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**Jack Kerouac's Spiritual Evolution:  
A Comparative Study of *The Dharma Bums* and *Satori in Paris***

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Introduction .....	4
1. The fundamental differences and similarities between Kerouac’s narrator’s Buddhism and Catholicism ....	9
1.1 Differences.....	9
1.2 Similarities and syntheses.....	15
2. Beliefs’ influence on religious practice and spiritual lifestyle .....	19
2.1.1 Religious Practice in <i>The Dharma Bums</i> .....	19
2.1.2 Religious Practice in <i>Satori in Paris</i> .....	22
2.2 Spiritual Lifestyle.....	23
Conclusion.....	27
Bibliography.....	31

**Abstract**

This thesis explores Beat-writer Jack Kerouac's spirituality as it is represented in his autobiographical novels *The Dharma Bums* (1958) and *Satori in Paris* (1966). Since the traumatic loss of his brother in his youth, Kerouac had come to associate life with suffering. This moment marks the beginning of his spiritual quest. He sought to alleviate suffering and find the meaning of himself and his life. Although he distanced himself from the Catholicism of his youth during a period of intense Buddhism, it remained an ever-present theme in his writing. Thus, he gradually created a synthesis of Catholicism and Buddhism where both belief systems provide him with insights and meaning. He constantly sought salvation and therefore immersed himself in spirituality. After a period of intense spiritual practice and enlightenment, his fervor slowly waned and he found himself investigating his ancestral roots in a mostly drunken trip to France. Still, his suffering remained, as did his spirituality, albeit much less intensely. He had never been fully satisfied by his spiritual findings and never succeeded in alleviating suffering by finding a satisfactory meaning for his life.

**Key words:**

Beat Generation, Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, *Satori in Paris*, *Duluoz Legend*, Catholicism, Christianity, Buddhism, Zen, Zen Buddhism, Spirituality, Salvation, Suffering, Alcoholism, Sex, Meditation, Prayer, God, Buddha, Close-Reading, Literary Analysis, Autobiography, Life Writing, Counterculture, America Studies.

## Introduction

I was first introduced to the Beat Generation through reading Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl* for a college course on the history of American literature. The Beat Generation, as America's first post-war literary generation, rebelled against the conformation of society (Johnston 103). As I learned more about the Beat Generation, I soon found out about its unofficial 'king:' Jack Kerouac. This sparked my interest in Jack Kerouac as a person and a writer.

This thesis examines the spiritual evolution of Kerouac, based on his novels *The Dharma Bums* (1958) and *Satori in Paris* (1966), which are parts of his autobiographical *Duluoz Legend* (Jones 139, 205). This *Legend* is comprised of a series of fourteen autobiographical novels, which fall within the literary style of 'life writing:' retrospective writing based on a person's life (Maher 491; Smith 4). The theory of life writing is explicated in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* by life writing scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Before we simply assume that Kerouac has written an exact and complete autobiographical version of himself into his *Duluoz Legend* novels (using different names), it is important to discern between Kerouac himself, the "flesh-and-blood author" at the time of writing, and his protagonists, or "narrated 'I's" in the *Duluoz Legend* (72). This split between Kerouac the person and Kerouac's voice in his novels arises because the novels are written retrospectively, looking back upon himself and his experiences and adding his interpretation and meaning at the time of writing. In doing so, Kerouac takes himself "as both subject and object" (5). To avoid further complication, going forward, I use the term 'Kerouac's narrator.' With this term, I am referring to Kerouac's overall voice in his books: the life narrator: "the narrating 'I'," the character: the "narrated 'I'," and the narrator's reflections on himself, his actions, thoughts and changes, which is the small space between the "narrating 'I'" and the "narrated 'I'" (72). There, Kerouac's assigning of meaning most evidently takes place.

In his novels, Kerouac's narrator relates stories from his life in his famous 'spontaneous prose' style (Theado 6, 34-5). In *Understanding Kerouac*, Matt Theado states that Kerouac used his own life as the basis for his works (9, 19-20). This aligns with Smith's theory that in self life writing, a life narrator uses personal memory as the basis for his writing (6, 7). Kerouac's novels contain adventures and journeys, both alone and with friends, as well as the narrator's own ruminations – many of which are deeply personal, confessional and spiritual in nature. These ruminations are essential to Kerouac's process of finding and assigning meaning to himself, his feelings and experiences. I treat Kerouac's narrator as his literary voice and expression of his reflections upon his real-world self, his memories and his development. I have made this choice based on Theado's explanation of the autobiographical nature of Kerouac's work:

More than that of most novelists, Kerouac's 'fiction' is generally autobiographical. [...] Kerouac sought to make his life into art, and language was the medium of metamorphosis. He wrote directly from the experiences of his life, transforming the details into art via intensified language. [...] He pictured his entire life's work as 'one enormous comedy' which he called the *Duluoz Legend* (9).

Thus, Kerouac "sought continually to blur the lines between himself and the legend," states Mary-Beth Brophy in "Strange Solitary Mystic" (419). Writing his *Legend* from this basis – using his life experiences and reflecting on them and their impact on him – "Kerouac essentially revises the experience by repeating it in prose" (Theado 32). Revising can only be done on events that have actually taken place; if it were pure fiction, he would be imagining, rather than revising. However, an important side note to this is that the life writer himself decides what to include and how to interpret it in the narrative (Smith 6). Thus, the framing of

an autobiographical narrative is a personal choice by the writer: “it is a record of self-observation, not a history observed by others”, which limits the degree to which we can view Kerouac’s revision-based narratives as completely historically accurate (6).

