

*An Apocalyptic Paradigm:  
Religious Improvisation of the Beats vs. Religious Fundamentalism  
By Karen Pressley, May 2007*



## Preface

In Fall 2006, my readings of the Beats and study of 1950s culture (art, music, performance, poetry, lifestyle) opened my awareness of the influence of Buddhism in the lives of the Beats and how it affected their values, their sexuality and relationships. I began to learn how

Buddhist teachings influenced the shaping of what eventually became known as Beat counter-culture. While reading Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems*, William S. Burroughs' *Queer* and *Naked Lunch*, Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* and *Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, and Joyce Johnson's *Door Wide Open*, I also learned of their disillusionment with and revolt against their family religions (mostly Christianity, but also Judaism) and their attraction to eastern thought.

I began to wonder what was more compelling to them: Buddhism, Chinese aesthetics, and eastern thought, or their passionate dissention with Western ways dominated by Judeo-Christian thought? Was Buddhism truly attractive on its own, or did it just provide a channel for revolt or a destination away from Christianity? Was becoming Buddhist simply a way of gaining a different idea from masses of Christians they did not want to identify with? Discovering this about the Beats was timely for me, as it mirrored a personal issue of disillusionment—not about Christ as God, but about the organized religious denominations and practices of Christianity in everyday life and American politics which I disdained (I'll explain this later). Because of this, I became willing to explore views outside my paradigm of Christianity. The lives and writings of the Beats really “spoke” to me for this reason: I hadn't understood the 1950's world of my parents that I grew up in. Through my studies, I discovered that the Beat movement was centered on dissention, a revolt against many things my parents stood for, which I did rebel against, too, though not to the degree of the Beats who basically created their own world. In my parents' era, being good Christians meant you weren't a communist; the way to show you were a good Christian was to conform to authority and not disagree by being different from the standards set by those in power (the elite class, the wealthy). Being a Christian showed support of governmental efforts to prove communism unworkable and undesirable for America. Working hard and striving to live like the elite class with nice homes,

nice clothes, being a church-goer, meant achieving what had become the American dream. Being a follower of this way of life meant being accepted socially by people of the same ilk: successful, materialistic capitalists, otherwise known as the American democracy of the 1950s.

Also during these studies, I've been jolted by the Beats' spirit of dissent and sexually explicit content of the works of Allen Ginsberg (*Howl and Other Poems*), William S. Burroughs (*Queer and Naked Lunch*); Jack Kerouac (*Dharma Bums, On the Road*), Joyce Johnson (*Door Wide Open*), Hettie Jones (*How I Became Hettie Jones*), all books that I would have never read as a conservative, fundamentalist Christian woman outside of this class. At the same time, I've



Photo of Allen Ginsberg and Beat friends, assessed 7/2007 from Google Images.



been intrigued and even envious of their spontaneous abandon of conservative paradigms on all fronts of life—from ways of dressing, communicating, living, sleeping, working, writing, performing, thinking, traveling, dissenting—which I discovered through reading their works and biographies, 1950s counter-culture lifestyle, music (specifically jazz of John Coltrane), metaphysical realities (Burroughs' investigations into Scientology, religion from a sociological

perspective, and spiritual pursuits of my own that paralleled my Beat studies.

On one hand, discovering all of this has embarrassed me. How could this whole movement have existed during the 1950s while I was growing up but was barely aware of them and their influence in the culture of my time? Had my paradigms been so different from theirs that the two never intersected in some way? On the other hand, exploring the lives of the Beats

and finding out what informed their aesthetics has not only fascinated and thrilled me but also has spoken to me in a deeply personal way. The very dissention they expressed so freely was the dissention I have felt but only expressed with limitations. Their abandonment of norms and freedom of expression mirrors many of my own my desires and imagination, but most of all, began to expose my own religious fundamentalism. This becomes a significant point of my study and is developed later.

Concurrent to all of this, I took a Sociology of Religion class. This opened up a world with a new perspective for me about how religion affects society and how society affects religion, including the sexual customs and practices of those religions and how men and women treat each other within those religious practices. For that class, I researched ten religious movements or world religions, visited their places of worship and took field notes: Tibetan Buddhism, Mormonism, Islam, Wicca, Church of Existentialism, Hare Krishna, Christian apologetics, Church of Religious Equality, and Quakers.

Looking at religions from a sociological perspective rather than from the paradigm of a Christian fundamentalist enriched my ongoing Beat study. I was able to look at how society affected the Beats' revolt against the religions of their upbringing, and then how the Beats affected society through their deviant religious practices (deviant meaning, deviating from the orthodox Judeo-Christian religions they had been raised in which, at that time, were considered the religions of the masses in America).

For a directed study throughout spring 2007, I began with the intent to explore the life of the Beats from a religious perspective, to see how their religions or spiritual beliefs informed their aesthetics and lifestyle overall. I wanted to explore this as a comparison to how religion had informed my aesthetics and lifestyle while I grew up in the 1950s, and showed my own dissention by departing Catholicism and becoming a spiritual seeker, to finding Scientology, to

disillusionment of that and departing it, to a radical change of becoming a protestant Christian in 1998. Gaining a new understanding of my personal spiritual journey became an integral element of my study, so I've included some of my personal experiences in this paper to show how the Beats' revolution has caused revelation in my own life.

