

ABSTRACT

SIMPSON, EMILY PATRICIA. Religious Turmoil: The Conflict Between Buddhism and Catholicism in Jack Kerouac's Life and Writing. (Under the direction of Dr. Nick Halpern)

Although Jack Kerouac has begun to be recognized as one of the great 20th century American writers, scholars have not yet fully explored the influence that his conflicting religious beliefs had on his work. Kerouac's internal struggle to reconcile his Buddhist and Catholic thinking, and his ultimate attempt to embrace Catholicism, had a profound effect on his writing, giving it the religiously tumultuous charge that is essential to Kerouac's distinctive writing style. This study addresses Kerouac's religious life and its effect on his work by focusing primarily on three of his works: *Visions of Gerard*, *The Dharma Bums*, and *Big Sur*. Kerouac's complex relationship between Buddhism and Catholicism and the effect this conflict had on his work has heretofore gone largely uninvestigated. However, it is essential to a complete understanding of his work. Exploring this element of his work sheds new light on Kerouac's novels that illuminates his depth and solemnity as a writer. Kerouac's religious quest was a cornerstone of his artistic development, and the three novels I have examined illustrate how Catholicism and Buddhism together informed that quest.

RELIGIOUS TURMOIL: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND
CATHOLICISM IN JACK KEROUAC'S LIFE AND WRITING

by
EMILY PATRICIA SIMPSON

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chair of advisory committee

advisory committee member

advisory committee member

This work is dedicated to my parents, for being such wonderful examples of brilliance; to all the family and friends who have supported me emotionally and intellectually throughout my schooling; to Nicholas Meriwether, for being my sounding board this year for all things Beat — your enthusiasm and thoughtfulness have been invaluable; and to the memory of Jack Kerouac, with respect and gratitude.

BIOGRAPHY

Emily Simpson received her BA in English from North Carolina State University in 1999, graduating Summa Cum Laude. She entered the MA program in English at NCSU in August of 2000, and will receive her degree in May of 2003. She currently is employed by Eli Research, Inc. in Durham, NC.

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INTRODUCTION

To understand what I'm sayin
You gotta read the Sutras,
The Sutras of the Ancients, India
Long ago...

-Jack Kerouac

I'm a Jesuit. I live in a house
with my mother. It's a mon-
astery, and I'm a monk and
she's a reverend mother.

-Jack Kerouac

...[Kerouac] thinks Buddha is the pope.

-Lucien Carr

In recent years, Jack Kerouac has begun to receive the attention he deserves as one of the great 20th century American writers¹. However, Kerouac scholars have not yet fully explored the influence that his conflicting religious beliefs had on his work. Kerouac's internal struggle to reconcile his Buddhist and Catholic thinking, and his ultimate attempt to embrace Catholicism, had a profound effect on his writing, giving it the religiously tumultuous charge that is essential to Kerouac's distinctive writing style. Kerouac believed and felt deeply about all aspects of life, as is evidenced in the many accounts given of him by his friends and in his published letters. This depth fueled his internal conflict between Buddhism and Catholicism — a shallower individual could easily dismiss such feelings and live his life out relatively unaffected by them. This religious conflict within Kerouac arguably contributed to his emotional breakdown and descent into alcoholism later in life. His work provides a portrait of an author virtually consumed by religious conflict, and a close reading of his novels reveals his ongoing attempt to either reconcile the two religions or decide which God to serve — it is this soul-searching that makes his work distinctly Kerouacian.

¹ This attention is evidenced in the dozens of books and articles published on Kerouac and his work in the last 20 years, as well as CDs of recording sessions he held during the height of his career.

Early in life, Kerouac developed his belief in the “terrible holy majesty” of the Roman Catholic church, which shaped the religious outlook that he would carry throughout his life (qtd in Sorrell 191). However, as young Kerouac moved through adolescence and into adulthood, he became increasingly troubled spiritually and desperately fought against the Catholic guilt that threatened to overtake him. In the mid-1950s, Kerouac sought relief from the psychological constraints of Catholicism and began to study and practice Buddhism. For approximately ten years of his adult life, Kerouac devoted himself to mastering Buddhist philosophy with the hope of finally attaining peace. He hoped that Buddhism would provide a much-needed means of escape from his overwhelming sense of guilt and self-loathing, which can largely be attributed to his Catholic upbringing as evidenced in Kerouac’s own accounts of his childhood. Kerouac was torn between physical desire and feelings of disgust toward physical intimacy. He bore guilt associated with sexuality and his body in general, and reveled in the Buddhist notion of rejecting our corporeal selves. Further, Kerouac was intensely egocentric (though, in a classically Kerouacian contradiction, he was also capable of notable compassion) and sought escape from his egotism. As Christopher Smith notes, Buddhism provided Kerouac with “a system of thinking that devalued the self” (17).

Unfortunately, Kerouac also found in Buddhism what he viewed as permission to continue drinking. Kerouac’s alcoholism was a source of despair for him and those close to him and was yet another cause of guilt, and he used Buddhism as a means of condoning his inability to stop drinking. This is not to say that Kerouac turned to Buddhism merely as a means of justifying or rationalizing poor behavior: He genuinely believed that it could provide him with the spiritual enlightenment that would allow him to transcend his earthly

problems. Finally, Kerouac sought Truth in both his life and his art and was drawn to the tenets of Buddhism that deal directly with discovering the truths of reality (Smith, 18).

Kerouac carried Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible* on him at almost all times, and memorized many of its passages (much as he had memorized scripture as a child). He focused most of his attention on the *Surangama Sutra*, the *Lankavtara Sutra*, and the *Diamond Sutra* (which Kerouac claimed contains the "highest wisdom" [Smith 26]) (Smith 21). In his study of eastern philosophy and Kerouac's poetry, Christopher Smith notes that the *Surangama Sutra* informed Kerouac's understanding of spontaneity, and he applied these ideas to his prose style. The *Lankavtara Sutra* appealed to Kerouac's Catholic sense of compassion and his interest in language. The *Diamond Sutra* focuses on notions of reality that profoundly influenced Kerouac's outlook by introducing the idea that nothing exists as an independent, solitary essence, and there is no fundamental reality (Smith 23-27).

Throughout his years living as a Buddhist, Kerouac still felt loyal to the Catholic Church and to the Trinity it represents. Ultimately, Kerouac largely abandoned Buddhism, and returned to Catholicism with as much whole-heartedness as he could muster in the final years of his life. Kerouac's writing provides his readers with a clear picture of the internal conflict that drove him between Catholicism and Buddhism. He believed strongly in the power of verisimilitude in art, and drew directly from his own life for material. Kerouac poured all of himself onto the page; he treated writing as confession, and developed his theory of spontaneous prose as a means of ensuring that he write as honestly as possible. Kerouac explicitly acknowledged the debt his spontaneous prose method owed to the sacrament of confession (Sorrell 195), placing his religious orientation at the heart of his

creative output, and it imbues much of his oeuvre. As Kerouac biographer Gerald Nicosia observes:

...any attempt to understand Kerouac's approach to writing must take into account his deeply religious temperament. A framework larger than tone, style, and point-of-view must be used to comprehend the works of writers — like Blake, Whitman, Yeats — who are also prophets. (326)

While some scholars have explored the influence of Kerouac's religion on his writing, they have either focused solely on his Catholicism or his Buddhism. Interestingly, there appears to be a trend in the scholarship for authors discussing Kerouac's Catholicism to mention his Buddhism as little more than an afterthought that usually positions his Buddhist years as a misguided distraction from his true religion (especially among earlier studies). For example, in her groundbreaking biography of Kerouac, Ann Charters states:

Kerouac was of course born a Catholic, raised a Catholic, and died a Catholic. His interest in Buddhism was a discovery of different religious images for his fundamentally constant religious feelings. He always remained a believing Catholic. It was just that, for a time, he was a self-taught student of Buddhism. (190)

Though technically accurate, this description diminishes the seriousness of Kerouac's commitment to Buddhism. The problem with this view is that it hampers a fuller understanding of the profound effect of his religious conflict on his writing.

Interestingly, there seems to be little or no mention of Kerouac's Catholicism in most studies of his Buddhism, which poses equal problems for exploring how this conflict played out in literary terms. Richard Sorrell provides an interesting, though brief, examination of Kerouac's Buddhism in light of his dominant Catholic philosophy, but approaches the dichotomy as a biographical point of interest — he does not explore the relationship with respect to Kerouac's writing. Joy Walsh and William Blackburn contribute enlightened

studies of the effects of Catholicism and Buddhism, respectively, on Kerouac's writing. However, they do not integrate the two or do much more than acknowledge that the conflict existed. In his recent book, *Kerouac, the Word and the Way: Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester*, Ben Giamo offers the first significant combined discussion of Kerouac's Buddhism and Catholicism to date. However, Giamo does not explore the profound effect that the *conflict* between his pursuit of the two religions had on Kerouac's writing. As a driving force in the writer and his work, this conflict is central to gaining a more complete understanding of this important American writer's work.

This study addresses Kerouac's tumultuous religious life and its effect on his work by focusing primarily on three of his works: *Visions of Gerard*, *The Dharma Bums*, and *Big Sur*. *Visions of Gerard* is Kerouac's tribute to his older brother, who died at age nine. Throughout his life, Kerouac maintained that Gerard was a saint and idolized his Catholic piety and purity. This book not only provides insight into Kerouac's thoughts on Catholicism, but it also illustrates a successful attempt on Kerouac's part to blend his Catholic and Buddhist philosophies. This virtually seamless merge of Buddhism and Catholicism in *Visions of Gerard* stands alone among his novels, and his next attempt, *The Dharma Bums*, showed the strain clearly. As Kerouac's best-known Buddhism-centered work, *The Dharma Bums* was inspired by the time Kerouac spent with Gary Snyder, who had a major impact on Kerouac's practice of Buddhism. Lastly, in *Big Sur* the conflict explodes full force in Kerouac's soul-searing depiction of the beginning of his decline. This is perhaps his most difficult book for readers, because he takes us along on his ride to the abyss of his tormented psyche. Kerouac's turmoil overtakes him in this book, and the pervading religious

overtones (both Catholic and Buddhist) illustrate the important role that his religious conflict played in this turmoil.

This study addresses this conflict in six chapters. Chapter 1 provides essential background and biographical information on Kerouac's religious and personal development, and introduces the friends and family members who play essential parts in any discussion of his religion. Chapter 2 offers an overview of Kerouac's Catholicism and Buddhism, focusing on his interpretation of both and the impact each religion's tenets had on his writing. Chapters 3 through 5 discuss the three novels in the order in which they were written (not the order in which they were published), followed by the concluding chapter. This organization is designed to provide an accurate picture of Kerouac's progression and decline, illuminated by the changes seen in his writing. By placing this fundamental religious tension squarely in the context of his artistic development, we gain a much fuller picture of the artistic, emotional, and intellectual stakes that give these works their singular beauty, pathos and power.

1. JACK KEROUAC'S RELIGIOUS LIFE

Jack Kerouac's friend, Lucien Carr, once said that Kerouac "thinks Buddha is the Pope" (Miles 274). Though intended to be humorous, Carr's remark neatly epitomizes the religious conflict that plagued Kerouac throughout his adult life. Kerouac's religious plight began in infancy. Christened Jean Louis Lebris de Kerouac, Jack was the third child of Leo Kerouac and Gabrielle L'Evesque, born on March 12, 1922 in the blue-collar town of Lowell, Massachusetts. Jack (nicknamed "Ti Jean"), his sister Caroline, and his brother Gerard grew up steeped in the devout Catholicism that characterized Lowell's Franco-American population. A hard-working mill town, Lowell's residents were predominantly Catholic, and considered Catholicism an essential part of their lives and identity. As Richard Sorrell points out,

...the Franco-American church elite saw themselves and their followers as the only pure Catholic nationality, who would expand the kingdom of God and expose the false material values of Protestantism. Religion ideally thus became a way of life, rather than just part of daily existence. (191)

In this environment, Kerouac developed his belief in the "terrible holy majesty" of the Roman Catholic Church as a young child. Like most children in Lowell, the Kerouac children attended Catholic school, played with Catholic friends, and spent countless hours memorizing the catechism. This foundation shaped the religious outlook that Kerouac would carry throughout his life.

When Ti Jean was four years old, his world was turned upside down by the death of his nine-year-old brother. Dennis McNally views this event as the catalyst behind Kerouac's turmoil later in life:

Kerouac grew up as a Roman Catholic mystic obsessed with freedom, the wider world, and spiritual search on one side of his life, and with a desire for

the stability and traditions of his native French-Canadian culture on the other. The split had begun in the psychic turmoil over his brother's death when Kerouac was four, and it would tear him apart — first opening within him a rarefied sensibility that would make his mark as a writer, and finally killing him. (485)

Gerard had been sick for most of his life, suffering from a rheumatic heart accompanied by many other complications. Gerard was instrumental in Jack's religious training, though he was but a toddler at the time (as Kerouac illustrates in *Visions of Gerard*, discussed in chapter 3 of this study). When Gerard was well enough, he devoted significant energy to teaching Ti Jean essential Christian qualities, such as reverence, compassion, gentleness, and humility. By all accounts, everyone who knew Gerard adored him — indeed, he often was viewed as a child saint, a tradition among French-Canadians that Gerald Nicosia explains in his critical biography on Kerouac.² Even after Gerard's death, Jack lived in his shadow. Throughout his life, Kerouac would idolize Gerard, holding him up as the model of religious purity.

