing it to be an aspect of life, one can defeat the existential fear that comes with envisioning a chaotic universe. Faith will lead us to truth and restructuring of the world. Political activism under the pretense of progressive change does not have the same power.

Though *Visions* focuses on the Catholicism with which Kerouac was raised, he deconstructs the notion of the Abrahamic god throughout the novel. Jack suggests that the ‘He’ of scripture is not literally a paternal figure. Rather, God is the sum total of all of the values that the institutions of religion project onto all of the aspects of human life that the individual has trouble understanding and relating to on his own. The transcendental ideal term ‘God’ refers to all things mystical, all manner of spiritual signifiers imposed on the individual based on the dualist system. For example, in a section discussing the nature of sin and how it relates to meaning, Kerouac argues that each individual’s existence is predicated upon sinfulness and

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 55.

ignorance. We seek out and construct religion as a means of creating an escape from those negative ideals. Moreover, Kerouac<sup>75</sup> posits that, by projecting our own desires and needs on a deity though the idea of a personal god, we perpetuate our own ignorance:

We talk about 'the Lord' out of the corner of our hands for what of a better way to describe the undefinable emptiness of the blue sky on such mornings as the morning Gerard wondered---It's typical of us to compromise and anthropomorphize and He it, thus attributing to that bright perfection of Heaven our own low state of self-being and selfhood and selfconsciousness and selfness general---The Lord is no-*body*---The Lord is no bandy with forms...

Here, Jack argues for a god that is not based on the dualist system. Rather than reference a god that is able to show us understanding as a means of escaping our sinfulness, he argues for a god that *is* that higher understanding itself. He believes that – when people use the term God – the ideal to which they are actually referring is the conception of knowledge that godliness connotes. Using a system that relies on anthropomorphizing a being that is supposed to be unknowable and outside oneself is unnecessarily constraining and must be rejected. Since – in his system of thought – that set of knowledge related to the inner workings of the universe is no longer conjoined with a deity, it can come from any source, including from within the self.<sup>76</sup> The individual has the same capability for higher understanding as any ineffable higher power.

Gerard has the same holy radiance that either spiritual figure – Buddha or Christ – represents:

I see there in the eyes of Gerard the very diamond kindness and patient humility of the Brotherhood Ideal propounded from afar down the eternal corridors of Buddahood and Compassionate Sanctity, in Nirmana (appearance) Kaya (form)--- My own brother, a spot of sainthood in the endless globular Universes and Chillicosm---His heart under the little shirt as big as the sacred heart of thorns and blood depicted in all the humble homes of French-Canadian Lowell.<sup>77</sup>

Effectively, Gerard is constructed as a manifestation of all of the beliefs to which Kerouac

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>76</sup> Perhaps Kerouac's understanding of the nature of God here comes from reading Thoreau, Emerson, or Whitman. For a proper characterization of transcendental realism, see those three thinkers.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 10.

subscribed. He represents the totality of knowledge that Jack sought throughout his life. Perhaps this is why he consistently tried to return to his childhood through writing, revisiting Lowell, and spending time with his mother.

As suggested above, Kerouac views the concept of God as the active search for knowledge, rather than the embodiment of knowledge. Kerouac picks apart the concept of a paternal god, believing that the imposition of a pronoun on such a figure brings the ineffable down to the level of base humanity. He references the “undefinable emptiness of the blue sky” to suggest that divine nature occurs in an area without the constraints of socialization, a place without people to impose a pronoun as a framework for understanding knowledge or the search for knowledge. Though *Visions* is rife with pastoral imagery, it is of a very specific variety. The novel idealizes the aspects of small-town life that are centered on the church and nature (both of which are associated with the sublime), and decries those that are based on materialist desire. For example, Jack writes of a day where Gerard finds a mouse caught in a mousetrap outside of a fish market. Kerouac<sup>78</sup> remembers, writing of

...Faces more bleak than envenomed spiders, those who invented mousetraps, and had paths of bullgrained dullishness beaten to their bloodstained doors, and crowded in the sill... I can remember the faces of the Canucks of Lowell, the small tradesmen, butchers, butter and egg men, fishermen, barrelmakers, bums on benches... The hungjawed dull faces of grown adults who had no words to praise or please little trying-angels like Gerard working to save the mouse from the trap----But just stared or gawped on jawpipes and were silly in their prime.