I originally intended this paper to also fully explore the gamut of Beat sexuality from the perspective of sexual practices of religions as this is a dominant aspect of their lives communicated through Beat literature, but that is extensive enough to deserve a study of its own. So, for the sake of this short project, I limited my focus to how society affected the religious views of the Beats that caused them to distill a theology from experience, and how the Beats' deviance from orthodox Judeo-Christian religiosity affected society. I may mention various Beats but write primarily about Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg.

## Apocalyptic Paradigms

In post-World War II America (when I was born), Americans celebrated their victory over the war but simultaneously embraced pessimism for their future. John Lardas' *The Bop Apocalypse* (2001) describes this as a momentary eruption of America's apocalyptic imagination. Society lived with the moral aftermath of the use of atomic bombs that devastated lives in Hiroshima, the Nazi genocide of the Jews, an impending fear of atomic war in our homeland, and the ongoing threat of the spread of communism. The need to retreat from these realities, whether by diving into an air raid shelter or finding other means of personal or social escape, enveloped 1950s society like an apocalyptic shadow. Lardas thus defines apocalypsis as *a way of seeing and interpreting the world*.

My exploration of the religious visions of Beat writers has been focused on what I see as the Beats' apocalyptic paradigm: the way they saw and interpreted the world and the interplay

between people and the source of truth caused them to revolt, the revolt being in the form of improvisational living, a spirituality distilled from life experiences.

Even though Jack Kerouac (raised Catholic), Allen Ginsberg (raised in Judaism), and William S. Burroughs (raised Protestant Christian) had different spiritual foundations, the Beats were each influenced by apocalyptic views from religions as well as Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*. Spengler identifies an essentially religious crisis: America's inability to escape the orbit of a decaying Western civilization. Lardas says the Beats saw themselves as either warriors in an apocalyptic battle to defeat forces of control unleashed by the Enlightenment (Burroughs) or as defenders of the ultimate promise of America (Kerouac and Ginsberg). In selectively reading Spengler, each of these writers positioned themselves in relation to an eventual, post-apocalyptic America.

Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs viewed their lives as both a cultural and individual crisis. Their Spenglerian belief in a connection between internal spirituality, and the transcendent laws that governed the workings of the cosmos, added a political dimension to their individual quests for knowledge of spiritual salvation. Ideas about spiritual freedom and individualism became connected to ideas about social transformation. As the Beats looked for an authority to substantiate their insights, they found Spengler a viable means for assessing American's relationship to the essence of life. They found Spengler's work to espouse an idea of proto-spirituality in that all life forms spring from a primordial essence. More about proto-spirituality shortly.

The "end of the world" always seemed to be looming or imminent. Since the death of Christ two thousand years ago, the Christian world—particularly the West--has been affected by the Christian apocalyptic view: the expectation of an imminent cosmic cataclysm in which God destroys the ruling powers of evil and raises the righteous to life in a messianic kingdom

(Lockyer, 1986). The *Bible's* book of Revelation prophesies signs of the end times. The imminence of this prophecy has driven Christian people to ensure others know Christ, to profess faith in Him by turning from sinful ways to give control of their nature to God. To demonstrate this faith, believers are to seek holiness for their personal nature, and will be saved from the eventual cataclysm the *Bible* promises. They will go to heaven rather than hell in the end. This is the apocalyptic paradigm of Christians, their way of seeing and interpreting the world.

Prominent Christians Billy Graham used evangelism since the 1950s to spread the word so that all people of the earth could be saved from a life separated from God by their sin. In the 1960s, what I knew to be real was the world of my working class parents who strove for success via the American-dream method, the very world that the Beats revolted against. I had always questioned my parents' religious affiliation with Catholicism because what that religion taught (strict adherence to the Ten Commandments, with threats of eternal penalties for sinning) was not evident to me in the way my parents lived (fighting, drinking, materialism, little presence of God or holiness in our house). They were not allowed to use birth control; kept rituals like fasting, going to confession, praying at the stations of the cross, and attending ritualistic masses, where the priests and altar boys wore elaborate garb and spoke in Latin which no one understood. There was so much control of their lives by the church; I couldn't see God in any of this. Control was exercised over my life as the above, plus I was forced to wear dark uniforms as a child at Catholic school, and saw nuns wearing habits treat other children with cruelty.

I left the Catholic religion at age 11 (1963) believing I would never find God there, and refusing to be a part of any organized religion for 20 more years. Like the Beats, I went looking for spiritual answers as a dissident myself, and got into Scientology in 1982, my own form of revolt like the Beats got into Buddhism: it was a rejection of orthodox Christian America. Burroughs was also involved in Scientology in the late 1960s, early 1970s, which I describe

more later. Scientology is an anti-Christian belief system where the individual discovers herself/himself as the creator of all aspects of life, thought, matter, energy, space and time—the opposite of what the Bible teaches. There you learn that humans were born basically good rather than born with original sin as Christianity teaches. As did William S. Burroughs, I came to understand existence through the presence of spiritual forces. Like me, he rejected the Christian polarization and conflict of the supernatural (evil) and human (good) realms.