Kerouac began his schooling at St. Louis de France Parochial School, where the nuns he respected with all his heart were known to beat children for minor infractions. Kerouac spent his mornings at St. Louis studying standard English subjects (grammar, spelling, arithmetic, history, etc.), and moved on to classes conducted in French in the afternoons. These lessons included “French spelling and grammar, Canadian history, catechism, and holy history” (Nicosia 27, 31). In fifth grade, Jack moved to St. Joseph's Parochial School, where he continued to impress teachers with his intelligence and earned the third-highest grade point average in the school (Nicosia 31). Just before entering the sixth grade, St. Joseph's

² Nicosia relays the story of Marie-Rose Ferron, who was born in Quebec in 1902. She began showing signs of sainthood at age 3. The Child Jesus is reported to have appeared before her, showed her his wounds, and marked her body with them. She stated that “death is only a passage that leads to life,” which seems to have informed Gerard's outlook on life and death. (26)

notified the Kerouacs that they lived beyond the school's district, and Jack was forced to attend Bartlett Junior High School.

Kerouac's instructors at Bartlett soon discovered that Jack was miles ahead of his fellow sixth-graders intellectually, and moved him up to the seventh grade. For the first time in his young life, eleven-year-old Kerouac had to take all of his classes in English. Coming from predominantly French schools and a French-speaking household, this proved to be a challenging transition. However, it was not long before teachers who initially pegged Kerouac as something of a dim-wit began to recognize his keen intellect, and he quickly mastered English (Nicosia 32).

When Kerouac entered Lowell High School, he began to be recognized not only as a bright student, but also as a talented athlete. He excelled in track and field, but football soon emerged as his forte. Jack led his high school team to many victories and was touted as a star on the rise. His popularity on the field and his striking good looks made Jack a favorite among the girls, as well. While Kerouac dated several girls, his most serious girlfriend in high school was Mary Carney³, with whom he discovered sexuality and all the guilt and shame that came with it for a Catholic boy with raging hormones. (Feelings of guilt and shame associated with sex would haunt Jack for the rest of his life, another bodily torment that Buddhism would fail to assuage.) Kerouac's prowess on the football field ended up being his ticket out of Lowell, landing him an athletic scholarship to Columbia University in New York, on the condition that he attend one year of prep school at Horace Mann. In 1939, 17-year-old Jack Kerouac left his beloved hometown for a new life in New York.

³ Kerouac would immortalize his relationship with Carney in his book, *Maggie Cassidy*, which details his high school years.

After a successful year at Horace Mann, Kerouac moved on to Columbia University, where he expected to be the hero-worshipped football star he was in high school. However, Kerouac was astonished and frustrated to discover that others outshone him on the field. In fact, head coach Lou Little excluded Kerouac from the starting line-up altogether. Then Jack fractured his leg during practice one night, and was out of commission for the remainder of the first season. That injury effectively ended Kerouac's football career, because he quit the team the next season when Little still refused him what Kerouac believed was adequate field-time. Although this decision might have robbed America of a football titan, it set a new literary and social phenomenon in motion.

While Kerouac was recuperating, he met the people who would shape the rest of his life and would form the nexus of the Beat literary movement — William Burroughs, Lucien Carr, Herbert Huncke, John Clellon Holmes, and Allen Ginsberg. These men soon became Kerouac's literary family and they encouraged him as he wrote his first novel, *The Town and the City*, published by Harcourt Brace in 1950. They also shared in his quest for spiritual certainty, and served as inspiration for him spiritually. The latter especially is true of Huncke, whose suffering as a homeless drug addict Kerouac viewed as holy, beautiful, and almost saintly in its stoicism. Then, in 1947 Kerouac met the man who would forever change his life, Neal Cassady.

Cassady quickly become the single most important influence on Kerouac's literary growth. The young author first encountered Neal's antics by reading the letters he wrote to a mutual friend, Hal Chase, and Kerouac was inspired by Cassady's free-flowing writing style. Indeed, Neal Cassady's letters led Kerouac to develop the prose style that would come to define most of his work, which Kerouac termed "spontaneous bop prosody." Kerouac also

felt drawn to Cassady as a kindred spirit and fellow tortured Catholic — blood-brothers bound by guilt. Few, if any, of their other friends understood the guilt that threatened to consume Cassady and Kerouac as wayward Catholics. “Such was the root of Neal’s failure ... Like Jack, he was raised a Catholic,” muses Neal’s wife Carolyn in her essay on the two men (Cassady, “Blind” 166).

Ironically, despite their similar religious upbringings (and emotional baggage), it was Cassady who most significantly affected Kerouac’s religious path by indirectly introducing him to Buddhism. When Jack went to live with the Cassadys in January of 1954, he found Neal obsessed with the teachings of California mystic Edgar Cayce, who claimed to have found scientific proof of reincarnation. As Charters recounts, “Cayce’s ideas were dreary and second-hand, Jack argued, and if Neal were really interested in that sort of thing, he should throw away Cayce’s books and read the ... ancient books on Buddhism” (*Biography* 192). However, Kerouac’s take on Cassady’s interest in Cayce’s teachings (as well Jack’s reading of the teachings themselves) does not appear to have been entirely negative. In a May 17, 1954 letter to Carolyn Cassady, Kerouac writes, “I still say you have been duped into belief in ego and self-nature and immortality by Cayce,” but goes on to say that Cayce is “radiantly right” for the most part (Charters, *Letters, Vol. 1* 419). The following April, Jack writes to Neal, “I approve of your Cayceism interest, I have the same interest in Edgar Cayce, I think he’s great and I think you’re the greatest” (Charters, *Letters, Vol. 1* 472). However, in a typically Kerouac vacillation, he scoffs to Ginsberg a few weeks later that “Neal and Carolyn and Cayce are all crazy. I guess it doesn’t take much intelligence to tell you why...” (Charters, *Letters, Vol. 1* 485-6).

Regardless of Kerouac's true feelings about Cayce, his teachings, and Neal's obsession with them, the debate sent Kerouac to the library to read up on the Buddhism he was using to counter Neal's defense of Cayceism. (Kerouac had read *The Life of the Buddha* several months before his 1954 stint with the Cassadys.) According to Charters, "All through February he sat reading in the public library, taking notes on Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible*, the Baghavad-Gita, the Yoga Precepts, Vedic Hymns, Buddhist Sutras, the writings of Lao-tse and Confucius — a mammoth dose of Eastern studies" (*Biography* 192). Although Kerouac began his study of Buddhism in an attempt to win his Caycean debate with Cassady, he soon became deeply immersed in the ideas themselves, and started to see Buddhism as a possible release from the Catholic constraints that bound him. Kerouac also believed Buddhism could provide him with the spiritual enlightenment that would allow him to transcend his more corporeal problems, such as alcoholism. Gerard Nicosia suggests that part of Kerouac's fascination with the religion centered on a sense of personal identification with Siddhartha Gautama (the original Buddha):

Born of noble house, raised in luxury, Gautama renounced his wealth and royal privileges at the age of twenty-nine, to wander among the poor and suffering and so learn the true terms of earthly life. The descendant of a baron, Jack always thought of himself as an aristocrat; and if he never knew ease, yet he was always coddled by a mother who would give anything in her power to keep him hers. In addition, Jack felt he had renounced the privilege of his genius to share the simple sorrows and joys of the fellaheen. Curiously, when Jack retold the life of the Buddha to the *Paris Review* interviewers in 1967, he claimed that Gautama was *thirty-one* when he made his renunciation — Jack's own age when plunging into the Buddhist life. (457-8)

And plunge into the Buddhist life Jack certainly did. For approximately the next 10 years, Kerouac lived and breathed Buddhism, though the specter (and sometimes the glory) of Catholicism still lingered within him. Kerouac read intensively about his newfound religion and devoted much time to taking copious notes designed to educate and enlighten his friends.

Compiled into a mammoth tome called *Some of the Dharma*, most of these notes finally saw publication in 1997, 40 years after Kerouac had completed it. At 420 pages, it stands as a testament to Kerouac's serious approach to life as a Buddhist.

In September of 1955, Ginsberg introduced Kerouac to Berkeley poet Gary Snyder, who soon became Kerouac's closest Buddhist-buddy and who would ultimately serve as the model for Japhy Ryder in *The Dharma Bums*. Snyder and Kerouac made an odd pair, to be sure; as McNally notes, "In personality they were poles apart: Kerouac was mercurial and contradictory, an erratic genius as a writer but a man torn between light and dark. Snyder had his moods, but was almost ostentatiously healthy, disciplined, focused, and self-reliant" (489). Or as David Robertson puts it, "If Kerouac's mode was detachment, [Snyder's] was engagement" (215). These differences, as well as Catholicism's tenacious hold on Jack's psyche, resulted in many conflicts between the two friends, many of which are evident in *The Dharma Bums*, as chapter four of this study will discuss. Although Kerouac was as immersed in Buddhism as he would ever be during the time he spent with Snyder, his friend had no illusions about Kerouac's fundamental theological orientation; as Nicosia puts it, Snyder "was convinced that Kerouac would be asking for Catholic last rites on his deathbed" (490). Nonetheless, Snyder was an inspirational presence in Kerouac's life and provided him with a disciplined, devoted model of the Western student of Buddhism, as well as the intellectual stimulation Kerouac needed to carry his Buddhist studies as far as he could.

While Kerouac could share his Buddhism with Snyder, many of Jack's other friends either politely listened to his Buddhist outpourings without sharing his enthusiasm, or else denounced his new religion altogether. William Burroughs argued that Buddhism was inappropriate "'for the West' because it was neither indigenous nor a form of active

engagement with the facts.” Further, Burroughs acidly wrote to Kerouac, “A man who uses Buddhism or any other instrument to remove love from his being in order to avoid suffering has committed, in my mind, a sacrilege comparable to castration ... Buddhism amounts to a form of psychic junk” (qtd in Lardas 242). Burroughs was not the only friend who received Kerouac’s new way of life with less than open arms: “[Kerouac] also felt that neither his literary agent, Sterling Lord, or Robert Giroux, one of the New York editors who had shown an interest in his work, were supportive of his writing on Buddhism” (Stanford ii).

Throughout his life, Kerouac longed for acceptance and approval, so his friends’ and literary colleagues’ denunciation of his Buddhism would have come as a hard blow to the young writer.

Kerouac’s family members were, of course, positively dismayed with his adoption of Buddhism, imbued with the pre-Vatican II Church’s teachings on salvation. If Ti Jean did not give up this silliness, he risked eternal damnation, a point his mother doubtless had in mind in her frequent admonitions to him to re-embrace the Catholic Church. Kerouac points to this conflict in *The Dharma Bums* during a scene in which the Kerouac character, Ray Smith, tries to explain to his family a Buddhist epiphany he has experienced. Instead of sharing his enthusiasm, Smith’s mother and sister come back at him by saying, “You and your Buddha, why don’t you stick to the religion you were born with” (114). Not surprisingly, this frustration over religious differences does not appear to have been one-sided. Jack’s patience for his mother’s devout Catholicism also seems to have been tried during his Buddhist heyday. Alex Albright relates an anecdote told by one of Caroline Kerouac-Blake’s neighbors, Helen Bone, about the summer Kerouac spent living with his sister, her husband and child, and his mother in Rocky Mount, NC. Ms. Bone recalls:

I knew he upset his mother a lot. He seemed to poke fun at her. I remember once when I took his mother to the priest in town to get her new rosary blessed. She'd lost her other one or broke it, and I think Nin gave her a new one. Anyway, we asked Jack if he wanted to come along — it was me and Nin and Gabe [Kerouac's sister and mother] — but he just grinned, didn't say anything, but I could tell he thought it was kind of foolish, and she was just having a fit to get it blessed. He finally just said no, he didn't think he'd go along. (47-48)

These religious conflicts between Kerouac and his mother eventually would fade into the background, as Kerouac left Buddhism behind by the early 1960s and once again began clinging to the cross and the Catholic Church. Unfortunately, he was also clinging to the bottle as tenaciously as ever, which had been a source of despair for him for many years. He wrote to Ginsberg in 1954:

I've been getting sillydrunk⁴ again lately in Remo and disgusting myself a la Subterraneans. I want to live a quiet life but I am so weak for booxe [sic] booze. I am very unhappy and have nightmares; when drinking; after a week of abstinence, I am happier than ever before in life, but slowly become bored and wonderin what to do now ... (Charters, *Letters*, Vol. 1 410).

Kerouac's Buddhist studies had not proven to be the path to the enlightenment — and sobriety — he had so desperately needed. Once that became clear to him, Jack had little further use for Buddhism. He wrote to Philip Whalen in 1959, "Myself, the dharma is slipping away from my consciousness and I can't think of anything to say about it any more. I still read the diamond sutra, but as in a dream now. Don't know what to do. Can't see the purpose of human or terrestrial or any kinda life without heaven to reward ... The Buddhist notion that Ignorance caused the world leaves me cold now, because I feel the presence of angels" (qtd in *Stanford*). However, though Kerouac professed to "feel the presence of angels," the most telling line in this passage is his admission, "don't know what to do."

⁴ Throughout this thesis, I have reproduced Kerouac's writing exactly as it was published.