Kerouac uses the derogatory word ‘Canucks’ to suggest that the tradesmen are base, that, in their age, they have lost their concern for things external to themselves. Rather than growing old and neutral as Kerouac did in *The Dharma Bums*, the tradesmen have no concern for the frivolities of childhood; they are divorced from compassion, and have no aspirations to free other beings from suffering or contemplate their existence. The marketplace drives them rather than religiosity.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

Gerard and Ti Jean are superior to them because of their status as children, un-warped by economic determinism. Kerouac is suggesting that economic exchange is a process of being-toward-death. The realization of one's finitude causes investment in the processes of the world. Once an individual becomes aware that they are rooted in a material world that is impossible to impose individual will upon, they construct an unfathomable abyss that produces a place for the individual to succeed and thrive. Kerouac believes that the proper place where people can grow is religion, that spirituality should inform one's everyday existence in every way possible. Ti Jean and Gerard invest themselves authentically in Catholicism, and view the tradesmen as inauthentically existing themselves in capitalism.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Though Jack wrote this novel as a reflection of his youth, it is apparent – based on sections like the one previously mentioned – that he was in part reacting to the time period in which he was writing, rather than solely experience. The tradesmen do not differentiate themselves from the masses, in the same way that people in the 1950's aspired to conform and remain complacent rather than rebel against oppression.

## Chapter 6: Theorizing Buddho-Catholicism

In one of his letters to Sterling Lord, Jack would briefly discuss the plans he had for a Buddhist novel about Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of infinite compassion. In a letter to a friend on May 31, 1957, Kerouac<sup>80</sup> wrote a synopsis of a new story he was writing:

Because the young Buddhist starts out he's fascinated by the teaching that everything is emptiness which is something he's suspected ever since he was 16 years old (he thinks) but actually since babyhood crib wise, and he goes out and as I did sat there in the railyards contemplating the railroad iron convinced it was marshmallow and so it would serve me right if the world crucified me by 18 hoodlums picking me up and holding me stiff straight out like a battering ram and ramming me straight on into a Pennsylvania Railroad coal hopper, even tho I scream as they rush me along: "Butwhether my body is wrecked, has nature added anything to nothing or removed anything from nothing" But a young Buddhist (a Virgin Buddhist) becomes an old dry dharma-bone Buddhist and that is to say he becomes not-a-Buddhist, he becomes nothing, he becomes the mailman shouting hello to you at nine o'clock in the morning, he becomes like everybody else already was!

On a personal level, Kerouac's switching between religions was mediated in terms of his psychological stress. Kerouac creates something that looks like both Buddhism and Catholicism but is neither. The religion that he conceptualizes in *Visions of Gerard* shifts in type and tone throughout the novel, but manifests itself as a refutation of his contemporary situation and a nostalgic longing for his life in the past. As we see above, Kerouac suspected a number of different tenets of Buddhism very early in his life, and wishes to follow them because of their deeply personal nature. However, when he goes out into the world, he is struck down by the institutionalized capitalist materialism that ran rampant in post-war America, resulting in a perversion of his artistic ideals.

For example, honesty in writing and in discourse was one of Kerouac's major beliefs. He created 'spontaneous prose' based on the combined ideas of Neal Cassady, and the Buddha's

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<sup>80</sup> Charters, *Letters* 57-69, 44-45.



*Suranpama Sutra*, a treatise about understanding and conveying the essential nature of a thing.<sup>81</sup>

In his essay “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” Kerouac<sup>82</sup> characterizes the new writing technique in scope:

Not “selectivity” of expression but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought, swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and expostulated statement, like a fist coming down on a table with each complete utterance, bang! (the space dash)—Blow as deep as you want—write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind.

Spontaneous prose lacked traditional punctuation, using the M-dash to separate thoughts in the same way that jazz musicians blew their horns. It also denies concepts of temporality and revision, favoring ekphrastic considerations of all aspects of a scene. With spontaneous prose, Kerouac tried to convey every aspect of his stream of consciousness to the rest of the world, so others could precisely understand the ideas he was trying to articulate by writing.