I have chosen the present novels because of the ongoing academic discussion regarding the spirituality in Kerouac’s writing. Brophy analyses Kerouac’s use of Catholic imagery in his Buddhism-influenced writing. She argues that Kerouac’s continuous use of Catholic imagery in his writing is the result of “an ongoing engagement with Catholicism” (418). For these findings, she has analyzed two other novels from the *Duluoz Legend*, to wit: *Desolation Angels* (1965) and *Big Sur* (1962). In “American Road, Buddha Path,” David S. Calonne states that, because of the untimely passing of Kerouac’s older brother Gerard, he had early-on in his life become intensely aware of and sensitive to the “internal experience” [my translation of the French term “*l’expérience interieure*”], and “the Buddha’s First Noble Truth: all life is [...] suffering” (65). He writes about Kerouac describing himself not as “‘beat’ but a strange solitary crazy Catholic mystic” (65). Richard S. Sorrell writes in “Novelists and Ethnicity” that the French-Canadian Catholicism instilled in Kerouac from his early youth, as well as his strong relationship with his mother and an obsession with suffering remained a factor in his life (40-1). His ongoing identification with Catholicism, combined with his recurrent use of Catholic imagery and vocabulary throughout his seemingly Buddhist writing, indicates a synthesized philosophy of life, spiritual attitudes and practices, critics argue. This spiritual synthesis has sparked an extensive academic discussion, which is supported by an essay on Zen Buddhism titled “Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen” by Alan Watts, a Buddhist scholar who appeared in *The Dharma Bums* as Arthur Whane (Calonne 81; *Dharma* 164)

In order to add to the ongoing academic discussion and to further delve into the spiritual transformation of Kerouac’s narrator, I have chosen to analyze two other works: one

which is Kerouac's pre-eminent Buddhist work, written at the height of the Beat Generation, and one that treats the last recorded period of Kerouac's life; thus, chronologically, the final installment of the *Duluoz Legend* (Jones 8). The first work, *The Dharma Bums*, is based on a year of Kerouac's life in 1955 and 1956 (Maher 491). At that time, the Beat Generation had become a literary and cultural movement with national notoriety and Kerouac was (along with his Beat peers) immersing himself in Buddhism (Theado 23; 123). In *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac and his real-life friends are portrayed under altered names, presumably due to a change in publishers (152). The narrator and protagonist is called Ray Smith – a name left over from an early version of *On The Road* (1957) (152) –, the story's hero is Gary Snyder, who appears as Japhy Ryder (151). The second work, *Satori in Paris*, is based on a solo trip Kerouac took in June 1965 to Paris and Brittany to investigate his French ancestry (Maher 491). In this period, he had become increasingly solitary and disconnected from the Beat Generation and the Buddhist philosophy of life he had followed diligently before. In this work, he uses his own name: “[a]s in an earlier autobiographical book, I’ll use my real name here, full name in this case, Jean-Louis Lebris de K  rouac, because this story is about my search for this name in France [...]” (*Satori* 2). I argue that in the years from the peak of the Beat Generation to Kerouac's relative withdrawal from it, he underwent a spiritual evolution. This evolutionary period is marked by these selected novels.

In this thesis, I investigate how Kerouac synthesized his ‘new’ Buddhist and ‘old’ Catholic belief systems and made them his own. I analyze how Kerouac's Catholicism formed a foundation for his newly acquired Buddhist views and how he synthesized the two. This evolution becomes apparent as his life, views and literary oeuvre evolved from the height of the Beat Generation to his solitary quest to find his Breton roots – and identity – in France. This research is based on the following research question: how have the beliefs of Jack Kerouac's narrator evolved between *The Dharma Bums* and *Satori in Paris*, with regard to his

spiritual experience and practices? The research is divided into two chapters. The first chapter treats the sub-question: “what are the fundamental differences and similarities between the Buddhism and Catholicism of Kerouac’s narrator?”. The second chapter treats the question: “how did the beliefs of Kerouac’s narrator influence his religious practice and spiritual lifestyle?”. Finally, in the third and concluding chapter, an answer to the research question is formulated, possible limitations of this research are discussed and suggestions for further research are made.

The method used in the investigation is a close reading analysis of Kerouac’s works and a quantitative literature study of the secondary sources. Through this, I expect to find that Kerouac had never felt quite fulfilled by either of his religions, which led him to combine the two into an all-enveloping spiritual synthesis with Buddhist thought and Catholic imagery and values. This synthesized set of beliefs is largely based on Kerouac’s Catholicism from his youth, which he had always revered, and his insights from Buddhism relating to suffering and the meaning of self. His quest for spiritual answers led him throughout his journeys and discussions with friends, as well as moments of solitary contemplation, meditation and prayer, but it ultimately never fulfilled him.



## 1. The fundamental differences and similarities between Kerouac's narrator's

### Buddhism and Catholicism

Jean-Louis Lebris de K  rouac was born in Lowell, Massachusetts into a Catholic French-Canadian family (Maher 9, 10). From his early youth, he showed an inclination towards religion and the search for answers to spiritual and religious questions (Sorrell 39-40). Sorrell argues that Kerouac's ethnic background, in which Catholicism was highly prominent, presented him with an identity crisis that haunted him throughout his life (40). The dichotomy between his personal and artistic identity and his ethnic identity

produced an almost dual personality in Kerouac. Beat versus Lowellite, Rebel versus Good Boy, he was circumscribed by the very Franco, Catholic, and mill town origins that he was trying to move beyond (40).

Throughout his life, the Catholicism of his youth would remain present in his spiritual thought, as well as his writing; it explains what Sorrell named his "life-long obsession with religion" (40). Despite its often predominantly Buddhist tone, Kerouac's writing often references Catholicism; something that we see throughout both *The Dharma Bums* and *Satori in Paris*. The following section offers an explanation of the key differences and similarities between Kerouac's Catholic and Buddhist beliefs; this is supported by passages from both novels.

