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Contextualising Religious Struggles in Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*

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Abstract

This essay explores Jack Kerouac's childhood problems and charts the evolution of his religious views in *The Dharma Bums*. Along with that, it concentrates on the time in Kerouac's life when he travelled throughout America looking for the God of his youth. Analysing *The Dharma Bums* reveals the difficulties, he faced when he first realised that his religious upbringing was in danger due to his Beat Generation writer identity. It has looked at the difficulties Kerouac faced in his later years, when he started to doubt his own religious commitment. His novel contains tension between social identification and religious identity, which has been made clear by a study of *The Dharma Bums*.

Keywords: Religious, Identity, Conflict, Beliefs, Struggle.

Jack Kerouac, once referred as our most underappreciated and misunderstood author, is slowly making his way out of that limbo, although much about him is still unknown. He is now slowly coming out of this limbo. The reason for his obscurity is that his novels were misinterpreted by critics who, guided by Cold War preconceptions, saw in Kerouac a promoter of anarchy of almost every sort, including sexual, psychological, political, and creative anarchy. These critics are so consumed by the bogey they created that they neglected to see a key fact about him, namely that his achievement is complex and even paradoxical. He is a devout Roman Catholic and a conservative in politics, but only in the conventional sense of Emersonian and Thoreauan individualism. He is not an egotistical romantic. Because of his shyness and talent for adulation, he valued his friends' originality more than his own, referring to them as fellow Beat Generation members.

The Dharma Bums describes Kerouac's quest for God, the truth, and religious enlightenment, which he believed would purify his corrupt soul. Kerouac hoped that a new trip, with new ideals, may eventually lead him to God. *The Dharma Bums* is mostly autobiographical and focuses on the author's relationships and experiences, much like much of his earlier writing. The friendship and adventure of two men who set out in pursuit of heavenly redemption in a barbaric region, spiritual enlightenment, and truth are chronicled in this novel. Kerouac uses the fictional Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder to depict

the real friendship he had with his Buddhist buddy Gary Snyder. The story of Kerouac's stay with Japhy is told by Ray Smith in Kerouac's voice.

The main theme of the novel, *The Dharma Bums*, is the American hero. While Japhy Ryder is given a heroic position, Kerouac once more portrays himself through the character Ray Smith as a passenger, an observer, rather than the driver and agent of the event. According to Steve Turner's *Jack Kerouac: Angelheaded Hipster*, when Kerouac first met Gary Snyder in 1955 at a poetry reading, he felt an immediate connection with him, much like he had when first meeting Neal in 1946. Kerouac praised Snyder for being loyal to himself and not caring what other people thought of his values or deeds. Like Neal, Snyder is a magnetic character. Snyder was portrayed by Kerouac as a frontiersman, and Jack recognised in Gary's way of living the backpack revolution that would result in millions of hippies leaving industrial America a decade later. This prophecy is mentioned in *The Dharma Bums* by Japhy Ryder; Kerouac once more appeared to be speaking for a social minority, this time a more extreme social movement that ten years later would become America's counterculture.

Snyder had a significant impact on Kerouac's life and work in *The Dharma Bums*. Kerouac is searching for something that can rekindle his faith after his unproductive adventure on the road; Catholicism seems to have let him down; therefore, he is looking for a replacement, something to protect him from the depressing Nothingness. Kerouac found comfort in Snyder's Buddhist practises because he thought they offered plenty of chances for exploration and adventure. It appears that Kerouac merely sees Buddhism, like Catholicism, as a way to run away from the obligations of life.

Kerouac felt that many of the Buddhist principles could be related to in *The Dharma Bums*, but the reader is made aware from the first chapter that his spiritual path is not a life-affirming conversion, but rather another source of energy for his one genuine dedication in life. As Kerouac attempted to combine some Buddhist and Catholic values in order to satisfy and support his own hedonistic lifestyle, the remaining values that served no purpose for him in his daily life are simply discarded, the religious devotions, spoke of could in no way be associated with perfection. In *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, Matt Theado had a more favourable opinion of Kerouac's devotion to Buddhism in:

One cannot overstate the significance of Kerouac's Buddhist studies on his life and writing. At its core, Kerouac's Buddhism is not a radical departure from his worldview, for he had been exploring key Buddhist issues since *The Town and the City* without the background of Buddhism's rich traditions. He found affirmation in Buddhist teachings that made sense in the universe as he knew it. Kerouac augmented rather than replaced his childhood religious beliefs. (123)