On the same level, spontaneous prose also had a connotation of instantaneous confession of Kerouac’s innate guilt. Kerouac had imbued his writing process with the tenets of his spiritual belief, and because he associated the profundity of his beliefs with the value of his writing, he expected that the works written in spontaneous prose would be accepted by mainstream society and become incredibly successful. However, publishing companies did not see his writing in the same way. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux rejected his writings about Buddhism several times because of their unprofitability, and Jack became depressed, lapsing back to a dualist system of understanding the world: that he had failed as a writer because there was something innately unmarketable about his prose, and that his project was largely unimportant to the rest of society.

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<sup>81</sup> Similar to the Kantian ideal of *Dinge an sich*. See Kerouac’s letter to Malcolm Cowley, September 11, 1955, which asserts that if writing isn’t “spontaneous, right onto the very sound of the mind, it can only be crafty and revised, by which the paradox arises, we get what a man has hidden... instead of what we need, what a man has shown” (Ibid., 516). In this way, Buddhism is tied directly to Kerouac’s writing.

<sup>82</sup> Ann Charters, ed. “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose.” *The Portable Jack Kerouac* (New York: Viking, 1995), 485.

Ellis Amburn views Kerouac's religious choices as being economically informed as well, though in a somewhat different way, suggesting that the "humiliation of being a failed novelist had become so unbearable that he could no longer face his friends as a writer. He assumed the mantle of a holy man, a Buddhist free of all desire, including the desire to be published."<sup>83</sup> Buddhism and Catholicism simultaneously circumscribed Kerouac's existence. The aspects that Catholicism represented were things that Kerouac aspired to contain within his writing and achieve throughout his life, giving him a specific set of values to aspire to. Catholicism was a relic of his past, representing his family, and small town idealism. In contrast, Kerouac's interpretation of Buddhism was a suggestion that everything is illusory. Eventually, that understanding of the illusory nature of all things caused him to invest less effort in progressive change of the society in which he found himself. Kerouac often falls into this sort of unfortunate dalliance from his own ideals, realizing that it is impossible to obtain higher truth, and provoking his own suffering. Buddhism cannot change the human condition; if we practice it wrong, it simply gives us a new thing to aspire to achieve, consume, and mindlessly pursue.

Once when Kerouac was visiting friends in Northport, Connecticut, he got into a bar fight. Depressed and injured, he was relegated to staying home for the next few days, and having Lucien Carr take care of him. Nicosia<sup>84</sup> writes:

...Jack learned that "people are tough enough to handle suffering and birth by themselves and don't need no Buddha." He derived further tranquility and stability from a synthesis of Buddhism and Catholicism. The Buddhists' Dharmakaya, the Body of the Truth, seemed to him identical in its emptiness with the Catholics' Holy Ghost. What the Buddhists meant by the "dreamlikeness" of reality Jack assumed to be no different from his belief that God was the electromagnetic-gravitational force holding the universe together. Somehow he also believed in a personal God, the Father of Jesus, who wanted people to suffer so they would deserve heaven.

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<sup>83</sup>Amburn, 218.

<sup>84</sup>Nicosia, 573.

When Jack felt that his family life was crushing him, he would fall back on Buddhism and Buddhist imagery, the tool that allowed him to escape his problems. When his friends were being oppressive by taking a political stance that he did not support, he would lapse back to Catholic terminology. However, Kerouac's collision between the two belief systems is a roadmap for dealing with the new politicized existence of the individual in American society.