#### 1.1 Differences

In Zen Buddhist philosophy, divinity and the self are intrinsically connected; at their core one and the same, Calonne explains: "[b]ecause 'divinity' and self are fused at the deepest levels of our being, seeking contact with one's 'true self' becomes a driving need" (83). This search

for contact with his true self is something Kerouac struggled with throughout his life. His spiritual identity was part Catholic – as becomes evident from his childhood story and in his writing – and part Buddhist – as becomes evident in his narrator’s contemplations in the internal monologues he wrote. In fact, I argue he ultimately came closest to identifying his true self in the process of writing, rather than during the experiences described in the novels.

On the fundamental attractiveness of Zen Buddhism to Westerners, including Kerouac, Alan Watts writes: “[Zen Buddhism offers] a view of the world imparting a profoundly refreshing sense of wholeness to a [Western] culture in which the spiritual and the material, the conscious and the unconscious, have been cataclysmically split” (6). For a spiritual seeker like Kerouac, finding a place in this world of abundant suffering, this philosophy was attractive. In his life he had had more than his share of suffering, with the early deaths of his brother Gerard and his father (Maher 19; 141). To feel the divine in his own life, and not just the suffering of this earth, he was out to attain his own spiritual awakening, his enlightenment, or Buddha state: “[...] the Buddha or awakened man of [...] Zen [Buddhism] is ‘ordinary and nothing special.’” (Watts 6). “We like this because here [...] is a conception of the holy man and sage who is not impossibly remote, not superhuman but fully human, and, above all, not a solemn and sexless ascetic” (6). “They are just like us, and yet much more at home in the world, floating much more easily upon the ocean of transience and insecurity” (6).

Religious examples from Kerouac’s texts are manifold; a good example is this passage from chapter 17 of *The Dharma Bums*, where we get a glimpse of the narrator’s ruminations on his religions and their resemblances:

And then I thought, later, lying on my bag smoking, ‘Everything is possible. I am God, I am Buddha, I am imperfect Ray Smith, all at the same time, I am empty space, I am all things. I have all the time in the world from life to life to do what is to

do, to do what is done, to do the timeless doing, infinitely perfect within, why cry,  
why worry [...] (*Dharma* 103-4).

Clearly, Kerouac had not left behind all of his Catholic roots, even in his most predominantly Buddhist work – he equates God to Buddha and to himself, he sees them as being the same, but with different names. As becomes clear from the passage above, *The Dharma Bums* contains a synthesis of both religions that Kerouac had adopted. This is confirmed by Theado: “Kerouac augmented rather than replaced his childhood religious beliefs (123). This is once again illustrated by the following passage: “[...] 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?” (*Dharma* 96-7). Clearly, Kerouac’s narrator in *The Dharma Bums* was of the opinion: “East’ll meet West anyway. Think what a great world revolution will take place when East meets West finally, and it’ll be guys like us that can start the thing. Think of the millions of guys all over the world [...] bringing the word down to everybody” (*Dharma* 171). Evidently, he considers himself a travelling mediator between eastern and western spirituality, a “religious wanderer” spreading the universal truth: a *Dharma Bum* (4).

This, however, is not how he would always see himself. In *Satori in Paris*, we see a side of Kerouac professing Christianity, at times, more than Buddhism or a transcendent combination of both. Upon meeting an Arab woman in France, he writes: “I teach her Christianity [...] I’m a fool in love with God.” (15). Also, as a devout Catholic, Kerouac wants to be closer to God and visits the Sainte Chapelle, where a piece of the true cross was supposed to be (5). He also visited La Madeleine, a church dedicated to Mary Magdalene. This impressed him deeply and left him more satisfied and enlightened than a “dull” visit to the crowded Eiffel Tower would have done (7).

Later, while making his return to Paris from Brittany, the narrator burst out into the following monologue:

Jesus was crucified because, instead of bringing money and power, He only brought the assurance that existence was created by God and it belongs to God the Father, and He, the Father, is going to elevate us to Heaven after death, where no one will need money or power because that's only after all dust and rust—We who have not seen the Miracles of Jesus, [...], only have to continue accepting the assurance which has been handed down to us in the Holy Writ of the New Testament [...] Therefore, Faith, and the Church which defended the Faith as well as it could. (51).

Kerouac's narrator holds this monologue on a train, in front of his fellow travelers, among whom was a Catholic priest. Delivering an Evangelical monologue like this indicates a deeply rooted Christian faith, as well as a desire to actively spread the Christian message – emblematic of deep and enthusiastic believers. Evidently, in his later years, Kerouac slowly made a return to his Christianity, underscored once more by his comment: “[...] I'm not a Buddhist, I'm a Catholic revisiting the ancestral land that fought for Catholicism against impossible odds yet won in the end” (57). Sorrell observes, however, that

Kerouac was not the traditional accepting sort of Catholic whom the Franco Church elite held up as the ideal. He was aware of the negative, foreboding side of his religious upbringing, the ‘moral straitjacket’ it encased him in, and he was sometimes hostile towards his religion because of this. He became estranged from the Church as a young adult, during his rebellious wartime and beat years (1940s – early 1950s), because Catholicism did not seem relevant enough. By the 1960s he

was criticizing the Church from the opposite standpoint, for substituting liberalism for refuge [...]. Kerouac remained obsessively fascinated with, and unable to escape from, the particular brand of Franco Catholicism in which he was raised. It was always his dominant moral and ideological motivating force; he may have rebelled against certain institutional aspects of Catholicism, but never its transcendent sense. (Sorrell 40-1)