In the final years of his life, Kerouac devoted much time to drawing representations of the crucifixion, meditating on the cross over his bed, and as he told Ted Berrigan in 1968 “pray[ing] to Jesus to preserve my sanity and my energy so I can help my family” (Plimpton 121). Regardless of these efforts, he still could not attain spiritual contentment, became increasingly depressed, cynical, and lonely (especially after Cassady’s death in 1967), and literally drank himself to death. On October 21, 1969, Jack Kerouac died at St. Anthony’s Hospital in St. Petersburg, Florida, of hemorrhaging esophageal varices after twenty-six blood transfusions (Nicosia 697). Jack’s penultimate sentence to his wife works hauntingly on many levels. He simply said, “Stella, I hurt,” (qtd in Nicosia 697)⁵. Kerouac had a “traditional Catholic funeral,” and is buried in Edson Catholic Cemetery in Lowell (Charters, *Biography* 366). The priest who officiated at the ceremony had known Kerouac when he was growing up in Lowell, and recited a wonderfully appropriate verse from Ecclesiastes: “‘They shall rest from their words and take their works with them.’ Jack most excitedly felt he had something to tell the world, and he was determined to do it ... Our hope and our prayer is that Jack has now found complete liberation, sharing the visions of Gerard. Amen. Alleluja” (qtd in Charters, *Biography* 367). Until his dying day, at the heart of Kerouac’s religious temperament was his religious turmoil, and his life and work paint a portrait of an author illuminated and finally consumed by religious conflict. Ironically, the internal conflict that ultimately destroyed him lends his writing the complexity and richness that give it such lasting value. Kerouac attempted to work through his theological quandary in his writing, first attempting to fuse Catholicism and Buddhism into a hybrid religion that would work for him, and when that did not work, trying to choose one over the other. Therefore, to truly understand Kerouac’s work, we must understand the religions behind it.

⁵ Nicosia reports Kerouac’s final sentence to his wife as being, “Stella, I love you.”

2. CATHOLICISM, BUDDHISM, AND KEROUAC: AN OVERVIEW

Jesus Christ and Siddhartha Gautama were among the most significant influences in Jack Kerouac's life, arguably surpassed only by his mother and brother. These religious figures touched virtually every aspect of his psyche and dramatically influenced his approach to writing. Unfortunately, they did not often exist in harmony, keeping psychological and spiritual peace at bay for Kerouac for most of his adult life. The source of this conflict lies in Kerouac's approach to the fundamental teachings of each religion, which we will explore in this chapter.

In *Lonesome Traveler*, Kerouac writes, "I'm not actually 'beat' at all, but strange solitary Catholic mystic." To understand the significance of this statement, one must consider Kerouac's relationship with the Catholic Church and its teachings. Richard Sorrell contends that Kerouac's religious upbringing — complete with forced catechism memorization, angry nuns overseeing school lessons, and the ever-present specter of sin — is critical, explaining "much of the contradiction between what [Kerouac's] reading public thought he represented, and the man revealed" in his own pronouncements, such as the one quoted above (190). That is, after *On the Road* propelled Kerouac into fame, thousands of readers (those who loved him as well as those who loathed him) viewed the "King of the Beats" as a carefree, free-wheeling vagabond simply on a quest for "kicks." This perception of Kerouac was in sharp contrast to the quiet, shy, and introspective man he really was, and the gulf between perception and reality caused Kerouac a great deal of frustration and grief. Further, most Kerouac fans assumed him to be a rootless wanderer dashing around the country without much thought of "home" — few realized how tightly he was connected to his Franco-American roots in Lowell.

Kerouac's French-Canadian ethnicity played a large role not only in his self-definition, but also in his relationship with the Catholic Church. Sorrell points to the three components of the Franco-American ethnicity: *la survivance*, or national survival, depended on devotion to (1) church, (2) family, and (3) the land (191). "The Franco-American elite made a valiant attempt to preserve these triads of *survivance* by stressing Catholicism, family, and the broader ethnic environment to be found in the Little Canadas of the mill towns where most Franco-Americans obtained employment" (Sorrell 191). As Sorrell points out, Kerouac was raised amid just such a "*survivance* trinity." Sorrell offers a useful explanation of the history of the Catholic Church as it relates to French-Canadians, and by extension Franco-Americans, which deserves to be quoted at length:

The Catholic Church was the main guardian of French-Canadian *survivance* after the fall of New France, which removed the French government and much of the power of the seigneurs, two competitors for allegiance of the masses. By the late nineteenth century the church was ensconced, both in Quebec and in Franco-American national parishes of New England, as protector of the French-Canadian heritage. It indoctrinated the faithful in the importance of family, parish, and parochial school, and in the dominance of spiritual over material. The significance of religion in the daily lives of Franco-Americans cannot be overstressed. In its most extreme form this became belief in a providential mission, a divine union of nationalism and Catholicism. The Franco-American church elite saw themselves and their followers as the only pure Catholic nationality, who would expand the kingdom of God and expose the false material values of Protestantism. Religion ideally thus became a way of life, rather than just part of daily existence. This was the atmosphere in which Jack Kerouac was raised. (191)

Even amid his fellow Catholics in Lowell, Jack took his religion more personally than most, perhaps because of his brother Gerard's saintly influence. In a 1950 letter to Cassidy, Kerouac writes, "I believe my brother was a saint, and that explains all. Now you will begin to know about me. I could not live without this confession" (Charters, *Letters*, Vol. 1 252).

While Kerouac wholeheartedly viewed his writing as a form of confession, the actual sacrament of confession, with its air of solemnity and the invisible priest, was horrifying to him. Sorrell explains, “The weekly sacrament of confession was torture to a young boy who felt compelled to gain forgiveness for masturbating” (192). Indeed, Kerouac was guilt-ridden about his sexuality virtually from the moment he discovered it as a child; this guilt plagued Kerouac throughout his life and was no doubt intensified by his occasional homosexual activity and his alcoholism (he drank to escape the guilt, but felt guilty because he drank).

Carolyn Cassady explains:

His guilt compounded, and he became more and more desperate to get away by himself. When he succeeded, he was tormented even more ... he never realized what he was trying to escape was simply temptation ... The overpowering guilt is nurtured in childhood and grows ever stronger, as both men [Kerouac and Cassady] displayed. Eventually it killed them both ... In their last few years, they both gave up the struggle and masochistically exaggerated these actions that had caused their self-loathing, indulging in a kind of flagellation, compatible with that as prescribed by the Church. (“Blind” 166).

Kerouac reveals the profound effect this guilt had on his psyche from his youth on in the “full confession” of his life that he penned to Neal Cassady in December 1950 and January 1951. This letter illuminates Kerouac’s reverence for — and fear of — the “terrible holy majesty” of the Catholic Church. For Kerouac, the Church carried an otherworldly quality that often was as menacing as it was comforting. He writes to Neal, “The Catholic Church is a weird church; much mysticism is sown broadcast from its ritual mysteries till it extends into the very lives of its constituents and parishioners ... A haunted house isn’t a novelty among Catholic kids and as you see all the houses I’ve mentioned are haunted one way or the other” (Charters, *Letters*, Vol. 1 270). Kerouac lived every day of his life in a “house” (i.e., his mind and body) haunted by guilt, and he viewed himself as a wretched

sinner for most of his life. Granted, the very foundation of Christianity is rooted in sin, so Kerouac's view of himself certainly is not unusual for a man so steeped in Catholicism. However, Kerouac was not like most men — those who knew him often attested to his unusual sensitivity and intensity. This is a dangerous combination for a man filled with guilt and self-loathing, and it was simply more than Kerouac could bear. There lies the “terrible” part of the Church's “holy majesty” in Kerouac's heart; instead of serving as a comfort, Kerouac's relationship with the Church only intensified his suffering. In his confession to Cassady, Kerouac writes, “I was born, my damned sin began ... I believed from early infancy, or sensed, in late-afternoon dreamy ways, that a SNAKE was coming after me ... Antichrist Kerouac, the SNAKE came for him alone, no one else, I now know, the SNAKE came for all of us and caught us all, but Christ is the son of God & died for our sakes truly” (*Charters, Letters, Vol. 1* 250 -1).

These notions of inherent and perpetual sinfulness were pounded into Kerouac's head virtually from the moment he could read (and probably before then). Part of the curriculum at the Catholic schools Kerouac attended was to memorize the *Baltimore Catechism*, which Kerouac mentions in works such as *Visions of Gerard* and *Doctor Sax*. Among the first lessons presented in the *Catechism* is one dealing with original sin. Kerouac and his fellow classmates memorized and recited the following lesson:

Q. What befell Adam and Eve on account of their sin?

A. Adam and Eve, on account of their sin, lost innocence and holiness, and were doomed to sickness and death.

Q. What evil befell us on account of the disobedience of our first parents?

A. On account of the disobedience of our first parents, we all share in their sin and punishment, as we should have shared in their happiness if they had remained faithful.

Q. What other effects followed from the sin of our first parents?

A. Our nature was corrupted by the sin of our first parents, which darkened our understanding, weakened our will, and left in us a strong inclination to evil.

Q. What is the sin called which we inherit from our first parents?

A. The sin which we inherit from our first parents is called original sin.

Q. Why is this sin called original?

A. This sin is called original because it comes down to us from our first parents, and we are brought into the world with its guilt on our soul.

Q. Does this corruption of our nature remain in us after original sin is forgiven?

A. This corruption of our nature and other punishments remain in us after original sin is forgiven. (*The Baltimore Catechism* 12)

Kerouac clearly took this lesson to heart, often viewing himself as a hopelessly fallen creature. His feelings of inadequacy seem to have been fueled at least in part by his belief in Gerard's moral, intellectual, and spiritual superiority over him⁶. Kerouac saw himself as the black sheep, while Gerard was the picture of perfection and holiness. Jack even goes so far as to say to Cassady, "Judas is me, Jesus is Gerard ... 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" (Charters, *Letters*, Vol. 1 282). This shocking sentiment serves as proof of Kerouac's intensity of feeling as he takes survivor guilt to the extreme.

In addition to the pervading sense of guilt exhibited in much of Kerouac's writing, he also provides a sense of being torn between feelings of genuine awe, respect, and reverence where the Church is concerned and those of anger and frustration. For example, in a Jan. 9, 1951 continuation of his "confession" to Neal Cassady, Kerouac writes, "The church is the last sanctuary in this world, the first and the last. It is the worldly edifice of the Lord; I'm done sneering at any part of it" (Charters, *Letters*, Vol. 1 285). However, just the day before, Jack sounded far more bitter where the church and its God are concerned: "How could I

⁶ Kerouac does not appear to have developed this belief on his own; there is evidence that his mother did not conceal her preference for Gerard over Jack. Kerouac reveals this painful situation in *Visions of Gerard* when he writes, "And there's no doubt in my heart that my mother loves Gerard more than she loves me" (72).

address God when for the better part of my life He did not make Himself manifest and gave way to the Devil so often, and forgot me” (Charters, *Letters*, Vol. 1 273). Kerouac’s hot-and-cold relationship with the Church, as well as his battles with guilt and hopelessness, might be attributable to the Jansenian strain in his Catholicism, which was common among French-Canadian Catholics. Sorrell explains:

[Jansenism] may best be described as analogous to Calvinistic Puritanism: salvation for only the elect few while the depraved mass of humanity wallowed in sin and damnation ... Jansenism obviously could transmit a pessimistic and guilt-ridden view of life to those Francophones who believed in it. Although Jack struggled to escape such an outlook, he remained in its grasp. Evidence of this is seen in his persistent fascination with sin and guilt ... (197)

While evidence of this fascination (which arguably borders on obsession) abounds in Kerouac’s writing, Sorrell highlights one particularly poignant example, as related in *Visions of Gerard*. As would be the case with any Catholic, the Hail Mary was a staple of Kerouac’s religious repertoire from the time he was a small child. The second verse of this prayer is as follows: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us, sinners, now and at the hour of death.” Kerouac, however, recited the line thus: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us, sinners now and at the hour of death.” That is, instead of focusing on the fact that although he is a sinner, Mary is praying for him now as she will do at the hour of his death, Jack focuses on the fact that he is a sinner now and always will be (Sorrell 197). For a man who devoted his life work to uncovering and sharing the joy and goodness in life, this view of his own dark sinfulness must have been a powerful engine — and a nearly impossible burden. In order to maintain a positive outlook on life, Kerouac needed to find a way to overcome — or at least manage — his fixation on sin. Enter Buddhism, which Kerouac clung to as a possible resolution for the turmoil and terror he felt as a renegade Catholic.

Kerouac's attraction to and interest in Buddhism is clearly expressed in *Some of the Dharma*. The foundation of Buddhism — and Kerouac's starting point where Buddhism is concerned — are the “four noble truths,” which Kerouac records in *Some of the Dharma* as follows:

1. All Life is Sorrowful
2. The Cause of Suffering is Ignorant Craving
3. The Suppression of Suffering can be Achieved
4. The Way is the Noble Eightfold Path (3)

Each of the first three truths would have touched Kerouac, who was no stranger to sorrow and suffering, and the promise of an alternate path (i.e., a path other than that espoused by the Catholic Church) leading away from the suffering he endured undoubtedly would have been welcome news. For most of his life, Kerouac had been particularly attuned to the suffering of those around him, and often equated a person's holiness with their degree of misery. Herbert Huncke, one of the early Beat circle's avatars, offered a prime example of this notion. Throughout his life, Kerouac maintained his staunch belief in Huncke's holiness; Neal Cassady, William Burroughs, Kerouac himself, and countless other sufferers who passed in and out of Kerouac's life also point to his fascination with the downtrodden, dispossessed, and persecuted side of life.