In "Speeding Across the Rhizome," Marco Abel posits an explanation for the way Kerouacian characters discover selfhood. He argues that a majority of the feelings that the characters in Kerouac's novels are expressing are actually internalizations of the processes outside of them acting on them, influencing their courses of action. All of their psychological and emotional reactions are simply a process of becoming, of developing a new system of understanding, belief, or selfhood. With spontaneous prose, Abel<sup>85</sup> argues that Kerouac is trying to invent his own means of writing as a tool for self-expression and - ultimately - successful restructuring of American thought:

Kerouac as a writer does not speak "for" anyone either. Struggling with the worn-out, yet still dominant rules of the major language within which he operates, Kerouac is interested in *inventing* a new language, a new literature, rather than representing whatever is given. As a white male, lower-middle-class American of French-Canadian ancestry, Kerouac ruminates in the established literature in order to find new forms of expression within the dominant tradition. Rather than rejecting ad hoc the very air he breathes, Kerouac exhales it and thus reconfigures the conventions of literary language.

Kerouac's system of spontaneous prose is a means of documenting the subjective stream of consciousness. He reacts to variables encountered in everyday life (specifically, the way that his Catholicism and Buddhism make him think about the outside world), and attempts to capture those reactions on the page. Kerouac's fusion of his personality and philosophy in his writing is as much a process of documenting life-narrative as it is thinking and working out ideological considerations on the printed page.

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<sup>85</sup> Abel, 231.

### Political Buddho-Catholicism

In 1968, Jack appeared on the television series *Firing Line*, discussing the apolitical nature of the Beat movement, and its relationships to the youth movements of the 1960's.

Kerouac<sup>86</sup> claimed throughout the program that:

...we started this, and the kids took it up and everything. But a lot of hoods – hoodlums – and communists jumped on our backs... Ferlinghetti jumped on my back and turned the idea that I had – that the Beat generation was a generation of beatitude, of pleasure and life and tenderness – but they called it in the papers a ‘Beat mutiny,’ ‘Beat insurrection,’ words I never used, being a Catholic.

Though drunk, Kerouac was willing to suggest on network television that the Beat generation in its entirety was apolitical, that they were simply trying to experiment with consciousness through their writing. Like Thoreau, Jack believed that reform began on an individual level rather than on the institutional level. One must isolate oneself from the larger social apparatus as a model for change and then exact that change.

Kerouac uses Buddho-Catholicism as a means of deconstructing the 1950's social mores.<sup>87</sup> When the social discourse says that economic investment in American society through consumer culture is proper, that it is important to believe the government is a surrogate father figure (responsible and trustworthy), and that one should move to the suburbs and pursue the American dream, he responds with the Buddhist adage that reality is illusory in its entirety, that the world is a projection of one's mental state, and that – by rejecting that mental state – one can achieve enlightenment and become a beacon of hope and salvation for the rest of humanity.

Kerouac believed that American society could escape from the McCarthy era's cycle of restriction and repression of positive thought by suffering a little bit, by rejecting the ‘blank state

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<sup>86</sup> Richard Lerner, 1986. “What Happened to Kerouac? [Video].” Retrieved April 17, 2011, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CD4ofEoUpxE>.

<sup>87</sup> The main focus of his philosophical belief was that reality is an illusion, that it is cyclical, and that it is predicated on suffering. Kerouac's Buddhism also focuses on the individual reaching enlightenment and maintaining one's own subjective suffering for the good of others.

of mind' espoused by the government. However, his system for change is not necessarily located in the material realm. Rather, if one is able to view social reality as a system that is artificially constructed, then one can become a locus for change. Kerouac's individualist approach to higher states of understanding parallels the way American society was concerned with material gain, looking out for themselves first and social welfare second. His politics and call-for-action is realistically a politics of the self, with a secondary effect on the social sphere.

### **Nostalgic Buddho-Catholicism**

Though Buddhism and Buddhist thought were both gaining popularity throughout the early- and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it may not have been enough to reference and recommend Buddhism to the rest of society. People probably did not have the same frame of reference as Kerouac, having been raised in the Catholic or Christian tradition or not being well versed in Eastern religions. So, Jack simultaneously uses Catholicism to assert new values (that is, the values that had previously existed but were cast aside) on top of the ones he just struck down, attempting to convey to the rest of America that we should return to the morality of the past.<sup>88</sup> Kerouac thinks that we may be able to go back to the place where people were happy and successful in their family lives, before global capitalism and mass media interconnectivity had its way with our world. Once again, Nicosia<sup>89</sup> is quite apt in his depiction of Kerouac's ethos:

The idea that the seeker must change inside before he will find wisdom is as old as Buddhism. The *Lankavatara Scripture* warns that disciples must undergo "a 'turning-about' in the deepest seat of consciousness." ... What is new is Kerouac's quintessentially American, optimistic belief that the will to change is itself sufficient to bring change about. Reminiscent of the Yankee adage that "words are deeds," Kerouac pursues the idea that stating a fact is fact enough. ... Kerouac attempts to bring East and West together in the magic of language. As the Buddha passes through the world, the world passes through him. So, for Kerouac, should the writer pass through his material, making it part of himself as he is part of it.