In 1998 I had an unexpected “God” experience, left Scientology, and became a Christian in 1999. My whole focus in life went onto a pursuit of the understanding of God and how to have a personal relationship with him; what was his will for me: how could I stay in his favor; what did it mean to be loved unconditionally. My pursuit has been a deep journey for me and has been the focus of my life since 1999, though some of my experiences in Christianity have also been traumatic and disillusioning. I had gotten involved in my mother’s church (Baptist) which I quickly discovered was a highly-controlling, judgmental and indoctrinating group almost to cult-like dimensions by the way the leaders tried to control members’ lives. I realized that while I had found freedom in Christ and came to understand the love of God in a personal way, I also saw that I disdained the control that organized religion (Scientology as well as Christianity) attempted to exercise on its members. I also disdained the fact that Christianity had been such a religion of war throughout its history, even within my own generation (Japan, Vietnam, Iraq). It became clear to me that organized religion is one activity; individual pursuit of a relationship with or understanding about God is another. The two may intersect but not necessarily. Following my bad experiences with certain Southern Baptists and my subsequent disillusionment with organized Christianity, my Beat studies entered my life.

I had been struggling with various issues such as, did I expect my religion to answer

moral or ethical questions and provide a framework within which I, and everyone else, should live? How did personal freedom and expression fit in this? In the pursuit of spiritual freedom, how does sexual freedom coincide with that, or does it? Should people live according to what their religion teaches about marriage and sex, versus building an inner personal set of morals and values and living by that code? While I was looking for answers to these things in my own life, I also looked at the lives of the Beats to see how they addressed these things in their lives.

I never understood until dialogue in this study of the Beats that Billy Graham's evangelism was responsible for millions of American's calling themselves "Christian" as nothing more than a label which brought protection from being perceived as communist, versus showing evidence of being true believers in God through Christ. I believe it was this religious fundamentalism that the Beats revolted against which drove them to find new ways of seeing. The Beats created an apocalyptic view of their own. There are more examples of this than I can fit in this report. To look at a few:

In Allen Ginsberg's collection of essays, *Deliberate Prose* (1952-1995), among other writings, he talks of apocalyptic thinking:

"Makes very little difference what happens, the next ten years, because the main thing in the universe isn't at all affected by these little shifts of anthills, musics, nations, marriages. The main thing's nameless, so I'll call it beauty—the Kind and Lord of the Cosmos, a perfect being who sits on a throne made of vanishing ink. It has a face so radiant that once you've see it, or guessed at it, you know that this creature has always been here and will be around as long as it wants, and won't be touched by men's atomic claws or the scary dust of the Apocalypse." (Ginsberg, 1959).

In that essay, Ginsberg goes on to question existence for the future, wondering what mankind will do next in its confused purpose in life. He'd be just as happy to blow up the false America that he believed exists which has been getting in the way of realization of beauty, so why not just get high on the soul. His spiritual leanings went toward Buddhism and forms of

Hinduism, mystical overall. He held ideas that the things of this world were reflections of the divine, and even served as tangible evidence of a looming divine judgment. In his essay,

“Metaphysics” (1949) he wrote:

“This is the one and only firmament; therefore it is the absolute world. There is no other world. The circle is complete. I am living in Eternity. The ways of this world are the ways of Heaven.”

The point being, that was Ginsberg’s apocalyptic paradigm, his way of seeing, shaped by the looming end of life and the need to meanwhile understand right now how to see beauty and experience pleasure. *Howl and Other Poems* expresses this similarly through Moloch, which deserves a paper of its own.

Jack Kerouac expressed apocalyptic revelations throughout his writings, especially in *Dharma Bums* (which I explore later). I’m using one short excerpt from *On the Road* here:

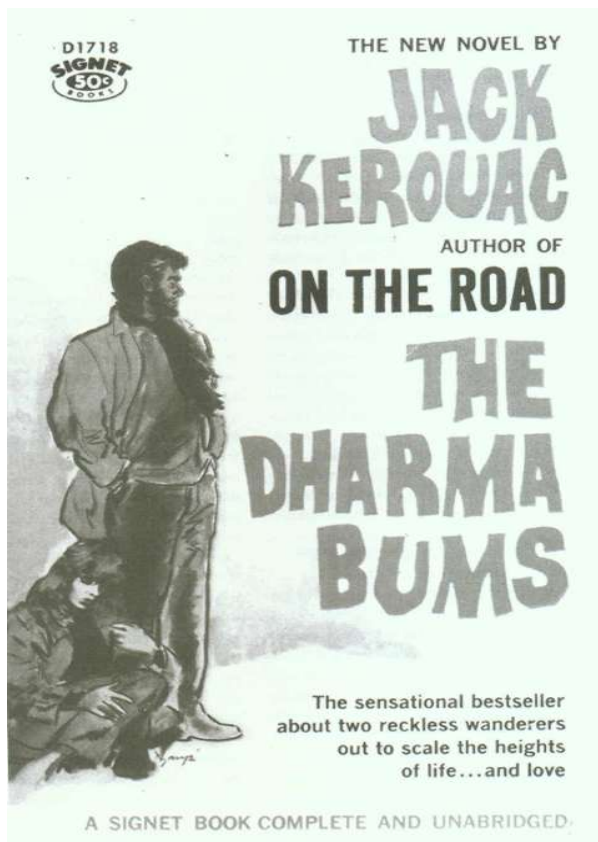
“The sounds you expect to hear on the 1st day of the world and the Second Coming...”