In Buddhist terms, the First Noble Truth is that *dukkha* is the defining characteristic of life. “Dukkha conveys the essential quality of life ... it means personal physical and mental pain; grief, despair, and distress; the anguish of loss and separation; and the frustration associated with thwarted desires” (Seager 15). This is not to say that Buddhism advocates a doom-and-gloom approach to life, however. As Seager explains, “Buddhists consider this focus on suffering to be neither tragic nor pessimistic but a realistic and correct diagnosis of the central problem in human life” (15).

The Second Noble Truth states that *dukkha* is caused by craving, or *tanha*. Seager notes that, on the most basic level, this craving comes from wanting what we do not have, and clinging to what we do have for fear of losing it (whether we actually want it or not). “On a more complex level, [Buddha] taught that craving is rooted in ignorance, a misunderstanding of the transient nature of reality that leads people to seek lasting happiness in things that are subject to change” (15). For Kerouac, this craving could have represented a more immediate problem — namely, his craving for the alcohol he knew would destroy him.

According to the Third Noble Truth, humans can abolish suffering by abandoning craving. When one abandons what Kerouac calls “ignorant craving,” one can achieve “quietude, equanimity, joy, and even liberation from the wheel of *samsara*,” (i.e., the cycle of life, death, and rebirth) (Seager 15). Unfortunately, though Kerouac recognized the power of this idea, he was ultimately unable to fight the disease that had devastated his father, his uncle, and was the scourge of Franco-American blue collar Lowell.

Finally, the Fourth Noble Truth offers the Eightfold Path as a roadmap to *nirvana* and an end to suffering. The Eightfold Path offers a path to Enlightenment according to Buddhist thought, much as the Old Testament teaches that the Ten Commandments point followers toward salvation. Kerouac records the Eightfold Path as follows in *Some of the Dharma*:

1. Right Views — Ideas Buddhistic
2. Right Aspirations — Resolution to Follow
3. Right Speech — Gentle Speech⁷
4. Right Conduct — Kind Circumspect Behavior
5. Right Means of Livelihood — Harmless Foodgathering
6. Right Endeavor — Perseverance in Supernormal States
7. Right Mindfulness — Realization of Supernormal States
8. Right Contemplation — Holy Ecstasy in Supernormal States (3)

⁷ Kerouac indents this item in *Some of the Dharma*. He offers no explanation of why he did so, but it seems probable that he wanted to emphasize Right Speech in particular, given his obsession with words and his reputation for empathy and gentleness.

As Seager explains, Right View and Right Resolve (what Kerouac terms “aspirations”) are “forms of wisdom” through which human beings distinguish right from wrong and recognize the consequences of both good and bad behavior (i.e., right view) and then consciously decide to set aside attitudes and behaviors that block the path to Enlightenment. The following three steps have to do with living ethically, as Seager notes:

Right speech is the recognition of the power of language to harm both oneself and other beings ... Right action entails avoiding behaviors such as killing, stealing, and profligate or harmful sexual activity. Right livelihood requires that a Buddhist earn a living in a way that is honest, nonexploitative, and fair. (16)

Finally, the last three steps of the Eightfold Path involve meditation — or as Kerouac says, “supernormal states.” Right Endeavor requires a constant, mindful pursuit of a positive mental state; Right Mindfulness “requires attention to body, feelings, mind, and mental states in the course of meditation and maintaining presence of mind in daily living;” and Right Contemplation (or concentration) means fully internalizing one’s mental focus “in states of mental absorption” (Seager 16).

These basic Buddhist tenets gave Kerouac a foundation on which to build his life as a student of Buddhism. Dwight Goddard gave him another significant stepping stone in the form of his anthology of Buddhist texts, *A Buddhist Bible*.⁸ Kerouac carried Goddard’s anthology almost constantly, and focused most of his attention on the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Surangama Sutra*, and the *Lankavtara Scripture*. Smith notes that the *Diamond Sutra* focuses on notions of reality that profoundly influenced Kerouac’s outlook by introducing the

⁸ Interestingly, Goddard was himself a born Christian, and returned to his original faith in the final days of his life. In addition to *A Buddhist Bible*, Goddard published works exploring the potential for Buddhism to “inform Christianity,” such as *A Vision of Christian and Buddhist Fellowship in the Search for Light and Reality* and *Was Jesus Influenced by Buddhism? A Comparative Study of the Lives and Thoughts Of Gautama and Jesus* (Aitken xvii-iii). I have found no evidence that Kerouac read either of these works.

idea that nothing exists as an independent, solitary essence (Smith 23-27). The *Diamond Sutra* teaches that if one can let go of “such arbitrary conceptions of phenomena as the existence of one’s own ego-selfness,” he can attain peace and tranquility (Goddard 88). This idea appealed to Kerouac because he desperately sought peace and saw his own egocentrism as a detriment to his spiritual well-being. This sutra also espouses the “practice of selfless kindness,” which Kerouac took to heart — those close to Jack often praised his enormous capacity for kindness, gentleness, and compassion. The sutra says a disciple “should practice charity by giving, not objective gifts alone, but the selfless gifts of kindness and sympathy” (Goddard 91).

The *Surangama Sutra* informed Kerouac’s understanding of spontaneity and the True Mind, and he superimposed these ideas onto his prose style. The sutra states, “If you are now desirous of more perfectly understanding Supreme Enlightenment and the enlightening nature of pure Mind-Essence, you must learn to answer questions spontaneously ...” (Goddard 112). Kerouac clearly applied this idea to his spontaneous bop prosody, and the notion of spontaneity as a path to “Supreme Enlightenment” meshes nicely with Kerouac’s notion of spontaneous writing as a form of confession in the Catholic tradition. Just as a Catholic turns to confession to cleanse his soul, thereby achieving a closer connection with God, a Buddhist approaches life with direct truthfulness that allows him to achieve Enlightenment. Kerouac’s spontaneous bop prosody was thus an attempt to purge his soul through confession, as well as to recount his life with the “straight-forwardness of the mind” that the *Surangama Sutra* praises.

The *Lankavtara Scripture* appealed to Kerouac’s sense of compassion and his interest in language. This text explains the importance of helping others achieve enlightenment;

Kerouac took this responsibility seriously, as evidenced in the many letters to friends in which he explains Buddhist tenets in efforts to enlighten those close to him. The *Lankavtara Scripture* also offers the promise of “self-realization;” that is, the promise that all the pieces will fall into place and the disciple will “become endowed with all the powers, psychic faculties, self-mastery, loving compassion, skillful means, and ability to enter into other Buddha-lands” (Goddard 327). Once again, Buddhism offers Kerouac hope for peace and escape from the trappings of Catholicism and the physical self. The *Lankavtara Scripture* also includes a lengthy discussion on the nature of words, which would have interested Kerouac a great deal:

... words are only sweet sounds that are arbitrarily chosen to represent things, they are not the things themselves, which in turn are only manifestations of the mind ... Disciples should be on their guard against the seductions of words and sentences and their illusive meanings, for by them the ignorant and dull-witted become entangled and helpless as an elephant floundering about in the deep mud. (Goddard 286-7)

As a wordsmith, Kerouac must have read these lines with great interest, and they seem to have informed his idea that the sound of a word is sometimes more important than its meaning. Note that in his poetry, Kerouac sometimes strings words together based more on their collective oral/aural effect than on their collective meaning. These sutras show that Buddhism not only influenced Kerouac’s spiritual outlook, it also reinforced and influenced his artistic philosophy.

Thus we see two distinct religions at work on Kerouac’s psyche. Each of these religions informed his practice as a writer, and Kerouac’s unique relationship with each, individually and in unison, gives his work the charge that makes it distinctly Kerouacian. The impact of Kerouac’s evolving relationship with both Buddhism and Catholicism is apparent in several of Kerouac’s novels, and the chapters to follow trace that evolution.

3. “WE’RE ALL IN HEAVEN”: KEROUAC, CHRIST, AND BUDDHA IN *VISIONS OF GERARD*

“Would I could remember the huddling and the love of these forlorn two brothers in a past so distant from my sick aim now I couldn’t gain its healing virtues if I had the bridge ...” (*Gerard* 4). This passage from the opening pages of Kerouac’s novel about his brother, “Saintly Gerard,” makes clear that the story to come is told from the standpoint of a man looking from the dark torrents of a raging river at an unattainable peaceful shore. Kerouac wrote *Visions of Gerard* from late December 1955 through early January 1956 while sitting at his sister’s kitchen table in Rocky Mount, NC, and claimed it was his favorite of his own works (Nicosia 500). *Visions of Gerard* chronicles the short life of Gerard Kerouac, as seen through the eyes of both young Jack Kerouac and the Kerouac sitting on the other side of a gulf dividing his youth from his adulthood. Writing to Gary Snyder on January 16, 1956, Kerouac refers to *Visions of Gerard* as a “full-length book of sorrows,” and notes that he would have liked to call the book *St. Gerard the Child* (*Charters, Letters, Vol. 1* 540). Throughout the novel, Kerouac highlights his brother’s saintliness, often presenting his own spiritual condition (both at the time and as a young child) in striking contrast to his brother’s holiness.

The novel is a sentimental tribute to Gerard, and its scenes often appear to be renderings of memories romanticized over time. However, the book offers interesting insight into Kerouac’s complicated view of the Catholic Church and his relationship to it, as his attitude fluctuates among reverence, awe, fear, respect, and doubt. Perhaps most significantly, though, is that although Kerouac wrote the book during the height of his Buddhist studies, the author of *Visions of Gerard* sounds decidedly Catholic. While Buddhism does figure prominently in the novel, Kerouac’s ultimate focus clearly is on the

cross. Finally, despite the unsteady feel of Kerouac's depiction of Catholicism and his role as a Catholic, *Visions of Gerard* does not even come close to approximating the degree of conflict found in Kerouac's later works, such as *The Dharma Bums* and *Big Sur* (the focus of chapters 5 and 6).

Kerouac opens *Visions of Gerard* by stating that on the day of his brother's death, "the nuns of St. Louis de France Parochial School were at his bedside to take down his dying words because they'd heard his astonishing revelations of Heaven delivered in catechism class on no more encouragement than that it was his turn to speak" (1). He continues on to explain that "the first four years of my life are permeant and gray with the memory of a kindly serious face bending over me and being me and blessing me — The world a hatch of Duluoz Saintliness, and him the big chicken, Gerard⁹, who warned me to be kind to little animals and took me by the hand on forgotten little walks" (2). From the novel's outset, then, Kerouac establishes Gerard as an exemplar of Christian piety who serves as a role model and mentor for his younger brother. *Visions of Gerard* is Kerouac's most direct statement about death and dying, but also about what it is to be the surviving brother of a boy who by all accounts fulfilled and surpassed the superhuman demands of Franco-American Catholicism. Ben Giamo notes that where his brother was concerned, Kerouac "projected a strong sense of survivor guilt that gnawed at him over the course of his life" (113). Gerard's death represented to Kerouac "the passing away of a spiritual hero, a child and youth who embodied humility, kindness, and patient suffering — a pure soul destined to be an angel of Heaven" (114). As Kerouac makes clear on several occasions, he seemed to believe that

⁹ Interestingly, aside from Kerouac himself as Jack Duluoz in several installments of *The Duluoz Legend*, Gerard is the only other character in Kerouac's novels allowed to retain his actual first name. The reason for this decision could be that Gerard was the only person Kerouac wrote about as a mature author who he actually remembered very little about. Thus, he might have felt that using Gerard's real name lent authenticity to his depiction of his brother.

Gerard was the only Kerouac brother worthy of Christian Heaven. This sustained belief in his inferiority to Gerard played a role in the survivor guilt that Giamo pinpoints as a central anxiety in Kerouac's life, and in *Visions of Gerard* itself, but another incident arguably plays an equal (or even larger) role in the guilt that plagued Kerouac throughout his life. Kerouac relates this incident to his sister in a letter dated March 14, 1945:

... the reason I have this subconscious will to failure, a sort of death-wish, stems from something I did before I was five years old and which stamped upon me a neurotic and horrible feeling of *guilt* [Kerouac's italics]. Now all I remember about Gerard, for instance, is his slapping me on the face, despite all the stories Mom and Pop tell me of his kindness to me. The psychoanalyst figured that I hated Gerard and he hated me — as little brothers are very likely to do, since children that age are primitive and aggressive — and that I wished he were dead, *and he died*. So I felt that I had killed him, and ever since, mortified beyond repair, warped in my personality and will, I have been subconsciously punishing myself and failing at everything ... But psychoanalysis can make me remember the kind things Gerard did to me, and the kind feelings I had for him — which would thus balance against the terrible guilt complex and restore normalcy to my personality. (Charters, *Letters, Vol. 1* 87)

Given Kerouac's admission that he did not recall anything about Gerard on his own, instead relying on memories conjured through psychoanalysis and his parents' stories, it is likely that few of the scenes in *Visions of Gerard* stem from real memories (unlike most of Kerouac's novels). However, considering the blatantly idealistic portrait of Gerard the novel paints, Kerouac arguably used the book in part as a means of assuaging (or "balancing") the guilt that bore down on him. That is, by focusing on Gerard's saintliness and kindness (real or exaggerated), Kerouac could be attempting to make up for once wishing his brother were dead. This need to atone for any past ill will toward Gerard makes even more sense when we consider the connection Kerouac establishes between Gerard and Christ (by symbolically making amends with Gerard, Kerouac could have felt he was doing the same with Christ).