Theado appears to have overlooked the fact that Kerouac lacked devotion and consistency in all part of his life, and his inconsistent religious beliefs do not seem to be an exception to this before making this comment. As a "Buddhist - Catholic," Kerouac described himself. Barry Miles in *Jack Kerouac: King of the Beats* states, "What's wrong with Jesus?" (97) in reference to the division between Buddhism and Christianity that separates east from west. Jesus apparently mentioned heaven. "Heaven - is it not the Buddha's Nirvana?" (97). He made an effort to avoid any allegiance to a certain religious order because he believed that he could turn whatever he is doing into a religion. This simplistic and erroneous worldview enabled Kerouac to corrupt and turn religious rites into drug-fuelled parties in *The Dharma Bums*:

She is sex mad and man mad, so there isn't much of a problem in persuading her to play *yabyum* ... I realised she wanted to be a big Buddhist like Japhy and being a girl the only way she could express it is this way, which had its traditional roots in the *yabyum* ceremony of Tibetan Buddhism, so everything is fine. (26-28)

Kerouac may have thought everything was acceptable when he began to manipulate Buddhist doctrines, just as he had done earlier in his life with Catholic principles, but those who knew him best disagreed. Many of Jack's close family members were aware of his ridiculous belief system; his sister accused him of playing God, and his Buddhist buddy Gary Snyder (Japhy Ryder) made fun of his inconsistent religious beliefs;

oh, don't start preaching Christianity to me, I can just see you 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. (169)

Kerouac's attempt to meld the principles of two religions made him more melancholy as his self-control broke down under the strain of a spiritual crisis. He tried a number of sophistries to make the conflict between his deep need for a personal God and his philosophical inclination for Buddhism go away. According to Steve Turner, *Jack Kerouac: Angelheaded Hipster*, Kerouac's failure in this religious endeavour is partly down to the childlike view of Catholicism he carried into adulthood from his adolescence.

Kerouac's religious and worldviews are undoubtedly contradictory, but what has not changed in his life is the depression that has followed him since he was a child. His hypocritical views on life and religion depict a lost, uneducated writer who is caught between the ethical poles, fascinated by both the perverse and the holy, unable to fully commit himself to either, and ultimately tolerant of both. He is divided between the booming all-night inebriated thrill of the city and the peaceful life, in the woods with only the necessities. Kerouac wrote in *The Dharma Bums* that Han Shan was "a man of solitude who could take off by himself and live honestly and authentically to himself," (22) and that he aspired to be like Han Shan. Yet it was not just his way of life; it was also his inability to tell the difference between religion and the logical search for life's meaning.

Kerouac continued to associate religion with misery; thus, it seems that his search for God is not about him finding peace and pleasure here on earth but rather about him finding safety in heaven after he dies. His simplistic view of faith stopped him from accepting life, thus his frenetic search for spiritual meaning - during which he raced between the isolation of the serene mountains and the raucous celebrations of the bohemian San Francisco streets - was nothing more than a foolish pursuit.

In the final chapter of *The Dharma Bums*, when Ray Smith once more departs the Beat scene of society to spend the summer alone on Desolation Peak, Kerouac documents his final effort to find spiritual salvation. Kerouac tried to withdraw from the world once more in an effort to escape the pain and despair of life, but he continued to ignore the fact that he was the only one who could find the answers to his issues, leading him on yet another pointless quest. Kerouac believed he would finally "come face to face with God or Tathagata and find out once and for all what is the meaning of all his existence and suffering" (197), according to James Campbell in *This is the Beat Generation*. The final chapters of the novel depict this summer Kerouac spent working as a fire lookout.

In *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac's character completes his spiritual quest and finds the answers he seeks, basking in the "Zen ideal of poverty and freedom" (142), saying, "owe so much to Desolation, thank you forever for taking me to the place where I learned all" (204). "In my diary I wrote, "oh I'm pleased!" on the late-day summits I saw the hope," (197) he writes, describing his time spent alone on Desolation Peak as a joyful period when spiritual light finally penetrates the armour of his black world. However, according to Miles, *Jack Kerouac: King of the Beats*:

The picture Jack paints of himself as a hermit bikku, happily meditating, cut off from the world for sixty days is something of an exaggeration. According to his friends, the experience reduced him to a nervous wreck, desperate for human company. (218)

In fact, it seems likely that Kerouac was forced to reflect and face the self he had avoided his entire adult life during the days when he was not distracted by other people or social gatherings. Introspection revealed to him the writer who had lost his will to live, not the carefree youngster of his Lowell youth. Hence, one should not picture Kerouac returning from the mountains as a contented and atoning man, but rather as a weary traveller who had accepted his place among all that humanity of bars, burlesque performances, and gritty love. He returned to the city still holding onto the dream that one day he may meet his own personal saviour, wishing there were a Personal God in all this impersonal matter, despite the failure of his restless days on the road and his spiritual journey to the mountains.