Kerouac’s line reflects a Catholic paradigm which comes from the *Bible* in the book of Revelation, an apocalyptic prophecy. His statement describes the sound of Jesus’ trumpet at His Second Coming, blowing to announce the end of the earth as we know it. This designates “the end” that Christians have been waiting for centuries. I think this also shows that the Beats saw themselves as both the beginning and the end of an era, with a cosmic view of history, infused with an apocalyptic sense of urgency in events of day to day living.

In *Bop Apocalypse*, John Lardas contends that the cultural remnants that informed the Jack Kerouac’s and the Beats’ new vision, and the existence of his new vision as a religious dimension, takes on clarity when one considers the influence of Spengler upon his and the Beat’s lifestyle and artistic collaborations. The Beats’ philosophical thoughts about America, their exploration of ordinary realities of daily living in the world, and the extraordinary realities they

found through drug use, sexual experimentation, literary curiosity, and religions were profoundly influenced by Spengler's apocalyptic view: the West was destined to collapse, like all previous civilizations, but that a new culture would inevitably emerge to continue the cycle of history, a phenomenon that includes the question of Being.

Lardas contends that Kerouac found in Spengler's cycles of history, evidence of a Catholic apocalypticism. Kerouac did not perceive Spengler's proto-spirituality to be very



different from a Catholic worldview, as they both assume that the world was made in the image of a divine reality. As a Catholic, he possessed a view that he held correspondence between this world and God as its sacred counterpart. I believe that Kerouac's book, *Dharma Bums*, expresses this the best, though those views are found throughout his writings.

*Dharma Bums* follows Ray Smith, a character based on Kerouac himself, through a physical and spiritual journey. Smith meets

Dharma Bums image accessed July 2007 through Google.images.

Japhy Ryder (his Buddhist friend, Gary Snyder), an eccentric mountaineer who is fascinated by Eastern literature and religion. Japhy inspires Ray to begin his career as a meditating, rucksack-wielding 'Zen Lunatic'. There are apocalyptic visions throughout this book; one excerpt is from a passage where Japhy and Ray have camped against a rock thirty feet high and wide, with twisted trees arched over it. It formed a concave which they could huddle in if it rained:

“How did this immense sonumbitch ever get here?”

“It probably was left here by the retreating glacier. See over there that field of snow?”  
 “Yeah.”

“That’s the glacier what’s left of it. Either that or this rock tumbled here from inconceivable prehistoric mountains we can’t understand, or maybe it just landed here when the friggin’ mountain range itself burst out of the ground in the Jurassic upheaval. Ray when you’re up here you’re not sittin’ in a Berkeley tea room. This is the beginning and the end of the world right here. Look at all those patient Buddas lookin at us saying nothing.”

This is just one of many excerpts that shows how the Beats saw life through an apocalyptic view, and saw themselves as in touch with both the beginning and the end. Ray is led to a deeper understanding of his Buddhist faith through scaling mountains, sleeping in silent deserts, and meditating for hours on end deep in the woods. He travels all over the United States, meeting innumerable different characters as he goes and learning more and more about the truths of existence itself. Ray and Japhy are searching for a new truth that is identified with the Dharma of the Buddhists, the last goal of the universe and life. I understand Dharma to mean the body of teachings expounded by the Buddha, as well as rules of the operation of the mind or universe in a metaphysical system.

This way of seeing the world is anti-fundamentalist Christian. It’s an active improvisation with life. It’s a search for balance and dharma. I’ll explore this concept next.

### **Religious Fundamentalism vs. Religious Improvisation**

It wasn’t until I began to summarize my thoughts about my study and write this paper that I realized that I had entered into this directed study with that of a conservative, fundamentalist Christian. I believe I would not have been able to perceive the Beats’ revolt against orthodox Christian America and religious fundamentalism as well had I not been able to see my own fundamentalism. I believed that one was only really a Christian if they could show

evidence through their holy lifestyle that they had been “born again” (had a personal revelation from God and they truly repented from their ways, accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, “got saved” from their own sin and were filled with the Holy Spirit). This was a truth to me, the paradigm through which I based my perception of all other Christians and judged them as to whether they were “real” or not. I believed that since the Bible said that homosexuality was an abomination, then that’s the way it should be treated in life, and Christians are to openly express hatred of sin (based on the Christian saying, “Love the sinner, hate the sin”).

I believed that my Christian beliefs, my faith, should inform every aspect of my life from my communication, my affiliations, my dress, my art, my marriage, my behavior. With this as my driving view, I was really stretching out to take the “Beat Aesthetics” class where I would learn about people my age living out what they believed to be true, revolting against the very life that I had just recently adopted after getting out of Scientology. While studying the Beats, I at first felt that if Kerouac left Christianity to be a Buddhist, then he should be a Buddhist all the way, not just pick and choose aspects of Buddhism that he wanted to practice as if he was selecting food items at a buffet line. I felt the same about Ginsberg who deviated from Judaism to Buddhism and aspects of Hinduism.