Gerard's main function in the novel is to present to "Ti Jean" (the toddler Kerouac character) and others around him a positive and hopeful view of life and death as a faithful Catholic. Kerouac presents many of Gerard's religious reveries in a form akin to a lesson or sermon, with Ti Jean as the attentive disciple. For example, Gerard's first description of Heaven is as follows:

"Heaven is all white" (*le ciel ye tout blanc*, in the little child patois we spoke our native French in), "the angels are like lambs, and all the children and their parents are together forever," he'd tell me, and I: "*Sont-ils content?* Are they happy?"

"They couldnt be anything else but happy ——"

"What's the color of God? ——"

"*Blanc d'or rouge noir pi toute* —— White of gold red black and everything ——" in translation. (3)

In another scene, Kerouac presents Gerard in a righteous rage, sounding more like an evangelist in the throes of a sermon than a little boy angry with his cat for killing a mouse.

The especially significant aspect of this scene is Ti Jean's perception of Gerard's uncharacteristic wrath:

"*Mechante!* Bad girl! Dont you understand what you've done? When will you understand? We don't disturb little animals and little things! We leave them alone! We'll never go to Heaven if we go on eating each other and destroying each other like that all the time! —— without thinking, without knowing! —— wake up, foolish girl! —— realize what you've done! —— Be ashamed! shame! ... Understand what I'm telling you! It's got to stop some fine day! There wont always be time! ...

I was amazed and scared in the corner, as one might have felt seeing Christ in the temple bashing the moneychanger tables everywhichaway and scourging them with his seldom whip. (11)

This passage illustrates Kerouac's view of himself as inferior to his brother, as Ti Jean cowers in the corner while "saintly Gerard" unleashes a diatribe that clearly reaches far deeper than the situation at hand. Further, Kerouac's comparison of Ti Jean to a spectator watching Christ is haunting when we recall the parallel that he draws between himself and

Judas where his Christ-like brother is concerned. This passage also provides an example of Kerouac's often seamless blending of Buddhism and Catholicism in *Visions of Gerard*, since preservation of all forms of life is a basic Buddhist tenet, though the manner in which it is portrayed is distinctly Catholic. This ability to successfully intertwine the two religions will deteriorate as Kerouac's life progresses, culminating in the scenes of psychic torment so prominent in *Big Sur*.

Kerouac devotes many passages in *Visions of Gerard* to the boy's descriptions of Heaven, which ring with the idealism and romance inherent to the childhood imagination. In Kerouac's eyes, Gerard perceives religion and the rewards of faith as pure, simple beauty. This notion would have been appealing to Kerouac, whose own theological perspective was far more complicated, and he comes back to it time and again throughout the novel. In one of the dozens of Heaven passages in *Visions of Gerard*, Gerard announces, "When I get to Heaven the first thing I'm gonna ask God is for a beautiful little white lamb to pull my wagon — Ai, I'd like to be there right away and not have to wait —" (26). Kerouac further elucidates Gerard's vision of Heaven in a passage in which Gerard has nodded off in school and is dreaming that the Virgin Mary is leading him back to Heaven, from which he has apparently strayed without knowing it:

"How'm I gonna follow you?"

"Well, your wagon is there" and Oh yes, he snaps his finger and looks to remember and there it is, the snow-white cart drawn by two lambs, and as he sits in it two white pigeons settle on each of his shoulders; as prearranged, he bliss-remembers all of it now, and they start, tho one perplexing frown shows in his thoughts where he's still trying to remember what he was and what he was doing before, or during, his absence, so brief — 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 ... (53)

The forgotten activity Gerard was attending to in his dream before being called back to Heaven was comforting Ti Jean. Just before the Virgin Mary appears on the scene, obliterating Gerard's immediate memory, he thought, "Since the beginning of time I've been charged to take care of this little brother, my Ti Jean, my poor Ti Jean who cries he's afraid ——" and Kerouac writes that Gerard was about to stroke his brother's head to comfort him, but was interrupted by the call of Heaven. This was, of course, quite literally the case in real life. As a grown man, Kerouac carried this view of Gerard as a source of comfort and security who was taken from him prematurely.

The most significant aspect of Gerard's dream of Heaven, and a central idea in the novel itself, is his revelation that we are already in Heaven. After briefly describing his dream to Sister Marie and his classmates, Gerard exclaims, "Dont be afraid my good sister, we're all in Heaven —— but we dont know it! Oh ... *we dont know it!*" (54). As Nicosia notes, this notion is not new to religious thought nor literature: "Dostoyevsky had put almost the same words in the mouth of Father Zossima's saintly brother, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and even there it was really a simple derivative from the Gospel notion that those who don't see and hear God on earth lack the proper eyes and ears" (502-3). Kerouac's decision to include this revelation in *Visions of Gerard* is no simple tipping of the hat to previously conceived notions, however. Gerard's belief that "we're all in Heaven" provides a tidy solution to one of the central problems presented in the novel — namely, why it is that Gerard's benevolent God allows suffering in the world.

Several passages in the book center on Gerard's often frustrated questions about why God lets His children suffer. Of course, this is not a surprising line of questioning coming from a young boy who has suffered for most of his life. However, many of Gerard's

questions focus not only on his own physical suffering, but extend to the suffering of other people and even animals. For example, early in the novel Gerard becomes upset when his mother explains that the birds near his window will not come to him because “boys hurt birds.” Gerard laments, “Why? Why is everyone so mean? Didn't God see to it that we — of all people — *people* — would be kind — to each other, to animals” (20). A later passage centers largely on Gerard's own suffering, but he does expand his view to include humanity in general when he asks his mother:

“Why did God leave us sick and cold? Why didn't he leave us in Heaven?”
“You're sure we were there?”
“Yes, I'm sure.”
“How are you sure?”
“Because it can't be like it is.”
“*Oui*” — Ma in her rare moments when thinking seriously she doesn't admit anything that doesn't ring all the way her bell of mind — “but it is.”
“I don't like it. I wanta go to Heaven. I wish we were all in Heaven.”
(44)

Gerard's later revelation that “we are all in Heaven” is, of course, a direct response to this scene. That is, if our everyday consciousness is merely a kind of dream that diverts our attention away from our true existence (i.e., in Heaven) — such as Gerard envisions in his dream — then any suffering we endure in this place is not actually real. If our true abode is in Heaven, and there is no suffering there, then the suffering we perceive to be reality is merely an illusion we can overcome by recognizing where we truly dwell. Gerard's God does not actually allow His children to suffer; but He leaves it up to us to use our faith in the immediacy of Heaven to transcend our “earthly” suffering.

This conclusion is one of several in *Visions of Gerard* that highlights Kerouac's reverence for the Christian God and his belief in the underlying goodness and mercy the Catholic faith has to offer loyal congregants. It is this belief that fuels Kerouac's statements

of loyalty to his native religion (even while mingling it with Buddhism in the novel overall). For example, he writes, "I'll never malign that church that gave Gerard a blessed baptism," and after considering the nuns' way of "whacking" students on the knuckles for failing to remember their lessons, he says, "But it was all secondary, it was all for the bosom of the Grave Church, which we all know was Pure Gold, Pure Light" (29-30). Kerouac even exalts in the Catholic practice of confession he often found so excruciating, presenting it as a miracle in its own right. Gerard becomes extremely upset after pushing one of his classmates to the ground, and runs to church to confess his transgression, which he views as a sin because "my Jesus wouldnt have liked that watching from his cross" (34). After Gerard completes his confession, Kerouac writes:

It's all over! It was nothing! He's pure again!
He prays and bathes in prayers of gratitude at the white rail near the
blood red carpet that runs to the stainless altar of white-and-gold, he clasps
little hands over leaned elbows with hallelujahs in his eyes ... God is merciful
and God above all is kind, and kind is kind, and kindness is all ... (38)

While the central message in this passage seems to be one of reverence and respect for God and confession, it also points to a degree of frustration with the Catholic Church. In the same breath that Kerouac uses to profess God's kindness and extol the virtues of confession, he seems to scold Him for making Christians in general (and Catholics in particular) endure confession in the first place. As he puts it, to be God and to see the bliss in Gerard's eyes "all because of some easy remission of mine, were hells of guilt I'd say" (38). In other words, God should feel guilty for making *us* feel guilty about committing sins that He can so easily forgive.

This sense of disquiet crops up repeatedly in *Visions of Gerard*, though most of the instances center on Kerouac's frustration with mankind rather than his frustration with God.

Sounding every bit the guilt-ridden Catholic, Kerouac bemoans the soiled and sullied state of the human soul: "... you bumbling fool you're a mass of sin, a veritable barrel of it, you swish and swash in it like molasses — You ooze mistakes thru your frail crevasses — You've bungled every opportunity to bless somebody's brow" (30). He also laments our inherent inability to avoid sin: "Sin is sin and there's no erasing it — We are spiders. We sting one another. No man is exempt from sin any more than he can avoid a trip to the toilet ... Even Gerard was a sinner" (31). This focus on humankind's inherent sinfulness is not surprising, given the intensely Christian environment in which Kerouac was raised. After all, the theological basis of Christianity is original sin.

The fall of man is not the only point of Catholic dogma emphasized in *Visions of Gerard*. Indeed, reflecting on Gerard's very existence drives home for the grown-up Kerouac some of the catechismic lessons he memorized as a child, according to critic George Dardess: "The manner of Gerard's life and death impresses upon Kerouac the incomprehensible fact of Catholic doctrine that divinity is immanent in matter, though not subject to it" (93). This notion stands in opposition to the Buddhist idea that matter is meaningless because objects are not real. However, as Dardess explains, Kerouac ultimately was unable to subscribe to this side of the Buddhist coin in *Visions of Gerard* because to do so would be to "deny the reality of Gerard's suffering and the heroism of Gerard's acceptance of that suffering" (93). To take Dardess's observation a step further, drawing on the direct connection Kerouac makes between Gerard and Jesus, to deny matter would be to deny the validity of the image at the center of Christianity — that of Christ suffering on the cross. Also, to reject the validity of matter would be to reject the validity of the Eucharist: if bread and wine are not legitimate, then the Catholic notion of transubstantiation crumbles.

While Kerouac was drawn to the Buddhist idea that the suffering inherent in life can be overcome by recognizing the unreality of being, he could not go so far as to turn his back on the fundamental tenets of Catholicism. This sense of Catholic loyalty could be a reason behind the tactile nature of *Visions of Gerard*. Perhaps more than any other Kerouac novel, *Visions of Gerard* abounds with descriptions of the physical world, and the sense of touch plays a key role in the novel (note Gerard's obsession with touching the birds outside his window, the memory of which Kerouac writes is "enough to make my heart leap from a cold indifferent lair (of late) —" [22]).

While Kerouac's central focus in *Visions of Gerard* remains on the Catholic Church, the novel also abounds with Buddhist thought that Kerouac manages to successfully blend with Christian doctrine. For example, while the vision of Heaven Kerouac presents through Gerard is classically Christian, complete with winged angels and fluffy white lambs for children¹⁰, the notion that we already are in Heaven but do not know it also has Buddhist echoes. One of the elements of Buddhism that most appealed to Kerouac was the notion that we can overcome suffering by transcending earthly weaknesses, such as "ignorant craving" (as is promised in the Third Noble Truth). Both Gerard's conclusion that we already are in Heaven and the Buddhist approach to overcoming suffering center on changing our frame of mind and being. Both revelations rest on the notion that much of our perception of reality actually is an illusion — what Ben Giarmo terms the "unreality of being-in-the-world" (114) — that blocks our true religious vision. It is important to note, however, that Kerouac does not advocate an outright denial of matter, only a retuning of our perception. Kerouac draws

¹⁰ Later in the novel, in a stinging parenthetical comment that offers a glimpse into the consequences Kerouac's religious turmoil will ultimately have on him, he calls angels and Heaven an "ethereal crock," (65). The cynicism driving this blow and the striking contrast between this sentiment and those expressed about Heaven (be it Christian or Buddhist) throughout most of the book suggests that Kerouac was already beginning to be consumed by his conflict, and erupting with occasional outbursts like this one.

an explicit parallel between Gerard and the Catholicism he represents and Buddhism early in the book:

It was only many years later when I met and understood Savas Savakis¹¹ that I 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, Awakenedhood — 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. (6)

Giomo points to another passage in which Kerouac “frames this Buddhist perspective with essential Catholic concepts”:

Bless my soul, death is the only decent subject, since it marks the end of illusion and delusion — Death is the other side of the same coin, we call now, Life ... The whole world has no reality, it’s only imaginary, and what are we to do? — Nothing — *nothing* — nothing. Pray to be kind, wait to be patient, try to be fine. No use screamin. The Devil was a charming fool. (qtd. in Giomo 114)

Finally, Kerouac not only draws parallels between Gerard’s (and his own) Catholicism and Buddhist teachings, but he also makes a connection between the figure of Gerard himself and Buddhism:

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 Buddhahood 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. (7)

These passages demonstrate the success of Kerouac’s ambitious attempt in *Visions of Gerard* to merge the Catholicism of his youth and the Buddhism of his mature years. Ben

¹¹ Savas Savakis is the alias Kerouac uses in *Visions of Gerard* for his friend, Sebastian “Sammy” Sampas, who died as a young man in World War II. Kerouac’s third wife, Stella, was Sammy’s older sister.

