Religious Turmoil: The Conflict Between Buddhism and Catholicism in Jack Kerouac's Life and Writing

Title: Religious Turmoil: The Conflict Between Buddhism and Catholicism in Jack Kerouac's Life and Writing
Author: Simpson, Emily Patricia
Advisors: Dr. Nick Halpern, Committee Chair
Dr. Carmine Prioli, Committee Member
Dr. Lucinda MacKethan, Committee Member

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

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Jack Kerouac was born "Jean-Louis Kérouac" in Lowell, not "Jean-Louis Lebris de Kérouac" as we can read in his books and biographies. Kerouac, other beat writers, and the subject matter of beat literature (especially blues, jazz and mysticism) have all had a significant influence on the work of Van Morrison. Here’s an example from Beatdom: "At the time of writing Visions of Gerard, Kerouac was in the process of synthesizing his two religions – Catholicism and Buddhism; both are clearly represented in the novel, and Kerouac successfully harmonizes them to present his Catholic sensibility from his recently adopted Buddhist perspective". This has the added benefit of
avoiding the conflict/dispute we were having with Buddhism. Gabrielle Kerouac—Jack’s mother—matched Leo’s civic pride with a fervent religious faith, which if anything intensified after the death of Jack’s older brother Gerard, whom Jack would later eulogize as an unheralded saint in the novel Visions of Gerard. This was that majestic, fearsome Catholicism that now exists purely in the realm of imagination for most modern practitioners: the Catholicism of the Latin mass, of all-powerful priests, of God as the unknowable, awe-inspiring other. Kerouac’s sad final years were spent in an increasingly frantic quest to find a true home for himself and his mother. Obviously he found similar spiritual sustenance in Buddhism and the sui generis mysticism of Blake.