It was through the course of my study that I realized how judgmental that I was as a Christian, expecting people, including the Beats, to be as extreme fundamentalist about their religion as I had been in mine. This realization rocked the rafters of my heart and opened me up to be able to see the direction I had been going as a religious fundamentalist—that I had become closed off from being able to tolerate the fact that people are in various stages of their spiritual journey (a journey of their choosing) which cannot be forced or prodded by others’ expectations or rules. Throughout the course of this whole study, I came to realize that I had allowed myself to become boxed in by my own fundamentalism, the very thing the Beats revolted against, and

that I had revolted against in my late teen years when I finally got the courage to question my parents' ways.

During this study, I examined my own views about religion, and realized that I thought that if a person was going to bother to be involved in a religion then they should do it totally—like I had. When I had been a Scientologist, I had been a radical Scientologist. I pledged my life to the aims of Scientology and fiercely defended the organization, though at the same time I also harbored deeply hidden doubts about the teachings and lifestyle. I repressed those doubts and remained in it for 16 years to keep my marriage together. When I finally broke free of it in 1998, I found my new faith in Christ, and did so with a deeply intense passion. I believed that this was the way for me, spiritually. Unfortunately, I failed to see in my spiritual growth as a Christian that I had taken on the ways of a conservative fundamentalist which actually have nothing to do with faith in Christ. Learning this about myself came about largely because of my studies of the revolutionary paradigms of others who confronted issues similar to mine, how they distilled their own theology from their experiences of life, and the sociology of religion.

Becoming aware of my own fundamentalism is what helped me recognize the level of creativity involved in developing one's own relationship with God--religious improvisation and the difference between that and fundamentalism. Thus is an example of looking at religion from a sociological perspective: how religion affects society, and how society affects religion. The Beat revolution in the 1950s has dramatically affected me personally in 2007. It was my exploration of the 1950s counter-culture and their dissent that reflected against my conservative fundamentalism. To me, conservative fundamentalism includes thinking that our way is the only right way; our way is the way of successful, wealthy American culture; the dominant way; the way anyone should live if they want to be considered good, righteous, moral,

strong values. The ugly side of this also happens to coincide with the way of political leaders like George Bush and his supporters who also tend to frame American democracy with these views. Conservative religious fundamentalism also happens to support war in the name of democracy which is really the American imperialistic stronghold of capitalism. Conservative fundamentalism was also a dominant force behind the bombs dropped on Japan and Vietnam, which could be interpreted as a war against Asian thinking or Buddhism.

I began to see that I had held a preconceived notion I had about them all—the notion that if they felt so strongly against Christianity and so religiously enamored with Buddhism, then I should find evidence of religious fundamentalism in their lives like I could see in my own. As I progressed through this study, I couldn't find religious fundamentalism like my own in their writings or their lives. This caused me to question whether they were really devout Buddhists or not, and I looked for both evidence of that as well as contradictions and inconsistencies with Buddhist teachings in their lifestyle. I did not understand Buddhism at that point and so could not know that I would not find the type of fundamentalism in them as Buddhists that was present in me as a Christian.

I began to see a common thread throughout Beat writings that paralleled my own life: each of them had been raised with a religion that they revolted against as they grew older because their religion did not align with the life they wanted to live. They viewed religion as constricting, limiting, oppressive, hypocritical. The dogma of their early religions did not provide the answers they were looking for in life. They believed there was much more to discover about themselves and their spirituality than what their religions provided them.

James Grauerholz, Burrough's twenty-year companion, said Burroughs dabbled in Buddhism but was not a Buddhist. He have an awareness of the essentials of Buddhism and, in

his own way, was affected by the Buddha--dharma. In 1954, Burroughs wrote to Kerouac from Tangier:

My conclusion was that Buddhism is only for the West to study as history...But it is not, for the West, an Answer, not A Solution. We must learn by acting, experiencing, and living, that is above all, by Love and Suffering. 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. You were given the power to love in order to use it, no matter what pain it may cause you. Buddhism frequently amounts to a form of psychic junk. I cannot ally myself with such a purely negative goal as avoidance of suffering. Suffering is a chance you have to take by the fact of being alive.”

His view that “suffering is a chance you have to take by the fact of being alive” is Burroughs way of saying it is our duty to learn from suffering, which I take to mean, he suffered much through romantic love, broken relationships, and loneliness. Like Grauerholz said, Burroughs only took from Buddhism but was not Buddhist. In a letter to Ginsberg, Burroughs referred to Buddhism as “psychic junk” and recommended that Ginsberg not waste his time with it as a source of spiritual answers. Burroughs carries this thought about Buddhism being “psychic junk” in *Naked Lunch*:

”Buddha? A notorious metabolic junk...Makes his own you dig. In India, where they got no sense of time, The Man is often a month late...Now let me see, is that the second or the third monsoon? I got like a meet in Ketchupore about more or less.’ “And all them junkies sitting around in the lotus position spitting on the ground and waiting on The Man.

“So Buddha says: ‘I don’t hafta take this sound. I’ll by God metabolize my own junk.’