Giamo has noted the challenge that Kerouac's goal of blending the two religions posed, pointing out that such a merger "is not without difficulty, for Kerouac must present the immigrant Catholic sensibility of a saintlike individual, his family, and community while reinterpreting events and their significance from a Buddhist perspective" (115). That challenge not only informs the work, but its success as a novel rests in large measure on Kerouac's success in harmoniously merging the two faiths. Kerouac handles this difficult task well in *Visions of Gerard*, however, and the Catholic and Buddhist undercurrents in the novel exist in harmony. This merger unravels in later novels, notably in *The Dharma Bums* and *Big Sur*, as the essential conflict between Kerouac's born religion and his adopted one re-emerges with increasing intensity.

4. “SOMETHING INEXPRESSIBLY BROKEN IN MY HEART”: TENSION BETWEEN JESUS AND BUDDHA IN *THE DHARMA BUMS*

During November and December of 1957, Kerouac composed the book that would earn “Beat Buddhism” a nod of approval from many critics who had previously perceived the phenomenon as a perversion of serious Buddhist studies, and that would introduce Buddhism to thousands of young adults who by then idolized Kerouac. *The Dharma Bums* chronicles the time Kerouac spent with poet Gary Snyder in 1955 and 1956 in California. Snyder already was a devout Buddhist when he and Kerouac met, and the younger man served as a mentor to Kerouac as he deepened his immersion in the religion. While *The Dharma Bums* received lukewarm reviews from critics, it was a smashing success among thousands of young bohemians — the incarnation of Kerouac’s vision in the novel of a “rucksack revolution” — who considered the book a “survival manual” (Nicosia 563). However, *The Dharma Bums* is an unlikely candidate for pop culture totem; as Nicosia notes, it is a “profound work, which asks the ‘big questions’ almost from page one” (563). The profundity Nicosia highlights comes from the care and depth with which Kerouac observes, records, questions, and interprets the world around (and within) him.

Ray Smith (the Kerouac character in the novel) is not simply a free-wheeling Buddhist enthusiast searching for kicks; he is a complex, intelligent and at times tortured character seeking to answer questions that a lesser character would avoid. Many of these questions center on religion, and *The Dharma Bums* offers particularly poignant insight into Kerouac’s religious struggle. Though the novel centers on Buddhism — indeed, it can be called an essentially Buddhist work — we see Kerouac vacillating between Buddhist and Catholic perspectives, often attempting to reconcile them. While he was largely able to achieve this reconciliation in *Visions of Gerard*, he was unable to do so by the time he wrote

The Dharma Bums because the deeper Kerouac delved into Buddhism, the stronger the opposing Catholic force within him seemed to grow. Consequently, the book exudes a tension not found in *Visions of Gerard*, revealing both the tension Kerouac's religious conflict produced in him personally as well as the particular charge it had begun to give his writing.

In his essay titled "Ritual Aspects of Narrative: An Analysis of Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*," Alan Miller states that "the character Ray Smith ... did not see any conflict between Christianity and Buddhism" (44). I contend that Smith *does* see a conflict between the two faiths, and that recognition accounts for much of the tension within the novel. Further, Smith's attempts to reconcile the two religions (as discussed later in this chapter) clearly point to his uneasiness about mingling Christ and Buddha — if he truly saw no conflict between the two, as Miller argues, then Kerouac would not spend so much time trying to find a way for them to co-exist within his own psyche ("methinks [he] doth protest too much..."). The tension that pervades *The Dharma Bums* becomes apparent from the novel's first pages. In chapter 1, readers learn that the Buddhism that inspired the work has since fizzled out. Ray Smith says:

I reminded myself of the line in the Diamond Sutra that says, 'Practice charity without holding in mind any conceptions about charity, for charity after all is just a word.' 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 ... (6)

This passage creates an unstable footing for all of the Buddhism to come in the book — from the beginning we know that, despite Smith's current enthusiasm for his newfound religion, it

will not last. Through Ray Smith, Kerouac¹² acknowledges his retreat from Buddhist fervor to cynical neutrality. Significantly, the scene immediately preceding Smith's musings on the Diamond Sutra offers a hint as to the source of the problem. Smith has just offered to share his bread and wine with an old hobo, an action which "evokes moods of compassion and communion," according to critic William Woods. Woods notes that "this imagery is as pointedly Christian as the narrator's reflections on it are specifically Buddhist" (11). Woods is correct in identifying two "paths of faith" in *The Dharma Bums*, but his contention that "Ray Smith, toward the story's end, will confidently see [the paths] as converging when he identifies Christ (to a skeptical Japhy Ryder) as a manifestation of Buddha" (11) is problematic. While Smith certainly does attempt to reconcile Christ and Buddha in this novel, the manner in which he does is more desperate than confident. If Kerouac were as secure in believing that a Buddhist/Catholic convergence was possible — or even if he were as comfortable with the notion as he appears to be in *Visions of Gerard — The Dharma Bums* would not be as filled with conflict as it is. Ultimately, Woods' interpretation risks downplaying the most powerful aspect of the novel.

Smith's attempts to reconcile Buddhism with Catholicism are not the only source of conflict in *The Dharma Bums* — conflict also permeates his attitude toward Buddhism itself. For example, early on in the novel Japhy Ryder scolds Smith for what Ryder perceives as mean-hearted prudishness, saying: "Your Buddhism has made you mean Ray and makes you afraid to take your clothes off for a simply healthy orgy" (29). Of course, Buddhism is not

¹² I have chosen to use Kerouac and Smith interchangeably in this discussion. William Woods offers a cogent justification for this approach: "A fundamental principle of objective criticism, the separation of author and narrator, entails the ancillary convention that the biography of the first is said to have no bearing on the life of the second. It's misleading to maintain this ordinarily useful fiction when writing about Kerouac. Not only did he disguise fact so thinly that many of his books are published with charts that translate the names of the various characters back into their historical originals, but the source of his personal impact on readers depends greatly on the confessional nature of his work: open a book, meet a man." (9)

the only force at work here. Part of Kerouac's interest in Buddhism sprang from the notion that suppressing craving, including sexual craving, could eliminate suffering — thus his choice to refrain from a “simple healthy orgy” certainly can be attributed in part to his Buddhism. However, we are told that Smith (like Kerouac) was born Catholic, and his strict Catholic upbringing instilled in him a degree of shame, and even disgust, toward sexuality. This scene illustrates that the interplay between Kerouac's Catholicism and Buddhism is a key issue even when he appears to be focused on just one of the religions. It is interesting that Ryder attributes Smith's meanness to his Buddhism, when in fact it is much better explained as the result of Smith's struggle to reconcile Buddhist and Catholic dogma.

Despite the novel's rather bleak opening, with Ryder's scolding and the older Ray's cynical take on the Buddhism of his youth, Smith is not a “mean” character, nor is the novel fundamentally dark or negative (though there certainly are several dark moments, such as Rosie's suicide). *The Dharma Bums* offers many glimpses of a serene Kerouac who seems to truly embrace Buddhism as the path to enlightenment, both for himself and for others. In one moving passage, Kerouac writes, “...I prayed that God, or Tathagata, would give me enough time and enough sense and strength to be able to tell people what I knew (as I can't even do properly now) so they'd know what I know and not despair so much” (29-30). In another instance, Smith shares a prayer with Ryder as they rest while hiking the Matterhorn:

I sit down and say, and run all my friends and relatives and enemies one by one in this, without entertaining any angers or gratitudes or anything, and like, like 'Japhy Ryder, equally empty, equally to be loved, equally a coming Buddha,' ... just people I know because when I say the words 'equally a coming Buddha' I want to be thinking of their eyes ... and you really do suddenly see the true secret serenity and the truth of his coming Buddhahood.
(55)

This flash of original Buddhist insight earns Smith heartfelt praise from Ryder. A similar sense of peace often embraces Smith while visiting his family in Rocky Mount, NC.

Kerouac describes one of his many late-night meditations in the woods:

I immediately fell into a blank thoughtless trance wherein it was again revealed to me 'This thinking has stopped' and I sighed because I didn't have to think any more and felt my whole body sink into a blessedness surely to be believed, completely relaxed and at peace with all the ephemeral world of dream and dreamer and the dreaming itself. (106)

In these moments, we see a hopeful Kerouac, believing he finally will achieve spiritual tranquility through Buddhism. As Ray says, "O wise and serene spirit of Awakenerhood, everything's all right forever and forever and forever and thank you thank you thank you amen" (109).

Unfortunately, these moments share company with far more confusing and troubling spiritual murmurings, both from within Smith himself and from his family. When Smith tries to explain his great revelation that "everything is empty but awake," his mother and sister come back at him by saying, "You and your Buddha, why don't you stick to the religion you were born with" (114). Like Smith's mother, Kerouac's mother did not understand why he turned to Buddhism, and often urged him to rededicate himself to Catholicism. His friends were no more encouraging. For example, the Allen Ginsberg character, Alvah Goldbook, pointedly states, "... to hell with all this Buddhist bullshit" (28). Though he takes comfort in thinking that Ryder will embrace his ideas, when Smith returns to California from Rocky Mount and explains his spiritual "discoveries" to Ryder, his friend sees through Smith's enthusiastic surface, recognizing the lingering doubt that keeps him from truly embracing Buddhism as a way of life. Reprimanding Smith, Ryder says, "Ah, it's just a lot of words ... I don't want to hear all your word descriptions of words words words you made up all winter,

man I wanta be enlightened by actions” (133). However, Smith is too Catholic to live a truly enlightened Buddhist life, and too Buddhist to live a truly enlightened Catholic one.

The Dharma Bums clearly illustrates the hold Catholicism still has on Kerouac through the many biblical references that he includes throughout the novel, and through several discussions and meditations centered on Christianity. For example, one of the more peaceful familial scenes in the novel is set on Christmas Eve, when Smith is staying with his family in Rocky Mount:

I took out the Bible and read a little Saint Paul by the warm stove and the light of the tree, “Let him become a fool, that he may become wise,” and I thought of good dear Japhy and wished he was enjoying Christmas Eve with me. “Already are ye filled,” says Saint Paul, “already are ye become rich. The saints shall judge the world.” (107)

Of course, Japhy probably would not enjoy Christmas Eve in the same way that Ray obviously does. The sadness in Smith’s tone and his wish for Ryder’s presence is important: Ray realizes by this point in the novel that while he and Japhy can share (to a large extent) their Buddhist endeavors, Japhy is not interested in sharing Smith’s Catholic fervor. Further, Kerouac’s decision to connect Smith’s wish for Ryder’s presence on Christmas Eve with the verse, “Let him become a fool, that he may become wise,” seems significant. Smith makes several attempts throughout the novel to justify Christ to Ryder, all of which fail. Thus, the verse seems to be directly meant for Ryder — despite his respect for Japhy’s Buddhism, Ray wants him to acknowledge Christ’s validity, if not His holiness. If this verse is indeed directed at Ryder, then Kerouac seems to be equating Buddhism with foolishness and wisdom with Christianity, since the verse is offered in the midst of a scene of Christian fellowship. This sentiment is problematic in the context of *The Dharma Bums* on at least two levels. First, it is not in keeping with Kerouac’s exploration of Buddhism as the path to

Enlightenment. Second, if Kerouac is subtly introducing the idea that Buddhism is valuable as a means by which to discover Christ (i.e., the foolishness that precedes wisdom), then the two religions would have to be reconcilable (as a means and an end). Kerouac's ultimate inability to achieve this reconciliation in no way undercuts the power and intensity of his attempt.

In addition to the passage discussed above, *The Dharma Bums* contains many quotations from and references to the Bible, such as when Ray, Japhy, and Morely spend a night camping before climbing the Matterhorn. Though this climb functions primarily as a Buddhist exercise, Kerouac interjects a Christian note: "I thought, 'What a strange thing is man ... like in the Bible it says, Who knoweth the spirit of man that looketh upward?...'” (62). As if suggesting the subtle pervasiveness of Christianity, even Ray's friend, Cody, quotes the Bible. Shortly thereafter, Ray finds himself listening to a woman preach a sermon in Chinatown park, who says, "Remember that we know that all things [work] together for good to them that loves *God*, to them who *are* the called accordin to *His* purpose. Romans eight eighteen, younguns" (92). When Ray exults that the woman is the greatest preacher in the world, Japhy condemns "all that Jesus stuff she's talking about." This comment obviously strikes a nerve in Ray and gives him the opportunity to vocalize his internal attempts to reconcile Buddhism and Christianity in the following exchange:

"What's wrong with Jesus? Didn't Jesus speak of Heaven? Isn't Heaven Buddha's nirvana?"

"According to your own interpretation, Smith."