It is no coincidence that – when we see references to Catholicism in Kerouac's writing – there is

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<sup>88</sup> See Chapter 2: Jack and Joe.

<sup>89</sup> Nicosia, 625.

also painful nostalgia, a romanticized longing for the way things used to be. Through his writing, intellectual, and spiritual endeavors, Kerouac constantly pursued returning to his youth, where he was happiest. Indeed, as both Buddhist and Spenglerian thought dictate, Kerouac would find himself perpetuating the same system of actions that would lead him to his mother's house.

After he had moved back in with his mother, Jack reverted mostly to using Catholic imagery, either because of her influence or because, as Nicosia<sup>90</sup> suggests:

Kerouac's Buddhism and all his subsequent shifts were the last resort of a national leader with no nation behind him, a failed conqueror who'd learned to entertain – which indeed is the best stratagem of the powerless. What, if not that, was the chief discovery of the Beat Generation? But Kerouac's mistake, in [Gregory] Corso's view, was that he took himself too seriously to settle for the role of clown, as Gregory had.

Toward the end of Kerouac's life, he became frustrated with the political movements that grew as a response to the McCarthy era's politics (the hippies, the yippies, the beatniks, and the rest). In Kerouac's opinion, Buddho-Catholicism was not being taken up by the youth of the nation. Young people were more inspired the life on the road that he had so carefully constructed. Some preferred to examine his work on a superficial level, idealizing the drug-addled wanderings and free associations of the rucksack revolution, ignoring the symbolic meanings and religious virtue. Certainly, the Dionysian elements of his experimental literature were important, but Kerouac saw himself as one of the major Catholic authors of the era.<sup>91</sup> People who did not see the religiosity of his writing were completely missing the point.<sup>92</sup> In 1959, Jack wrote to Philip Whalen, disillusioned with his belief system, and ready to buy into mainstream society:

Myself, the dharma is slipping away from my consciousness and I cant think of anything to say about it any more. I still read the Diamond Sutra, but as in a dream now. Dont

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<sup>90</sup> Nicosia, 555.

<sup>91</sup> Historian Douglas Brinkley states that almost every page of Kerouac's journals have "a cricifix or a prayer to God" on them, and that Kerouac goal was "trying to make everything holy" through his writing. See NPR's "'On the Road' at 50" (2007) for more information.

<sup>92</sup> See Kerouac's letter to Patricia MacManus regarding questions about the Beats, on July 19, 1957: "Explaining the Beat Generation will be a pleasure and you'll be surprised how much of the concept derives from the New Testament." *Charters, Letters 57-69*, 58.

know what to do. Cant see the purpose of human or terrestrial or any kinda life without heaven to reward the poor suffering fucks. The Buddhist notion that Ignorance caused the world leaves me cold now, because I feel the pressure of angels. Maybe rebirth is simply HAVING KIDS.<sup>93</sup>

He would remain depressed for a good portion of the rest of his life, grappling with the problem of existence. He had the epiphanic realization that life *had* meaning, that everything was not illusory. At one point, Kerouac tried to go back to the Lowell of his childhood, revisiting his old haunts to psychically sort out his understanding of the universe.

Even though he saw his politico-religious synthesis as not being functional, Kerouac wrote a letter to Gary Snyder philosophizing about the role of the individual in translating teachings and beliefs to the outside world: “The fact of the matter is, Buddha was right and Zen is a corruption of his truth – Just as St. Paul was a corruption of the rightness of Jesus Christ – and the church that followed was a corruption of Jesus Christ.”<sup>94</sup> This letter is an allegory that connects him and the Apostle Paul. Though both had good intentions, their reinterpretations of religious teachings may not come to fruition the way he would like.