In light of this, it is interesting to note that both *The Dharma Bums* and *Satori in Paris* end, not with a piece of Buddhist insight, but with a reference to his Catholic God: *The Dharma Bums* ends with the narrator looking back on his time with Japhy Ryder (Gary Snyder) and his newfound insights on Desolation Peak with these words: “I said ‘God, I love you’ and looked up to the sky and really meant it. ‘I have fallen in love with you, God. Take care of us all, one way or the other’” (*Dharma* 205). Similarly, *Satori in Paris* ends with the narrator looking back on a *satori* he had experienced in Paris. A *satori*, Kerouac writes, is “the Japanese word for ‘sudden illumination’, ‘sudden awakening’, or simply ‘kick in the eye’” (*Satori* 1). Professor of religious studies Richard M. Jaffe expands on this in “On Satori – The Revelation of a New Truth in Zen Buddhism,” saying “the world for those who have gained a *satori* is no more the old world as it used to be” (16). “[It] is the greatest mental cataclysm one can go through in life” (15). He provides the following explanation for this:

The essence of Zen Buddhism consists in acquiring a new viewpoint of looking at life and things generally. By this I mean that if we want to get into the inmost life of Zen, we must forego all our ordinary habits of thinking which control our everyday life [...] Zen proposes to do this for us and assures us of the acquirement of a new point of view in which life assumes a fresher, deeper, and more satisfying aspect.

[...] This acquiring of a new point of view in our dealings with life and the world is popularly called by Japanese Zen students “satori” [...]. It is really another name for Enlightenment [...] (15).

A satori came to Kerouac’s narrator thanks to a taxi driver with whom he had shared a genuine and spontaneous connection, an eye-opening moment which guided his attention to the presence of the eternal divine in everything, even the smallest cordial interaction between two strangers. It is worth noting that at this late stage of the *Duluoz Legend*, the divine aspects of life which Kerouac’s narrator highlights are not presented as either Buddhist or Catholic, but a synthesis of both; in line with how his spiritual views have gradually evolved from his earlier, more Catholic perspective.

Kerouac ends the novella, reflecting on his instantaneous enlightenment in Paris, with the following Christian-themed comment: “[w]hen God says ‘I Am Lived,’ we’ll have forgotten what all the parting was about” (*Satori* 104). I argue that these mentions of God at the end of both works reflect a determined strategy by Kerouac. By doing so, he hints at the transcendent meaning of his Catholicism that God, the “Immovable Mover,” is present in all of his creation (Giamo 91). Sorrell stated Kerouac would never escape this “transcendent sense” of his Catholicism, despite his rebellion “against certain institutional aspects of Catholicism” (41). This transcendent view aligns with the Buddhist view of the divine, which can be found in every moment’s “here and now:” eternal freedom beyond the confines of chronological time (Giamo 91). Thus, the divine is everything and vice versa; this view transcends time and space and implies that the essence of existence has no beginning and no ending, like God the “Immovable Mover” (91). Thus, it is possible to align the Buddhist perspective with the deeper message of his original Catholic faith. It also helps explain Kerouac’s final sentence and his satori in Paris: God, in essence, is pure existence, which is

all-enveloping and timeless. Thus, when he speaks (“I Am Lived”), this cannot be at only one moment or in only one place, but always and everywhere at once, thus making “parting” – an act confined to man’s dualistic awareness of time and space, and self and others – a mere illusion. This allows Kerouac’s narrator to simply forget what the “all the parting was about” and be content with the fact that he exists and shared a pure moment of connection with another soul.

Another clear difference between Catholicism and Buddhism, despite some apparent similarities in its practice to Buddhist meditation, is prayer. In his article “Catholic Discernment with a view of Buddhist Internal Clarity,” Dr. Rafael Luévano, professor in religious studies, explains that the difference between prayer in Catholicism and meditation in Buddhism is the dealing with external or internal divinity. “Implicit with Catholic prayer is the God who intervenes,” it is a “cooperative spiritual enterprise” (43). In meditation “there is silence about [...] divinity,” it is a solitary spiritual enterprise in which the silence is essential to the interior process (43). Meditation, then, provides a direct, internal connection with the divine eternal, and prayer is a conversation with the external, “personal God” (Giamao 91). Interestingly, Kerouac’s stories contain both meditations and prayers. In *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac’s narrator meditates often, but freely exchanges it with prayer. The next section demonstrates that prayer and meditation were not the only aspects Kerouac kept concurrently from both belief systems.

## **1.2 Similarities and syntheses**

This section outlines some similarities between Kerouac’s narrator’s Catholicism and Buddhism, which further enabled him to synthesize the two into his “own” spiritual worldview and set of beliefs, which he was clearly not afraid to do: “[w]hat’s wrong with Jesus? Didn’t Jesus speak of Heaven? Isn’t Heaven Buddha’s nirvana?” (*Dharma* 96).

Giamo explains the meaning of Nirvana as a state of “nonbeing,” “emptiness,” “void,” or “ultimate escape” (31). Luévano adds that suffering is completely extinct (45). This makes Nirvana a state of bliss, and the opposite of *samsara*, which is the realm of the “born, created, shaped, differentiated,” in other words, the everyday world where suffering exists (Giamo 31).

Such a spiritual enlightenment was exactly what Kerouac was after and had seen a good chance of attaining through an intense, diligent study of Buddhism. Giamo argues:

Kerouac often associated [the] Buddhist emphasis on deliverance with the Christian notion of self-denial and detachment from the spurious pleasures of the world so as to rest peacefully in the arms of God and/or heavenly Buddha. This direct relation led at times to Kerouac’s superimposed perspective on Buddhism and Catholicism. (21).