"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?" (91)

Here we see that the idea that Kerouac was successfully able to approach from both a Catholic and Buddhist perspective in *Visions of Gerard* (i.e., that we are “all in Heaven now”) begins to fall apart in *The Dharma Bums*. Although he attempts to recreate the harmony he was able to inscribe on Gerard’s epiphany while composing *Visions of Gerard* in early 1956, by late 1957 Kerouac seems unable to do so. Indeed, although Kerouac makes other attempts to reconcile the two religions in *The Dharma Bums* — such as when Smith sleeps on the beach and thinks “O Buddha thy moonlight O Christ thy starling on the sea” (93) — it is all too clear that Kerouac is most assuredly not in Heaven now. The battle within him between Buddha and Christ keeps Paradise decidedly at bay.

Despite Smith’s assertion that it doesn’t make a difference what religion one chooses, an earlier passage shows readers that it does. Here, Smith recalls a poem that questions God’s intentions for man, and why man should bother living at all:

Who played this cruel joke, on bloke after bloke, packing like a rat, across the desert flat? ... Was it God got mad, like the Indian cad, who was only a giver, crooked like the river? Gave you a garden, let it all harden, then comes the flood, and the loss of your blood? Pray tell us good buddy, and don’t make it muddy, who played this trick, on Harry and Dick, and why is so mean, this Eternal Scene, just what’s the point, of this whole joint? (83)

Then comes the essential statement: “I thought maybe I could find out at last from these Dharma Bums.” Thus, Smith clearly is turning toward Buddhism in hopes of achieving the peace he could not find in Catholicism. When these hopes go unrealized, Smith plunges into despair and drunkenness. We see this downward turn toward the end of *The Dharma Bums*, when Japhy asks Ray to attend a “lecture and discussion at the Buddhist Center,” and Ray responds, “Aw, I don’t wanta go to no such thing, I just wanta drink in alleys” (149).

By the end of the book, Ray Smith’s conflict between Buddhism and Catholicism is apparent to Japhy Ryder, who forthrightly asks, “You really like Christ, don’t you?” (159).

Although Smith answers the question in an attempt to tie Jesus to Buddha, Ryder simply does not buy it. He says, “Oh, don’t start preaching Christianity to me, I can just see you now on your deathbed kissing the cross like some old Karamazov or like our old friend Dwight Goddard who spent his life as a Buddhist and suddenly returned to Christianity in his last days” (159). While we never see Ray Smith on his deathbed, we do know that Kerouac returned to Catholicism in his final years. Japhy Ryder was right.

The Dharma Bums is the final work by Kerouac to focus so overtly on his Buddhism. As the novel shows, his fervor for the religion waned substantially by the time he wrote it in late 1957; by 1959, Kerouac had turned away from serious Buddhist studies entirely, though the religion continued to influence him. Since Buddha had not guided Kerouac down the path to Enlightenment, he once again set his hopes on the cross.

The conflict that informs *The Dharma Bums* foreshadows the turbulence of Kerouac’s next few years, and offers a glimpse of the despair evidenced in these comments to Whalen. The novels Kerouac wrote after *The Dharma Bums* present a view of the world far removed from the hopeful and excited outlook that shapes his earlier work. The next novel Kerouac wrote after his four-year silence following *The Dharma Bums*¹³ clearly reveals this change, taking the already well-developed dimensions of the religious and adding to it alcoholism, which arguably was fueled by his religious conflict. As Susan Kayorie notes, “The loss of faith in Buddhist doctrine and in himself ... is further verified by Jack’s vision of the Cross in his time of greatest need; that time spent alone with the sea and his addiction to alcohol of which he wrote in *Big Sur*” (19). *Big Sur* presents Kerouac in despair, and try as he might, neither Jesus nor Buddha is ultimately able to save him.

¹³ Kerouac actually finished writing *Desolation Angels* before *Big Sur* in 1961. However, *Big Sur* is the first novel completed start to finish after *The Dharma Bums*. Kerouac had begun *Desolation Angels* in 1956.

5. “NOW AT THE POINT OF ADULTHOOD DISASTER OF THE SOUL”:
KEROUAC’S BREAKDOWN IN *BIG SUR*

In September of 1961, Kerouac was embroiled in a legal battle with former wife Joan Haverty over the paternity of their daughter, Jan. As if the litigation were not bad enough, articles with titles such as “My Ex-Husband Jack Kerouac Is An Ingrate” began to appear in print (Nicosia 626). It was in the midst of this stormy period that Kerouac sat down to write *Big Sur*, a chronicle of the six weeks he spent in Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s cabin during the summer of 1960. *Big Sur*, an historic bohemian community of Monterey, is the setting for this haunting, sad, and explosive representation of Kerouac in the throes of physical, mental, and spiritual crisis. The novel documents Kerouac’s attempt to rediscover himself and regain his psychic equilibrium, and he looks to both Jesus and Buddha for assistance¹⁴. As Nicosia points out:

Kerouac characterizes Duluoz’s spiritual journey with metaphors common to both Christianity and Buddhism. When Duluoz advises himself, “Cross the bridge you woken bum and see what’s on the other shore,” he condenses an enormous body of Eastern and Western imagery. Both Christ and Buddha commanded their disciples to “wake up.” (627)

Indeed, much of the novel centers on Kerouac’s attempt to re-awaken his once exuberant and driven soul, which now threatened to sink into despair and insanity. Throughout the novel, we see Kerouac reaching toward both his Buddhist and Catholic beliefs as a way out of the canyon into which his soul had descended during his time in Big Sur. Some of the scenes in *Big Sur* recall moments from *Visions of Gerard* and *The Dharma Bums*, but here unfold in the disturbing light cast by his deteriorated physical and spiritual health. The climax of the novel centers on Kerouac’s final vision of the cross, which marks his return to Catholicism and renunciation of Buddhism.

¹⁴ Note that although Buddhist ideas play an important role in Kerouac’s soul-searching in *Big Sur*, he wrote the novel two years after his comments to Whalen about the “dharma slipping away from [his] consciousness.”

Kerouac opens the novel with the sound of church bells, but instead of soothing him, the sound is virtually unbearable as it awakens him to the reality of what he views as another personal failure:

The Church is blowing a sad windblown “Kathleen” on the bells in the skid row slums as I wake up all woebegone and goopy, groaning from another drinking bout and groaning most of all because I’d ruined my “secret return” to San Francisco by getting silly drunk ... (3)

The Kerouac character in *Big Sur*, Jack Duluoz¹⁵, then reveals that he had planned for a secret escape to his friend Lorenz Monsanto’s cabin in “the Big Sur woods.”¹⁶

Kerouac writes that he had to retreat to the cabin to escape from the whirlwind that by that time ensconced him as the King of the Beats, “finally realizing that I was surrounded and outnumbered and had to get away to solitude again or die” (*Big Sur*

5). Kerouac’s response to the church bells with which the novel opens reveals his state of mind at the time:

I wake up drunk, sick, disgusted, frightened, in fact terrified by that sad song across the roofs mingling with the lachrymose cries of a Salvation Army meeting on the corner below “*Satan* is the cause of your alcoholism, *Satan* is the cause of your immorality, *Satan* is *everywhere* working to destroy you unless you repent *now*” ... (5-6)

Here Kerouac sounds every bit like the tortured Catholic, and his insistence that Satan was coming to destroy him echoes his comment to Cassady ten years earlier that as a child he believed a snake was coming after him. Thus, the sense of guilt-driven paranoia that plagued him in 1951 — well before his Buddhist years — continued to haunt him a decade later.

Kerouac looked to his sojourn in Big Sur as a chance to defeat his alcoholism (or at the very

¹⁵ As in *The Dharma Bums*, this discussion will use Jack Kerouac and Jack Duluoz interchangeably.

¹⁶ Lorenz Monsanto is the name Kerouac uses for his fictional representation of Lawrence Ferlinghetti, whose cabin was actually in Bixby Canyon.

least to dry out for a few weeks), thereby keeping Satan at bay for a time — and prove, once again, that grace is possible.

In keeping with his disturbed state of mind at the beginning of the novel, Kerouac describes his journey to the cabin in “Raton Canyon” in hellacious terms. He creates the feeling that Satan is right on his heels, and will destroy Kerouac if he makes one false move. (Here, “Satan” is manifest in the terrifying darkness that surrounds Kerouac.) Jack takes a cab as far as the Raton Canyon bridge, at which point the cab driver warns him to be careful “walkin around there in the dark” (9). At that point, Duluoz begins his descent into the canyon:

... I sense something wrong somehow, there's an awful roar of surf but it isn't coming from the right place ... I can see the bridge but I can see nothing below it ... it's a nice white bridge with white rails and there's a white line runnin down the middle familiar and highwaylike but there's something wrong ... I therefore turn on my railroad lantern for a timid peek but its beam gets lost just like the car lights in a void ... The sea roar is bad enough except it keeps bashing and barking at me like a dog in the fog down there, sometimes it booms the earth but my God where is the earth and how can the sea be underground! ... “What the hell's going on!” “Follow that road,” says the other voice trying to be calm so I do ... But now the road's going down again, the reassuring bluff reappears on my left, and pretty soon according to my memory of Lorry's map there she is, the creek, I can hear her lapping and gabbing down there at the bottom of the dark ... But the closer I get to the creek as the road dips steeply, suddenly, almost making me trot forward, the louder it roars ... It's screaming like a raging flooded river right below me ... I'm *afraid* to go down there ... there's the bridge rail, there's the creek just four feet below, cross the bridge you woken bum and see what's on the other shore. (9-12)

By crossing the Raton Canyon bridge, which Kerouac establishes as a symbolic bridge between his current state of physical, mental, and spiritual anguish and the peace he seeks, Kerouac hopes to begin the healing process. Indeed, this is exactly what he seems to do for his first few days alone in the cabin. Note the immediate change in tone once he crosses the bridge and crawls through the last obstacle in his path:

Then I crawl thru the barbed wire and find myself trudging a sweet little sand road winding right thru fragrant dry heathers as tho I'd just popped thru from hell into familiar old Heaven on Earth, yair and Thank God ... (13)

Duluoz then proceeds to enjoy a few peaceful days alone in the cabin, and readers are reminded of the joy and beauty a healthy-minded Kerouac could find in the simple activities of daily life:

Marvelous opening moment in fact of the first afternoon I'm self alone in the cabin and I make my first meal, wash my first dishes, nap, and wake up to hear the rapturous ring of silence of Heaven even within and throughout the gurgle of the creek — When you say AM ALONE and the cabin is suddenly home only because you made one meal and washed your firstmeal dishes — Then nightfall, the religious vestal lighting of the beautiful kerosene lamp and careful washing of the mantle in the creek ... (20)

Even in these first peaceful days, however, Kerouac gives hints of their transience. The turmoil that drove him into hiding is still alive and well within his soul, and several passages foreshadow the impending breakdown.

While alcoholism plays a key part in this breakdown, religion cannot be overlooked. Kerouac clearly implicates religion's role in his psychological turmoil in several passages, and although he claimed to be through with Buddhism by this point in his life, Kerouac's many references to the religion show that Buddha still occupied a place in his increasingly ravaged soul. For example, Duluoz overtly equates himself with a Buddhist figure when he writes: "The Bhikku's¹⁷ home in his woods, he only wants peace, peace he will get — Tho why after three weeks of perfect happy peace and adjustment in these strange woods my soul so went down the drain ... I'll never know — Worth the telling only if I dig deep into everything" (19). This passage points to the fact that while Buddhism still might provide Kerouac with a romantic notion of how to approach life, it simply was not enough to keep his

¹⁷ A bhikku is a Buddhist monk (Seager 17).

soul from circling the drain. In another passage early in the novel, Kerouac combines Buddhist and Catholic thought in a fashion similar to some of the passages noted in *Visions of Gerard* and alludes to a particularly poignant moment in *The Dharma Bums*:

So easy in the woods to daydream and pray to the local spirits and say “allow me to stay here, I only want peace” and those foggy peaks answer back mutely Yes — And to say to yourself (if you’re like me with theological preoccupations) (at least at that time, before I went mad I still had such preoccupations) “God who is everything possesses the eye of awakening, like dreaming a long dream of an impossible task and you wake up in a flash, oops, No Task, it’s done and gone — And in the flush of the first few days of joy I confidently tell myself ... “no more dissipation, it’s time for me to quietly watch the world and even enjoy it ... no more I ask myself the question *O why is God torturing me* ... no more self imposed agony ... Go back to childhood, just eat apples and read your Catechism [sic]. (24)

Kerouac’s focus on the woods recalls his moment of Buddhist epiphany as he describes it in *The Dharma Bums*, when he discovers in the woods that “everything is empty but awake” (114). Further, his focus on awakening from a “dream of an impossible task” clearly points to Buddhist notions of reality (and non-reality). The Catholic element is equally obvious, in the question of why God is torturing Kerouac (recall that this question — and the answer to it, which Kerouac here seems to have forgotten — plays a key role in *Visions of Gerard*).

While Kerouac’s method of merging Buddhist and Catholic thinking in this passage mimics his approach in *Visions of Gerard*, there is a crucial difference. Instead of focusing on the moment at hand, as he does in *Visions of Gerard*, here Kerouac is focusing on what he *hoped* to do but ultimately could not (and thus descended into madness).¹⁸ While he could unify the two sides of his spirituality with some degree of harmony in *Visions of Gerard*, and tried to

¹⁸ Throughout the novel, Kerouac illustrates his inability to follow through with the ideas he offers in this passage about how he should behave. At one point, he seems to forget his resolve to stop questioning why God tortures him when he writes: “... it’s all caught up with me again, and I hear myself again whining “Why does God torture me?” (111)

do so with less success in *The Dharma Bums*, he is absolutely unable to reconcile them in *Big Sur*.