“Man, you can’t do that. The Revenooers will swarm all over you.

“Over me they won’t swarm. I gotta gimmick, see? I’m a fuckin’ Holy Man as of right now’

“Jeez, boss, what an angle.”

To me this shows that while he has taken from Buddhism he also criticizes it, but also, may misunderstand it. Grauerholz pointed out that a motivation to “avoid suffering” is merely another form of craving. And in Mahayana Buddhism the bodhisattva vows not to seek nirvana, but to be reborn for as long as the sentient beings remain unliberated by enlightenment. While

Burroughs lived in Tangier writing *Naked Lunch*, he sunk into severe addiction of drugs. Grauerholz pointed out that while it is misguided to confuse an opiate stupor with a transcendental state, it is undeniable that Burroughs saw a rough equivalence between the apathy of the stoned junky and the transcendental stillness of the meditator. In a way he was emptying his mind, a Buddhist goal, which Burroughs also sought. He claimed to reject the “purely negative goal” of avoidance of suffering, but what else was he doing by using narcotics? Lots of contradiction here. But when he says, “I’m a Holy Man as of right now,” this strikes me as being so representative of the Beats’ spontaneity, believing that just by making a split-second decision they can do or be in the moment. It is this type of spontaneity that explains what I mean by improvisation in life.

## Religious improvisation

My study continues to show how cultural remnants informed the new vision of the Beats, outside the box of religious including Christianity and Judaism. They distilled a theology of experience from disparate influences. These disparate influences include so many sources that they cannot all be named or explored within the confines of this paper, but they tend to zero in on things like the works of innovative, improvisational musicians Charlie Parker and Miles Davis; the prophecies of Spengler, teachings of Catholicism and Judaism; the works of abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock; the political and cultural ramifications of post-World War II; the influences of many writers but especially William Blake and Walt Whitman; and so much more.

For example, Jack Kerouac’s poetry and prose are characterized by a raw, rhythmic and improvisational quality which has revolutionized American literature. It brought a spontaneity

and in particular a spiritual humanness to poetry and prose. I call this spontaneity a form of improvisation, a way of seeing and being like a voyage of spontaneity which characterizes the Beats and which I believe became their actual religion. Improvisation requires original thought but to create original thought requires understanding of all that is and selecting from that what you like, and adding that to your new creation. This is a cognitive experience that exemplifies opposition to the bourgeois society. It springs from a desire for freedom in thought and movement, outside the realm of control imposed by others. This is truly a spiritual process though it also involves the body. Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* is a great example of religious improvisation. Kerouac, as Ray Smith, almost with apparent superficiality, when telling about his moves and adventures through the American continent, joins the physical and the spiritual element.

Burroughs lived his own forms of religious improvisation. As regards his movement from Buddhism to Scientology in the late 1960s, he was attracted to the fact that Scientology confirmed his belief that consciousness is akin to a tape recording that can be rewound, fast-forwarded or erased. This discovery influenced his spiritual views as he sought to undo conventional authorship and words, and worked to move things around collage-style, which he eventually developed into cut-ups. He favored inhabiting an occult-type magical universe where the power of the individual will reigned, versus a world where control over individual will is exercised by an authority outside the individual. He had been against control his whole life—individual, psychological, familial, state, biological. His revolt against control and desire for personal contact free from restrictions were underlying principles that his quest for spontaneous expression and lifestyle. Burroughs pursued the knowledge of language to discover how it

functioned as a control mechanism, which led him to Alfred Korzybski's General Semantics, a basis for L. Ron Hubbard's Dianetics and Scientology.

Burroughs introduced Scientology to Allen Ginsberg, along with his discovery of his cut-up method. In studying Scientology, Burroughs would have read Hubbard's claim of being the reincarnated Buddha, and that Scientology is founded on Buddhism and the wisdom of other Eastern religions. Before Scientology, Burroughs had been interested in Buddhism. However, Burroughs was later quoted as saying that "Eastern techniques of meditation were primitive and would be superseded by scientific techniques," expressing opposition to Ginsberg's and Gary Snyder's "back to nature" trip. In an interview for the Daily Californian, Burroughs told the interviewer (Bates) that "Yogi is superseded by autonomic shaping, electric brain stimulation, things like that. Things that can take a yogi 20 years to do can be done quite quickly now." (Burroughs & Bates, 1974).

But Burroughs left Scientology for some of the same reasons I did. In 1970, he told the *LA Free Press*:

"Some of the techniques of Scientology are highly valuable and warrant further study and experimentation. The E-Meter (instrument similar to the lie detector, used in Scientology spiritual counseling) is a useful device. On the other hand, I am in flat disagreement with organizational policy. No body of knowledge needs an organization policy; this can only impede the advancement of knowledge...it is precisely organizational necessities that have prevented Scientology from obtaining the serious consideration merited by Hubbard's discoveries. Scientologists are not prepared to accept intelligent and sometimes critical evaluation. The demand unquestioning acceptance."