Kerouac wants everyone in the world to be his spiritual brother or sister, but on his terms rather than theirs. Sometimes that means playing into the whims of social discourse, but other times it means rejecting that discourse outright, supplanting it with one’s own reading of the way people should interact in the world.<sup>95</sup> Kerouac’s attempted project is to restructure America to meet his own needs, reshaping the American political landscape, and he expected the rest of America to follow him as he did so. For him, it is the ideals that matter, not their implementation.

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<sup>93</sup> Charters, *Letters 57-69*, 236-7. This quote is especially interesting because Kerouac had a daughter that he refused to acknowledge. The intersection here between his epistolary life and actual life again shows a tension between the desire to be a functioning cog in the American machine and his political stance.

<sup>94</sup> Charters, *Letters 57-69*, 363.

<sup>95</sup> In a letter to Neal Cassady, Kerouac argues that one’s identity must exist in flux in order to retain one’s freedom: One of the big routines in society is to "look right" ... [so that] no cop, no prick dares question [your] freedom. It's all an evil game. I change faces a hundred times a day in knowledge and aversion of this... You must begin to protect yourself by playing the game... While the world is still stupid we must be wise. Charters, *Letters 40-56*, 213.

## Conclusion

One of the major stances Jack takes in his writing is that – since the individual is defined relationally, within a culture – it is impossible to conceive of ourselves as entities that are independent and isolated. Because Jack was obsessed with memory, history, family, and the subjective experience, he attempted to catalogue all of his individual experiences, with the goal of having a body of work that would lead him (and his readership) to a higher understanding of reality through transcendent spiritualism. Mysticism of all kinds were very important to him, as he saw religion as a distinct and important way to consider one's place in the world. His life was a spiritual journey, with distinct and indistinct stops.

Catholicism, the religion with which he was raised, suggests that salvation – that is, higher understanding, profound realization, manifestation of a higher order – comes from interaction with others. In a young Kerouac, it inspired reverence for all things within the world. When Kerouac began writing in earnest, Catholicism was so impacted and perverted by political ideology and the considerations of the people in power that it lost its ability for people to gain significant spiritual realization. Catholicism became a tool for perpetuating the ideologies of large-scale institutions, messages to which Kerouac did not subscribe. At this point, he began associating with the array of people who would forge the Beat generation.

It was around this time that he discovered Buddhism, understanding it to be a reflection of things he had believed for a long time but had yet to solidify into a rational philosophic ideal. However, Buddhism placed too much emphasis on the individual's role in the process of reaching higher understanding, and – though Kerouac was fairly successful at following some of the ideals held in Buddhist scripture – he ultimately failed at following the religion on its own terms. Because his Buddhist education was largely piecemeal, his blending of several different



doctrines proved to be his downfall. Buddhism was unable to fulfill all of the philosophic needs he expected it to meet; he could not function as a Buddhist within the society of perverse Catholicism from which he had originated. In order to make it possible for him to succeed spiritually, he began writing, using a combination of Catholic and Buddhist imagery in his novels. Kerouac uses the hybrid ideology of Buddho-Catholicism as a two-pronged approach for social change in his literature, but its manifestation – like the construction of the religion itself – tends to be schizoid and seemingly contradictory.

His ultimate goal by combining Buddhist and Catholic thought was to return to the romanticized conception of America he experienced in his youth, where spirituality and mystery were one and the same, where there were no boundaries between dogmas, where society was not nearly as materialistic. Kerouac's popularization and dilution of Buddhist philosophy, and subsequent combination of it with Catholicism redefined religion and morality for several generations. Kerouac's philosophy – though incredibly personal – became a cure for the ideological problems that had existed in American society for decades previous. As Amburn<sup>96</sup> suggests, Kerouac's Buddho-Catholic ideals became a means of escaping Puritanical guilt, thus altering the progression of American society:

The seepage of Eastern thought into Western philosophy and religion via Kerouac and his disciples helped liberate a generation from centuries of enslavement to the Puritan work ethic and, like a lifting of Maule's curse, freed them from shame and repression. When Kerouac first told the story of Buddha in the mid-fifties, few even knew who Buddha was, but they quickly learned as Kerouac's unpublished religious treatises and letters circulated among the subterraneans of the fifties.