What Giamo means, in my opinion, by Kerouac’s “superimposed perspective” is that Kerouac used and applied ideas and notions from both religions into his own belief system. The direct relation between “resting peacefully in the arms of God” and resting peacefully in “heavenly Buddha,” are just two sides of the same coin; two ways of describing a single state of being. Another noteworthy aspect of this quote is that Giamo uses the term “heavenly” alongside “Buddha,” in line with Kerouac’s practice of equating or even uniting aspects from both religions with one another, both in practice and in writing.

*The Dharma Bums* is effectively Kerouac’s most profoundly Buddhist work, albeit with a persistent Christian flavor. Regarding the Buddhism of the Beats, Watts wrote that their Zen was, in his opinion, “a shade too self-conscious, too subjective, and too strident” to be true oriental Zen Buddhism, but he sees “no real quarrel” with it, as “the experience of



awakening [...] truly constitutes Zen” and is “too timeless and universal to be injured” (8, 9).

In the opening chapter of *The Dharma Bums* Kerouac writes about his experiences with Buddhism and how it influenced his life:

I was very devout in those days and was practicing my religious devotions almost to perfection. Since then I've become a little hypocritical about my lip-service and a little tired and cynical. Because now I am grown so old and neutral ... But then I really believed in the reality of charity and kindness and humility and zeal and neutral tranquility and wisdom and ecstasy, and I believed that I was an oldtime bhikku in modern clothes wandering the world [...] in order to turn the wheel of the True Meaning, or Dharma, and gain merit for myself as a future Buddha (Awakener) and as a future Hero in Paradise (4).

In this passage, the space between Kerouac's “narrating ‘I’” and “narrated ‘I’” becomes apparent: his “narrating ‘I’” takes a step back from the events in the book to reflect, from the present, upon his “narrated ‘I’” (Smith 72). He uses this space to reflect on how he has grown to differ from what he stood for when he was living the story he is now writing and using to find and give meaning to himself. Thus, writing, in itself, was a means for Kerouac to identify himself and give meaning to his life and experiences.

Apparent throughout his writing, his reverence for nature, humans, interactions and meditation heralds deep Buddhist thought, but also a Christian acknowledgement of the omnipresence of God. Kerouac's view of divinity in everything is exemplified by this quote, in which he felt blessed and grounded in the present moment by the arrival of a bird after a hard night's sleep: “[...] nothing but horror all night long, except at dawn a little bird blessed me” (*Dharma* 101). As he wrote *The Dharma Bums*, exploring Buddhism and its place in his

life, Kerouac wrote in a short passage how, essentially, all religions share the same core view of the nature of all things: “God nature, or Buddha nature, or Allah nature, or any name you want to give God [...]” (125). This sentence indicates an ecumenical view of religions’ messages; that is to say, most religions, at their core, promote similar ideas of the existence and divine meaning of (a) ‘God.’

Kerouac’s Catholic views held that suffering was a way to “achieve salvation and sainthood,” similar to the views held in Buddhism (Sorrell 40). Thus, suffering – ostensibly a negative word – carried with it the prospect of a great spiritual redemption for him:

“Kerouac’s life was typified by a mystical sense of religious affirmation, an absolute belief in divinity, and a spiritual search for the justification of the horrors of life” (40). Occupying himself with both religions and taking from them wisdom and insight to apply into his own life, was a way for Kerouac to deal with his spiritual quest.

As this chapter has demonstrated, Kerouac merges religions in his writing. The use of both Catholic and Buddhist imagery, vocabulary and ideas demonstrates that, despite their differences, Kerouac attempted to unite and synthesize them to fit his own world view and life story. Writing his autobiographical novels was a deliverance from suffering for him, as well as a mental process for creating order and finding meaning in a life taking place in a universe of chaos.

## 2. Beliefs' influence on religious practice and spiritual lifestyle

The previous chapter explained similarities and differences between Kerouac's narrator's Buddhism and Catholicism. This chapter digs deeper into the influences these belief systems had on his lifestyle and religious practices and expressions. Section one examines Kerouac's narrator's religious practice – some of which has come by in chapter one; section two discusses Kerouac's narrator's spiritual lifestyle. I argue that Kerouac had gone from a dedicated active Buddhist with an inescapable Catholic background in *The Dharma Bums*, to a mostly drunken reborn Catholic with a Buddhist inclination in *Satori in Paris*.

### 2.1.1 Religious Practice in *The Dharma Bums*

Meditation is a frequent practice for Kerouac's narrator, as becomes clear in *The Dharma Bums*. In Zen Buddhism, meditation is an important spiritual practice aiding in the search for answers, as professor of religious studies Jason Bivins notes in “Beautiful Women Dig Graves” (62). Through meditation, among other aspects of the lifestyle (such as discipline, ritual activity and communal life (62)), Zen practitioners can attain a satori: they can learn to “perceive the ‘suchness’ of reality beyond its concrete particulars and conceptual dualisms;” a state of enlightenment can thus be achieved (63).

Kerouac's narrator came to experience this non-dualistic state through meditation in *The Dharma Bums* upon the realization that “[e]verything is empty but awake! Things are empty in time and space and mind” (122). He reflects on this new insight in the following soliloquy:

What does it mean that I am in this endless universe, thinking that I'm a man sitting under the stars on the terrace of the earth, but actually empty and awake throughout the emptiness and awakedness of everything? It means that I'm empty and awake,

that I *know* I'm empty, awake, and that there's no difference between me and anything else. In other words it means that I've become the same as everything else. It means I've become a Buddha (123).