Scientology's control had squelched Burroughs' improvisational religiosity. But Scientology had positively influenced Burroughs' cut-up technique, where he cut up a page into sections and rearranged the quadrants. He cut up pre-existing media and rearranged it to form

something entirely new. This established new connections between images and expanded one's range of vision. Burroughs's art was tied to his spiritual expression in a similar way that Ginsberg created *Deliberate Prose* and Kerouac created *Spontaneous Prose*. Burroughs' cut-up method was intended to alter a reader's consciousness in a do-it-yourself manner. Scientology's emphasis was to direct the individual to rehabilitate one's self-determination, complete knowledge and spiritual power toward the goal of total spiritual freedom.

Lardas said that "Burroughs's cut-up method was the evangelical counterpart of Scientology, in that it was intended to alter a reader's consciousness, to use cut-up in order for readers to become aware of their own power to dictate reality. Burroughs believed that cut-ups were similar to human experiences in the real world as people walked down the street (Pallanck, 2005).

This is representative of the Beat emphasis on the body as a primary mediator of our experience. The individual (spiritual being) uses their body for improvisation, whether as a saxophone player creating new, original combination of notes blown through expressive breaths; or as a writer like Kerouac saying in his *Spontaneous Prose* that first thought is the best thought and that is what should be written or said. It is also like Ginsberg as a poet who wrote in one of his essays in the *Deliberate Prose* (1959) collection:

Beauty is so perfect that it doesn't depend on anything happening in this world that we see with our feet and brains. We've all seen beauty face to face, one time or other—and said, "Oh, my god, of course, so that's what it's all about, no wonder I was born and had all those secret weird feelings!" Maybe it was a moment of instantaneous perfect stillness in some cow patch in the Catskills when the trees suddenly came alive like a Van Gogh Painting or a Wordsworth poem. Or a minute listening to, say, Wagner on the phonograph when the music sounded as if it was getting nightmarishly sexy and alive awful, like an elephant calling far way in the moonlight. At that moment you either kill your soul and go out and make money, or you pick up on the fact for good that there's something ALIVE behind the universe that nobody, but nobody, has ever had the guts to

meet. Or said much about if they did...Meeting the invisible elephant and looking in his eye means the end of you, and the eternal return of the old God that everyone at once knows and that never dies.

Ginsberg is telling us that beauty helps us latch onto something mysterious inside our soul, which takes over completely when we die and that is what we become—beauty. In his *Deliberate Prose* essays, he inspires us, tells us, to look for moments of finding beauty or of soaking up all that we can in each moment, spontaneously, to capture the expression of each moment and just BE.

Religious improvisation to me means that instead of embracing the fundamentals of organized religious doctrine through the traditions of world religions, their *distillation* from experiences became their religious vision that animated their everyday lives and informed their art. Lived religion was incorporated into the way they wrote. They demonstrated how they engaged us on moral grounds through the discourse of their lived religion.

## Conclusions

Throughout all this study, I began to see over and over that Kerouac had revolted against Christianity because of what it represented culturally, its association with war, wealth, authority, American tradition, the very things he felt were crippling American culture. And, that he had turned to Buddhism and eastern thought for answers and a way of life that he could live with, but yet, his writings showed an ongoing disappointment with life itself. His Buddhism did not bring peace to his soul. He died an unhappy alcoholic, with many unresolved relationships (mother, lovers). Grauerholz says that during the mid 1980s Burroughs went through a time of deep sadness and depression, reviewing a life's catalog of mistakes and regrets. This seems to have resulted in a kind of spiritual awakening, because by the end of his life ten years later, he really had become enormously sweet and tenderhearted, more patient, more kindly, and considerate.

As death approached, Burroughs was writing in what he knew would be his final journals. There he wrestled with his anger of man's bottomless ignorance, quoting Sri Aurobindo "This is a War Universe." It what could have been because of karma, he used the last decade of his old age to look back upon his life and study its lessons. Grauerholz said Burroughs attained a state of compassion for the suffering that is in everyone.

Kerouac and Burroughs died during unhappy circumstances with addictions to alcohol and drugs. To me this was a sad contradiction to the freedom they had been seeking through their religious pursuits. I don't know about the conditions of Ginsberg's death. One other Beat artist affected my views. I had studied the life and music of John Coltrane, a bebop jazz saxophone player known as one of the greatest musicians ever from that period who continues to influence jazz today. During my research into his life, I discovered that he had become more and more deeply disturbed about American culture (racial discrimination which emanated even from Christianity, which disillusioned him) and he began to look toward eastern spiritual practices for fulfillment. He studied under Ravi Shankar for years, and while involved in both religions he continued struggling with drug addiction and alcoholism. Religion didn't resolve this for him. His music became so dissonant that he even began to lose his black audience. Ravi Shankar's comment about Coltrane affected me deeply: "John Coltrane had read the Bhagavad Gita. This shouldn't have happened.

Shankar's words echoed my thoughts. Why would a gifted musician like Coltrane and writers like Burroughs and Kerouac, understand the teachings of their religion that should bring peace and truth, yet live with such lack of fulfillment, and live a life that contradicts their very religious beliefs?