Shortly after the passage quoted above, Kerouac revisits a notion about God he introduced in *Visions of Gerard*, that the world is a movie set with God as the director (which certainly was not an original idea on Kerouac's part). In his discussion of Gerard's funeral, Kerouac writes: "It's a vast ethereal movie, I'm an extra and Gerard is the hero and God is directing it from Heaven" (*Gerard* 127). In *Big Sur* he writes:

So even that marvelous, long remembrances of life all the time in the world to just sit there or lie there or walk about slowly remembering all the details of life which now ... have taken on the aspect ... of pleasant mental movies brought up at will and projected for further study — And pleasure — As I imagine God to be doing this very minute, watching his own movie, which is us. (25)

However, while this notion is presented with a sense of relative peace and comfort in *Visions of Gerard*, in which Kerouac describes the scene as "fitting and proper," in *Big Sur* his role has changed for the worse. While the underlying idea is the same, now instead of being a "proper" extra, Kerouac sees himself as a glitch on God's divine reel — assuming that God even exists, which Kerouac appears to doubt: "... I'm left sitting there in the sand after having almost fainted and stare at the waves which suddenly are not waves at all, with I guess what must have been the goopiest downtrodden expression God if He exists must've ever seen in His movie career" (41). Despite the profound doubt Kerouac introduces in here, disbelief in the Trinity does not play a major role in *Big Sur* (or in any of Kerouac's work, for that matter). It is not God that Kerouac doubts — his belief in a ruling divinity never seems to waver, but he questions the nature of God. Often in *Big Sur*, that doubt spawns despair and fear.

Kerouac connects many of these feelings of doubt where God is concerned with particularly low moments in *Big Sur*. For example, in describing a bout of *delirium tremens*, he writes: "... you feel a guilt so deep you identify yourself with the devil and God seems far away abandoning you to your sick silliness ..." (111). From feeling that God is far away Kerouac progresses to feeling that God is nowhere at all:

He'll want to bury his face in his hands and moan for mercy and he knows there is none — Not only because he doesn't deserve it but there's no such thing anyway — Because he looks up at the blue sky and there's nothing there but empty space make a big face at him ... (112)

It is in this frame of mind that Kerouac makes a statement literally meant to reference the immediate surroundings in the cabin, but that clearly has much deeper implications in terms of his spiritual crisis: "What was beautiful and clean yesterday has irrationally and unaccountably changed into a big dreary crock of shit" (112).

Kerouac's condition spirals from irrationality into full-blown paranoia and terror, and he begins to make even more references to the Christian God and the condition of his own soul, which he notes is in a state of "adulthood disaster" (117). Though most of his paranoia centers on his friends and his notion that they are plotting against him and laughing at him, some passages make clear that his religious temperament plays a role in that paranoia¹⁹. One passage in particular describes Kerouac's state of mind here and must be quoted at length:

"Can it be that Ron and all these other guys, Dave and McLear or somebody, the other guys earlier are all a big bunch of witches out to make me go mad?" I seriously consider this — Remembering that childhood reverie I always had, which I used to ponder seriously as I walked home from St. Joseph's Parochial School or sat in the parlor of my home, that everyone in the world is making fun on me ... But my childhood reverie also included the fact that everybody in the world was making fun of me because they were all members of an eternal secret society or Heaven society that knew the secret of the world

¹⁹ At one point in the novel, Kerouac even considers the possibility that his friends are plotting against him solely because of his religion: "I'm thinking 'this secret poisoning society, I know, it's because I'm a Catholic, it's a big anti-Catholic scheme ...'" (203)

and were seriously fooling me so I'd wake up and see the light (i.e., become enlightened, in fact) — So that I, "Ti Jean," was the LAST Ti Jean in the world, the last poor holy fool, those people at my neck were the devils of the earth among whom God has cast me, an angel baby, as tho I was the last Jesus in fact! and all these people were waiting for me to realize it and wake up and catch them peeking and we'd all laugh in Heaven suddenly — But ... Jesus ... wasn't peeking down my neck — There lies the root of my belief in Jesus — So that actually the only reality in the world was Jesus and the lambs (the animals) and my brother Gerard who had instructed me — But my waking up would take place and then everything would vanish except Heaven, which is God — And that was why later in life after these rather strange you must admit childhood reveries, after I had that fainting vision of the Golden Eternity and others before and after including Samadhis during Buddhist meditations in the woods, I conceived of myself as a special solitary angel sent down as a messenger from Heaven to tell everybody or show everybody by example that their peeking society was actually the Satanic Society and they were all on the wrong track. (116-17)

Thus, Kerouac tells us that all his life he has been engaged in a kind of battle with heaven and earth, that Jesus is at the heart of that battle, and that God (whether He be an Eastern or Western figure) has sent him to earth to deliver a message. The central problem, of course, is that Kerouac is unsure what that message is. He mentions this problem in other places in *Big Sur*, such as when he explains, "if I don't write what actually I see happening in this unhappy globe which is rounded by the contours of my deathskull I think I'll have been sent on earth by poor God for nothing" (167), or when Billie exclaims, "O Jack it's time for you to wake up ... and open your eyes to why God's put you here" (175).

Unfortunately, at this point in the novel all Kerouac sees when he opens his eyes is impending doom — or worse, nothing at all. Contemplating the cliffs that surround him, Kerouac writes:

I see the rocks wobble as it seems God is really getting mad for such a world and's about to destroy it: big cliffs wobbling in my dumb eyes: God says "It's gone too far, you're all destroying everything one way or the other wobble boom the end is NOW."

"The Second Coming, tick tock," I think shuddering ... (183)

Kerouac's focus on the cliffs and his vision of God sending them tumbling ("wobbling") into the sea as He brings the world to a close recalls a moment in *The Dharma Bums* when Kerouac considers his fate in reference to a mountain. The degree to which his spiritual condition has deteriorated is illustrated by the marked difference in tone and outlook between the passage quoted above in *Big Sur* and the moment in *The Dharma Bums* when Kerouac overcomes his fear of the mountain:

Then suddenly everything was just like jazz: it happened in one insane second or so: I looked up and saw Japhy *running down the mountain* in huge twenty-foot leaps, running, leaping, landing with a great drive of his booted heels ... and in that flash I realized *it's impossible to fall off mountains you fool* and with a yodel of my own I suddenly got up and began running after him doing exactly the same huge leaps ... with one of my greatest leaps and loudest screams of joy I came flying right down to the edge of the lake and dug my sneakered heels into the mud and just fell sitting there, glad. (68-69)

While contemplating the mountains around him once inspired in Kerouac jubilation and confidence, doing so now only convinces him that the end is near and leaves him literally shaking in his boots.

At this point, Kerouac has two choices: he can either continue along on his current path to complete self-destruction and madness, or he can look for a path out. At this critical juncture, as Kerouac lies awake at night battling his demons, he has a vision that marks his official return to Catholicism:

An argot of sudden screamed reports rattles through my head in a language I never heard but understand immediately — For a moment I see blue Heaven and the Virgin's white veil but suddenly a great evil blur like an ink spot spreads over it, "The devil! — the devil's come after me tonight! tonight is the night! that's what!" — But angels are laughing and having a big barn dance in the rocks of the sea, nobody cares any more — Suddenly as clear as anything I ever saw in my life, I see the Cross. (204)

To emphasize the significance of this vision, Kerouac ends the chapter here. Though this break signals an apparent end to Kerouac's suffering, we soon discover that Kerouac is far from spiritual contentment.

The penultimate chapter of *Big Sur* opens with a passage that presents Duluoz turning his soul over to Christ in a fairly traditional Christian manner:

I see the Cross, it's silent, it stays a long time, my heart goes out to it, my whole body fades away to it, I hold out my arms to be taken away to it, by God I am being taken away my body starts dying and swooning out to the Cross standing in a luminous area of the darkness, I start to scream because I know I'm dying but I don't want to scare Billie or anybody with my death scream so I swallow the scream and just let myself go into death and the Cross ... (205)

However, Jack's time has not yet come, and he "slowly sink[s] back to life." As soon as he returns to consciousness, his demons are back menacing him once again. In an effort to combat them, Duluoz once again fixes his sights on the cross, even while marveling at his inclination to do so:

... suddenly I see the Cross again, this time smaller and far away but just as clear and I say through all the noise of the voices "I'm with you, Jesus, for always, thank you" — I lie there in cold sweat wondering what's come over me for years my Buddhist studies and pipesmoking assured meditations on emptiness and all of a sudden the Cross is manifested to me — My eyes fill with tears — We'll all be saved ... (205-206)

Thus, Duluoz is officially setting his Buddhism aside and reaffirming his allegiance to the Catholic Church.

If this were the end of the story, we could say that Kerouac had a happy ending. Unfortunately, nothing could be farther from the truth. He ends *Big Sur* in a hopeful and idyllic tone, writing that "a golden wash of goodness has spread over all and over all my body and mind — All the dark torture is a memory." He closes the book with the assertion that "something good will come out of all things yet — And it will be golden and eternal just

like that — There’s no need to say another word,”²⁰ (216). However, the opening to this final chapter does not match the sentiment expressed therein, as Kerouac describes waking up to a “horrible” Sunday dawn. Given the sense of hope Kerouac expresses in the final lines of *Big Sur*, it would be fitting for him to take the traditional view of dawn as a hopeful new beginning; instead he opens the chapter with the statement, “Dawn is most horrible of all ...” (212). Kerouac’s most prophetic statement about the fate of his soul comes just after his revelation that “We’ll all be saved,” when he writes: “I’ve seen the Cross again and again but there’s a battle somewhere and the devils keep coming back” (206). As illustrated in several of the novels Kerouac wrote after *Big Sur*, while he claimed to be a devout Catholic once again, this spiritual battle raged on in him until his dying day. Sadly, since neither Buddha nor Christ could restore peace to his soul, it remained for the bottle to put an end to his earthly suffering.

²⁰ Given Kerouac’s close reading of (and admiration for) Shakespeare, the similarity between this closing line and Hamlet’s “the rest is silence” is not likely a coincidence. Kerouac arguably identifies himself with the Hamlet character in *Big Sur*, both in terms of the tragic ending he undoubtedly foresaw for himself (despite his assertions to the contrary) and the descent into madness he experienced. This is not the only *Hamlet* allusion in *Big Sur*. Earlier in the novel, Duluoz says to his girlfriend, “... you might go to a nunnery at that, by God get thee to a nunnery ...” (189).

6. CONCLUSION

As a driving force in his work, Jack Kerouac's religious outlook played a role that is hard to overstate. Steeped in the mystical Catholicism of his working-class Quebecois upbringing, Kerouac's deep and complicated relationship with the Catholic Church was formed by his family, in particular his brother Gerard, and cemented by his schooling. This background set the stage for his development as a man and as a writer, and his introduction to Buddhism provided the essential plot twist that distinguishes his life and writing from others like him. Religion's influence over Kerouac on a personal level is evidenced by the fact that the most significant figures in his life were those who touched him on a spiritual level, most notably Gerard Kerouac, Neal Cassady, and Gary Snyder. On an artistic level, religion's influence on Kerouac is boundless. His Catholic upbringing instilled in him the sense of awe that permeated his worldview for the rest of his life, and he communicated this perspective in his writing. The Catholic Church also spawned Kerouac's fascination with mysticism, often highlighted in his writing; this same fascination fueled his enthusiasm for Buddhist studies. As discussed in chapter 2, both religions informed Kerouac's confessional, spontaneous prose style.

Ben Giamo is correct in saying that Kerouac's life was a spiritual journey, and his books chronicle every bump in the road. Kerouac's writing describes his transition from relative contentment, as illustrated in *Visions of Gerard*, to the increasing degrees of spiritual torment presented in *The Dharma Bums*, to the full-blown crisis delineated in *Big Sur*. The complex relationship between the two religions and the effect this conflict had on his work has heretofore gone largely uninvestigated. However, it is essential to a complete understanding of his work. While Kerouac's writing often espouses ecstasy, enthusiasm, and

sheer life-force, there is a darker side to Kerouac that is just as essential to who he was as a man and artist as the free-wheeling, kicks-joy-madness side of his personality that made him “King of the Beats.” Kerouac took both his writing and his religion far more seriously than many people realize, and in many ways his writing represents a heart-wrenching and mind-bending religious quest. Exploring this element of his work sheds new light on Kerouac’s novels that illuminates his depth and solemnity as a writer. Kerouac’s religious quest was a cornerstone of his artistic development, and the three novels I have examined trace how Catholicism and Buddhism together informed that quest. He never actually believed that Buddha was the Pope, as Lucien Carr once joked, but Kerouac’s writing catalogs his attempts to decide which god to serve. Ultimately, neither Kerouac’s Buddhism nor his Catholicism makes his work what it is — rather, it is the battle that raged in his mind and heart between Buddha and Christ. Though *Big Sur* does provide a resolution of Christian salvation, Kerouac’s own life is messier. Although he no longer had the energy or will to continue struggling with his dueling religions, his decision to place his loyalty with Catholicism did not bring him the peace he sought, and his final years often were marked by depression and insecurity. Christ may have won the battle, but by then Kerouac had already lost the war.

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