This profound realization left Kerouac's narrator feeling "exhilarated" (122). Throughout these transcendental experiences, he felt a state of 'oneness,' or connectedness, with all things and beings: "I felt great compassion for the trees because we were the same thing" (123). The next day, he experienced a "vision" which was "devoid of any sensation of I being myself, it was pure egolessness, just simply wild ethereal activities devoid of any wrong predicates... devoid of effort, devoid of mistake" (124). Watts endorses Kerouac's findings, stating that in Zen, the world is seen as an "inseparably interrelated field," of which no parts can "be separated or valued above or below the rest" (7).

Having experienced the "'suchness' of reality" and a connection with the divine (his "God nature, or Buddha nature, or Allah nature" (*Dharma* 125)), Kerouac's narrator calls himself "St. Raymond of the Dogs," since he was usually accompanied by dogs during those meditations (Bivins 63; *Dharma* 123). Calling himself both a Buddha and a saint, he places himself within both the Buddhist and Catholic tradition.

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, Kerouac never fully relinquished his Catholicism (Brophy 418). He was planning to

[...] go off somewhere and find perfect solitude and look into the perfect emptiness of my mind and be completely neutral from any and all ideas. I intended to pray, too, as my only activity, pray for all living creatures; I saw it as the only decent activity left in the world (*Dharma* 88).

Despite his fervent meditating, he still considers prayer “the only decent activity left in the world” (88). Throughout his *Dharma* adventures, Kerouac’s narrator keeps a habit of praying. One instance of prayer is especially interesting, as he prays “under the stars for the Lord to bring me to Buddhahood after my Buddha-work is done, amen” (103). He prays to the Catholic God of his youth to bring him to Buddhist enlightenment, which shows a highly synthesized religious experience. Another interesting example of Kerouac’s religious synthesizing occurs at the end of chapter 17 of *The Dharma Bums*. Upon waking up, he writes:

I felt exhilarated and meditated first thing and made up a little prayer: ‘I bless you, all living things, I bless you in the endless past, I bless you in the endless present, I bless you in the endless future, amen’ (104).

He meditates and subsequently prays, but in this instance, Kerouac’s narrator himself is doing the blessing, instead of asking God for blessings. He ends his prayer in the Christian fashion with “amen.” I consider this a mixture of Buddhist and Christian practice. As mentioned in chapter one, Christian prayer is an exchange between God and man, where Buddhist meditation is a “nontheistic exercise” (Luévano 43). Yet, in this instance, the prayer is not quite an exchange between man and God, but, suiting Kerouac’s synthesized spirituality, it is a personal exchange with an inner divinity. A final example of his remaining affiliation with the Catholic faith is his joyous exclamation to God in Mexicali: “Thank you, O Lord for returning me my zest for life, for Thy ever-recurring forms in Thy Womb of Exuberant Fertility” (Brophy 418; Sorrell 41; *Dharma* 107).

The examples treated above highlight Kerouac's narrator's simultaneous practice of Buddhist and Christian devotion during the *Dharma Bums* period. Prayer and meditation are interchanged in his daily life and seem to coexist equally.

### **2.1.2 Religious Practice in *Satori in Paris***

Contrary to *The Dharma Bums*, the much shorter *Satori in Paris* is not filled with disciplined religious practice and passionate adoration. Its language is still religious, at least at times, but does not convey as much conviction as that of *The Dharma Bums*. I argue that in this work, Kerouac expresses more disillusionment with his life, or at least his Buddhism, and attempted, in vain, to find the same degree of enlightening, liberating spirituality in his old Catholicism. Because of this, he had become mostly disgruntled and sad, leading him to drink even more, so as not to feel a gaping emptiness inside himself. In contrast to the enlightened sentiments discussed in *The Dharma Bums*, this time Kerouac's narrator seems to struggle with the emptiness of existence, instead of finding enlightenment in knowing that everything is "empty and awake" (*Dharma* 123).

At the beginning of this more Christian work, Kerouac refers to the principle of *caritas*: "loving charity" (*Satori* 5). While visiting the St. Louis de France church in Paris – linking it to his Catholic heritage, because it shares its name with the Lowell church where Kerouac was baptized (5) – he was holding his hat upside down "in awe" (5). Upon misunderstanding this gesture, a woman had given him twenty centimes to teach her kids this "loving charity" (5). Back home, Kerouac's mother asks him: "'Why didn't you then put the twenty centimes in the poor box?'" which he had forgotten (6). Apparently, though, he felt rather guilty about taking this money for himself, because he justifies his actions directly after, stating that one of the first things he did in Paris, was give away two francs in an act of *caritas* (6). In fact, he refers to this instance again later on, admonishing himself: "[l]ike the

twenty centimes in St Louis de France that I shoulda [sic] stuck in the poor box, as gold of the real Caritas” (64).

Chapter one detailed Kerouac’s narrator preaching the Christian gospel to his fellow travelers on the train to Paris in a joyous Catholic outburst (51-2). Before doing so, he had attempted to make contact with the priest, saying “I’m a Catholic too” (48) and showing him that he wears the “Sacred Queen and also St Benedict” (48). Later in the story, Kerouac’s narrator even explicitly states that he does not consider himself a Buddhist, but rather a Catholic (57). At the end of chapter 22, in the middle of the night, he sang Ave Maria with some sailors (59), though this seems more like crazed antics than pious Catholicism, as he ends, mockingly describing himself: “Some nut with a raincoat and a hat” (59).

## 2.2 Spiritual Lifestyle

As has become evident, both meditation and prayer were frequent practices in Kerouac’s books. Nonetheless, he also did a great deal of drinking and partying. This hardly seems very spiritual – sometimes even its opposite – adding to the enigmatic, occasionally somewhat paradoxical nature of Kerouac’s narrator. He does not make explicit why he drinks as much as he does in either of the books at hand, but he seems to try any number of things to find meaning in his life or briefly forget the need to do so. Of course, these are both manifestations of the same inner need for meaning and understanding.