Kerouac's spiritual decline was caused by his incapacity to have faith in something he could not ostensibly identify; he had tried to be spiritual but had given up waiting for God. These conditions seemed to exacerbate his fascination with death, which permeated *The Dharma Bums* as well as many of the letters he penned at the time. Around this time, Kerouac's morbidity grew, and he embraced beliefs like "Death is holy ecstasy. Life is holy suffering" (*The Dharma Bums*, 299) and accept death as though a friend were dropping by for a drink, who also claim that life is holy suffering. In 1969, at the age of forty-seven, he passed away from an alcohol-related sickness after overcoming his prior fear of dying by merely extracting the want of life. He continued to hold these depressing beliefs up until his early passing.

Following the 1958 release of *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac disliked the idea that these individuals were attempting to affiliate themselves with the Beat Movement. During his time working with Gary Snyder, he foresaw a new movement, and *The Dharma Bums* captured the concept of this rucksack revolution.

Kerouac's prediction came true, and in 1958 he came under new criticism for allegedly promoting a group that would subsequently be known as the Beatniks. He struggled against these accusations of Beatnik affiliation and is more appalled than ever that he could be perceived as endorsing this hippy lifestyle, which he believed to be futile and damaging. He expressed his outrage at being associated with the Beatniks in a 1958 interview with the New York Herald Tribune. Kerouac is furious that the general audience has misread the genuine meaning of his writing, and he is mortified to think that his position as the leader of the Beats had been reduced to that of a jester:

Jack had always longed for fame and acceptance but, now that it had arrived, it threw him over the top and he became insufferable. His drinking increased so that most of the time his talk is little more than incoherent babbling. People laughed at him behind his back and he became something of a standing joke as well as someone to avoid. (232)

Around this time, Kerouac's friends and family observed a significant change in his personality. The rejection of his daughter Jan is possibly the clearest indication of his transition during this time because it contrasts sharply with the haughtiness and cruelty he had modelled in his works.

Given his parental sympathies for his brother Gerard, Kerouac's handling of Jan is particularly difficult to comprehend. Kerouac spent his entire life dwelling on Gerard's memories and was tormented by guilt, which led him to question if he might have somehow spared Gerard by passing away in his place. So, it is hard to imagine how the same individual who feels morally conflicted over his brother's unavoidable death could have watched his own daughter endure a life including heroin addiction, homelessness, and prostitution. While it appears that Kerouac could have been saved by simple acknowledgment and paternal love on Kerouac's part, it is true to his nature that he chose to hide in the past, says Turner in *Jack Kerouac: Angelheaded Hipster*: Kerouac could not have prevented Gerard from dying yet he always blamed himself.

In November 1967, Jan Kerouac paid her father a brief visit. She is now fifteen years old, pregnant, and on her way to Mexico with a long-haired boyfriend. Uncontrollable at home, she had dropped acid at twelve and is on heroin by thirteen. To support her habit, she had turned to prostitution ... If he saw any connection between his past behaviour and her present problems, he didn't mention it. (201)

This is undoubtedly a different side of the guy who vowed to create a literary generation based on kindness and moral principles, and during the 1960s, Kerouac's daughter would not be the first person to experience his newly discovered callousness.

To sum-up, the actions of Kerouac at this time eventually led to the dissolution of the group. Since becoming well-known as a published author, he had alienated those who were closest to him. During this time, his suffering is so great that he starts to consider suicide once more. He believed that death would provide him with safety and reconnect him with Gerard because he felt he could no longer handle life's demands. His religious upbringing had taught him that suicide is sinful, so he believed to the end of his days that it could not be justified before God. As a result, he never had the courage to really attempt it. Kerouac has admitted to a few people that he wanted to die but was unable to commit suicide because he is a Catholic. Despite this, it would not be the first time in his life that he had twisted religious principles. He intended to drink himself to death.

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