Unfortunately, Kerouac's message was re-shaped by the mass media. Through the progression we see in *The Dharma Bums* and *Big Sur*, it is evident that Kerouac was unable to escape American society in the way that he wished. In *The Dharma Bums*, he had a marked idealism for

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<sup>96</sup> Amburn, 218-219.

experimentation with a new religion, as a means for change. *Vision of Gerard* contained an idyllic setting to which Buddho-Catholicism would eventually lead. Finally, during *Big Sur*, he had become the figurehead of the countercultural revolution but could not function as a harbinger of change. The youth idealized his desire to travel, his sexual experimentation and drug use, and completely ignored the spiritual insight that was supposed to come with his writing. Rather than being convinced to produce change, people that bought and read his books were buying into a lifestyle of superficiality. Eventually, Kerouac's image was used in the 1990's as a representation of coolness in order to sell jeans, coming full-circle away from his original desire of 'rucksack revolution.'<sup>97</sup>

It could be that all of Kerouac's religious conflict stems from the death of Gerard. When Gerard died, Jack lost his spiritual mentor and – for the first time – was to forced deal directly with death, loss, and the aspects of Catholicism that are concerned with suffering. When he discovered Buddhism, he saw it as a means of direct connection to all of his ancestry (which – throughout his life – he was constantly seeking to understand and discover) and a means of escape from the spiritual oppression of American society. However, to practice Buddhism in its entirety would have caused him to forsake his religious ties to his brother. So he combined Catholicism and Buddhism together, eventually returning to his hometown and finding it completely changed. Perhaps it is the case that Kerouac retained his Catholic belief as a means of preserving the community of his youth, a way to keep the nostalgia for his childhood, his family, and hometown intact.

But if it didn't work, what did Buddho-Catholicism do for America or for Kerouac

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<sup>97</sup> Thanks to Gap, Kerouac's image had become a consumable product. However, it is also the case that – though he was rebelling against his ideals being commoditized – he had to balance his personal ideology with the tools necessary to succeed in the marketplace. In order to be a published author, he had to be complicit in his own co-opting.

personally? Ultimately, it doesn't matter. The most important thing for Kerouac was to experience "living religion."<sup>98</sup>

As Kerouac once decided after ingesting LSD, "walking on water wasn't built in a day."<sup>99</sup> Kerouac believed that the individual's role was to live his religion, investing all of his experience, body, and mind into it, but also allow the religion itself to grow and change.

Kippenberg's<sup>100</sup> reading of the role of religion in society, based on Hegel, is a particularly telling means of understanding Kerouac's religious problems:

[Hegel argued] that religion does not create a harmony between the human mind and the natural world, between subject and object. In contrast to that romantic view, religion is a major power in establishing a split between them.... Hegel was the first to distinguish two different, even opposite, modes of world rejection: contemplation/mysticism on the one hand, asceticism on the other.

Kerouac's Buddhism suggests that all of social reality (and by extension, the boundaries that it imposes between different belief systems) is superficial by its very nature. Whether expected or not, his attempts have the potential to lead to social change. His constant treading of the line between asceticism and the contemplative life show that it is the ideals that matter, not their direct implementation. The fact that he could conceptualize such a philosophy makes him a Buddho-Catholic bodhisattva, a being that intends to spontaneously perform right actions for the benefit of all other sentient creatures, but that gets sidetracked because of the materialistic orientation of external society. Kerouac's syncretism – the experimentation with Buddhism, Catholicism that he practiced – was simply a process of becoming, of reorientation, of exploration and personal growth.

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<sup>98</sup> Nicosia, 494.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 621.

<sup>100</sup> Hans G. Kippenberg. "In Praise of Syncretism: The Beginnings of Christianity Conceived in the Light of a Diagnosis of Modern Culture." In *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, edited by Anita M. Leopold, Jeppe S. Jensen (New York: Routledge, 2005), 34.

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