Although sex is only mentioned on some occasions, Kerouac’s narrator does explain his spiritual stance concerning sex in *The Dharma Bums*:

I’d also gone through an entire year of celibacy based on my feeling that lust was the direct cause of birth which was the direct cause of suffering and death and I had really no lie come to a point where I regarded lust as offensive and even cruel (24).

According to Luévano, Kerouac's narrator's approach to overcome suffering by removing its root cause can be placed in line with the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism (44-5). Rather than invoking a religious text, however, Kerouac's narrator says that he had based his celibacy on his own feeling about lust being the cause of suffering and death. This demonstrates the personal nature of his spirituality, which is supported by Watts' view of the Beats' Buddhism as a liberal and personal form (6-7). In a conversation on the Buddhist conception of sex, Japhy Ryder explains that sex is a holy, spiritual celebration and not a mere distraction from enlightening spirituality rooted in lust: "[t]his is what they do in the temples of Tibet. It's a holy ceremony" (*Dharma* 24). He argues that it is a natural celebration of life: "Smith, I distrust any kind of Buddhism or any kinda philosophy or social system that puts down sex" (25). Up until that evening, however, Kerouac's narrator had voluntarily abstained from sex to escape the wheel of suffering and improve *his own* Buddhist experience: "[a]ll the peaceful celibacy of *my Buddhism* [my italics] was going down the drain" (25). I argue that this further indicates the personal degree of Kerouac's narrator's spirituality and religious practice. Nevertheless, Kerouac's narrator did still join the others in having sex, which shows that he had been influenced by Japhy's Buddhist argument.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that in this instance, again, a small space appears between Kerouac's "narrating 'I'" and "narrated 'I'" (Smith 72). Kerouac, at the moment of writing, distances himself from his past self. He regrets his "narrated 'I's'" decision to abandon his "peaceful celibacy," because it had resulted in an "absence of active lust," which gave him "a new peaceful life that [he] was enjoying a great deal" (Smith 72; *Dharma* 25).

In *Satori in Paris*, he had clearly gone back somewhat on this notion: I argue that here, sex was no longer a pure spiritual celebration and expression of life, but an attempt to escape it for a while: "[t]he lady who ran the hotel was not pleased when I inaugurated my first evening with a wild sexball with a woman my age" (7). Clearly, Kerouac's narrator seems to



have become more unrestrained than he was at the time of *The Dharma Bums*, which becomes evident from his nearly bragging tone. Besides, he tells the readers he gave the woman “\$120 for her son’s education, or some new-old parochial shoes” (*Satori* 8). This suggests that she may have been a prostitute, but that the payment was intended as noble, or as a way of avoiding to acknowledge to himself that he engaged in sex for money. In that case, it is again an instance of Kerouac using the act of writing to improve his (and his readers’) conception of himself. He recurs to this on the next page, saying he did not want to see her again “because she wanted *more* money” (9). What I read between the lines here is a confirmation that she was a prostitute, meaning he treated sex as a commodity and ‘used’ her ‘services’ for his own fleeting pleasure instead of a mutual spiritual celebration, but, understandably, he does not make it more clear than this. Nevertheless, he seemingly does feel embarrassed about himself: after writing she “was the wildest lay imaginable,” he asks himself “[h]ow can I go into such detail about toilet matters?” (8). Again, this demonstrates Kerouac, at the time of writing, tinkering with spiritual meaning in the space between the “narrating ‘I’ and the “narrated ‘I’” (Smith 72). Continuing his effort to vindicate himself, he says that it was not “a question of money, but souls having a good time” (8). This hints at the spiritual notion of sex being a holy celebration and not solely a matter of the flesh. Rather paradoxically, however, he writes “toilet matters,” instead of using language that observes the holiness of sex. To a small degree, then, Kerouac wanted to uphold the notion of sex as holy in *Satori in Paris*, but he did not follow it nearly as convincingly as in *The Dharma Bums*.

At the same time, sex is not as high on his list of priorities as alcohol, as becomes evident on page 9: “I was about to meet some of the prettiest women in the world but the bed business was over because now I was getting real stoned drunk.” This further shows his desire to escape life rather than be deeply immersed in it, which substantiates my previous point about the way he treats sex in *Satori*.

This ties in with the following aspect of Kerouac's somewhat paradoxical lifestyle: his great enjoyment of alcohol and other drugs. Although, he was certainly no stranger to alcohol in *The Dharma Bums*, the events in *Satori in Paris* are almost tied together by drinks. This is in significant contrast to the *Dharma* period, which consisted of immersion in nature, friendship, meditation and prayer. In *The Dharma Bums*, drinking, like drugs, was described as more of a social matter, whereas in *Satori* it seems more like a compulsion, a coping mechanism for a disillusionment and detachment from his old, deeply spiritual lifestyle and his friends. While his goal is finding his ancestral roots and the origin of his family name – Lebris de K rouac – in Brittany, he spends most of his time drinking and drunk. Although he does find the region of his name's origin, he does not find irrefutable evidence of his own particular lineage. A frustration at this partial failure can help explain why he drinks so much while in France.

Initially, in *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac's narrator was trying to find clarity in spiritual enlightenment and thus break with his "ego" (or "persona"): his history and conceptions about himself "with which he has been taught to identify himself" (Watts 7). Part and parcel of this "ego" is family name and heritage, which, in *Satori in Paris*, he is all but obsessed with. This indicates a significant shift away from the dedicated practice of Buddhism and the quest for enlightenment from the *Dharma* period (Theado 126). Perhaps this is partly due to his worsening alcoholism and the misery and dullness it brings, and perhaps it is due to a disillusionment in his Buddhism and return to Catholicism, the religion of his youth and his mother, with whom he was living again (Jones 190, 212; Sorrell 41).

## Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the evolution of Jack Kerouac's narrator's religious views based on *The Dharma Bums* and *Satori in Paris*. These two parts of his autobiographical *Duluoz Legend* chronicle his evolution from the period of his Buddhist and Catholic synthesis, to the alcoholic haze of his later, mostly Catholic days. Chapter one has expanded on the differences and similarities between his Catholicism and Buddhism. Chapter two has further examined the impact his spirituality had on his daily life and spiritual practice.

Based on this research, it becomes clear that the beliefs of Kerouac's narrator had a great influence on his spiritual lifestyle and religious practice and that his beliefs have evolved in the period between the two novels. Since his early childhood, he had a strong spiritual inclination and he was an avid spiritual seeker for most of his life. He devoted much of his time and thinking to his beliefs and how he could apply those to make his life more bearable and more importantly, increase his understanding about the nature and meaning of life and himself. Throughout these two parts of the *Duluoz Legend*, he tried to find satisfaction in his personal, liberal form of Buddhism and synthesized this with his personal, transcendent interpretation of Catholicism. All the while, he freely interchanged meditation with prayer. He also practiced charity and attempted to uphold sex as a holy celebration of life. Beside his continued spiritual search, the act of writing and revising itself proved essential for Kerouac in finding and organizing the meaning of his life, his identity and his conception of himself.

Especially in *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac's narrator displays a deep spirituality, mainly Buddhist, but still cloaks it in a great deal of Catholic language and symbolism. This remained an ever-present theme in his writing. It has become evident that Kerouac never fully relinquishes the Catholicism of his Franco-Canadian youth, even during his most devoted phase of Buddhism. This once fervent Buddhism declined later in his life and he eventually

described himself as a Catholic in *Satori in Paris* (48, 57). In the end, however, his needs were not fully met by either of these faiths, nor by his combination and he became more addicted to alcohol, which he used as a means to escape the grind of his unending search for meaning. Ultimately, the ending of *Satori in Paris* suggests that Catholicism brings him the greatest comfort, in part because it gives him a stronger sense of the connection he craves in looking for his ancestral roots, and in part because of his intensified relationship with his mother and his increased isolation from his Beat peers.

What has likewise become clear is that the tone of Kerouac's narrator had changed drastically between *The Dharma Bums* and *Satori in Paris*. Where he was energetic, upbeat, sociable and fanatically spiritual in the first novel, he comes across as much more desperate, lonely and unrestrained in the latter. His weakened Buddhism and return to the Catholicism of his youth – in which he had suffered a great deal – can account for this change in tone, as well as his worsened alcoholism and increased isolation. But despite his reduced passion for spirituality, he never lost it, as various passages from his works have demonstrated.

Naturally, Kerouac was not perfect. Despite his continued adoration of spirituality, he was never completely above the use of alcohol and other drugs, and meaningless sex, as has been discussed. Where he had been celibate for a whole year to refine his spirituality in the *Dharma* days, both alcohol and sex, especially in his later period, proved to be a way for him to escape life. Especially at the time of *Satori*, Kerouac's narrator had substituted a large portion of his Buddhism and Catholicism for alcoholism and he drank more than he meditated or prayed.

What I had initially expected to find through close reading of Kerouac's work and studying the academic literature was that he had never felt completely satisfied by either of his religions. I expected this would have led him to create his own spiritual synthesis, using Buddhist and Catholic thought, to improve and give more meaning to his life experience. The

research has proven this to be a good assumption. What I had not initially expected, however, is the importance of the act of writing and revising itself; the research showed that this was essential for Kerouac in assigning meaning to his life.

A gradual evolution in his spirituality has become evident. Losing his brother and father early in his life left a lasting impression on Kerouac, who would since then always associate life with suffering. He sought to alleviate this suffering, which is where he found peace in Buddhism and its promise of spiritual enlightenment. Still, chasing the meaning of life and self was a difficult and time-consuming process for him, but he persisted with it. He had, to his exhilaration, finally attained enlightenment in *The Dharma Bums* (122). This enlightenment, however, proved impermanent, as has become apparent in the analysis of *Satori in Paris*. There, he was seemingly operating on the other end of the spectrum: by deeply investigating his family heritage, in an effort to define his identity and a greater meaning of himself. Thus, instead of practicing enlightening meditation as in *The Dharma Bums*, he was seeking for meaning beyond himself, instead of inside himself. Of course, this is another way of giving meaning to life and locating himself in the world, as well as reassuring his right to a place in the grand scheme of things. His lifelong quest for insight and meaning eventually took him to his ancestral France. Whereas in his *Dharma* times, his travels immersed him in nature and meditation, in *Satori in Paris*, he spent his time drunkenly investigating his family name in libraries. This counterproductive development of his spiritual evolution is perhaps best illustrated by Kerouac himself: “if I could forget myself and devote my meditations to the freeing, the awakening and the blessedness of all living creatures everywhere I’d realize what there is, is ecstasy” (*Dharma* 120).

This thesis adds extra insight to the debate surrounding the complex world of Kerouac’s spirituality and describes, based on his own words, his spiritual evolution and its impact on his religious practice and spiritual lifestyle. The main limitation of this research is

the fact that I have only analyzed and compared two novels of the *Duluoz Legend*. Close reading analyses of other novels in the *Legend* could deepen our understanding of his complex spiritual evolution, as well as his use of writing and revision in assigning a meaning to himself and his life. Future research could investigate more deeply Kerouac's declining mental and physical state, his increased solitude and his intensified relationship with his mother, and the effects those had on the development of his spirituality. This can lead to more comprehensive academic understanding of Jack Kerouac and his literary legacy: the *Duluoz Legend*.

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