As I read Kerouac's, Ginsberg's and Burroughs' works I also became troubled by how they are represented as Buddhists, yet treated women with such lack of respect as if they were simply objects that they used for their own pleasure. I did not quote any references about this because I did not explore the topic of sexuality as I originally intended, due to the fact that it is an extensive topic in the lives of the Beats and needs its own study. But I want to mention it here from a perspective of religious studies because this is contrary to the teachings of Buddhism. I'm not an expert on Buddhism, so I may be looking at this out of context, but in the textbook, *Scriptures of the World's Religions*, James Fieser writes about Buddhism:

#### WOMEN SHOULD BE HONORED

One of the notable features of the tantric movement is an emphasis on the spiritual capacities of women. Classical Indian literature indicates that extreme misogyny was prevalent in the society, which makes this aspect of tantra even more significant. An example of the emphasis on the equality of women is the fact that one of the basic vows required of all practitioners is a pledge not to denigrate women, "who are the bearers of wisdom." The following passage from the *Chandamaharoshana Tantra* expresses a similar sentiment in its praises of women.

When women are honored,  
 They provide instant accomplishments (siddhi)  
 To those who wish for the welfare of all beings,  
 Thus one should honor women.  
 Women are heaven, women are dharma,  
 Women are also the supreme asceticism (tapas).  
 Women are Buddha, women are the sangha;  
 Women are the perfection of wisdom.

Their own sexuality, I feel, was the Achilles heel of their life and a complete contradiction to the doctrines of their faith. This was one of the main things that, when I first began this Beat study, caused me to question whether the Beats were in fact spiritual at all in their Buddhism, or whether they leaned on Buddhism and other spiritual studies as simply a diversion from and revolt against the orthodoxy of Judeo-Christian organized religions. Despite their apparent lack of fulfillment from their religious improvisations that I would have thought

would bring them happiness to the end of their life, they made impact on society through the counter-culture they created through literature and living.

Look at what happened to me as a result of studying this counter-cultural movement for a few months of my life. This caused me to look at life from the perspective of APOCALYPSIS—a way of looking and processing all that is within me and all that I see around me—just as they did.

They picked up pieces of this and that from their readings, their relationships, their good and bad experiences, and added it all up to something that became their theology. So their dissent, their experimentation, their revolution became their religion. And it has profoundly affected mine. The reading of many Beat works, but especially *The Dharma Bums*, has been helpful to me in order to understand my own religious fundamentalism that had closed me off from much creative thinking; but also, that not always what we are looking for can be found under my nose. This has stimulated in me the desire to know life in ways I have not yet known it and to embrace all parts of what I encounter.

In her panel discussion in 1996 with women writers of the Beat generation, Ann Charters commented to the panel how sad it was that Kerouac, in *Dharma Bums*, didn't really have a teacher, didn't really find a way of life; that the good teachers didn't come until the sixties. Joyce Johnson, who had a relationship with Kerouac for many years, responded with this about Jack being a Buddhist:

“With Buddhism, he was very eloquent on the subject. My own feeling is that he sort of misused Buddhism as a way of rationalizing his deepest hang-ups rather than trying to overcome them, rather than trying to work toward finding a way to have a really strong relationship with a woman apart from his mother, to overcome his horror of bringing children into the world. Buddhism was used to justify all that, I think it sort of added to his confusion. I know that point of view may make me very unpopular, but that's the way I feel.”

Carolyn Cassady responded with this comment:

“I would agree with that too. He was pretty escapist in most of his attitudes. I think one of the things he liked about Buddhism was because when he got into sticky situations you could say, “Oh, it’s all an illusion.” That’s how he sort of resolved things. Instead of as Joyce said, really trying to analyze the problem and overcome it, he just said, “It’s not really there.” He wasn’t very Buddhist about it; that appealed to him anyhow.

Hettie Jones added this:

“I think in a general way, the whole Beat idea and its relationship to Buddhism, and its whole place in American society at that time was really an anti-materialist point of view. Buddhism was very attractive to those of us who were disaffected with the organized religion that we were brought up in and wanted to use this little bit of knowledge that we acquired at that time, in a way, to see a more peaceable kingdom. Because we were in the middle of the Cold War, don’t forget, and people were setting off nuclear blasts to in Nevada. You have to put all this in context, and so I think that no matter how watered down we approached it, we still made use of the tenets of Buddhism as far as we could.”

The contributions made by these three Beat women who all knew Kerouac, Burroughs, Ginsberg and many other Beat writers and artists of the time, confirmed thoughts of my own. They had been there, observing, loving, having sex with, listening, reading, writing, and traveling with Beat men. I feel their comments sum up the answers to the questions I expressed in the beginning of this paper. Nevertheless, the three Beats I wrote about here created a profound affect on society through their words which continue to impact lives today. James Grauerholz ended his article about Burroughs with a quote from *The Place of Dead Roads*:

“Whenever you use this bow I will be there,” the Zen archery master tells his students. And he means there quite literally. He lives in his students and thus achieves a measure of immortality. And the immortality of a writer is to be taken literally. Whenever anyone reads his words the writer is there. He lives in his readers.”

Though Kerouac may have died an alcoholic at an early age, and Burroughs a drug addict, and Ginsberg I’m not sure, but each in their own way did achieve the immortality they had been seeking; they achieved it as writers whose words will live on. It is those words that continue to create revolution for any reader, as they broke through my own fundamentalism and helped me to adapt a new way of seeing.

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