Dharma Bums: The Beat Generation and the Making of Countercultural Pilgrimage

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I believe in the sweetness of Jesus
And Buddha—
I believe,
In St. Francis,
Avaloki
Tesvara,
the Saints
Of First Century India A D
And Scholars
Santidevan
And Otherwise
Santayanan
Anywhere. (Kerouac 1959: 15)

Preliminary Polemics

“PILGRIM, n. A traveler that is taken seriously.”
—Ambrose Bierce, The Devil’s Dictionary 2007: 133

As Beat commentator Stephen Prothero describes in his article “On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest” (1991), the Beats and their pilgrimages have most emphatically not been taken seriously. Both critics and scholars have been unkind to members of the Beat generation, and this unkindness has manifested itself in relative neglect of the Beats in all possible aspects of scholarly investigation. But nowhere does this appear more pronounced than in the area of Beat religion. Though some recent scholarship has been picking up from this earlier neglect and it is now
possible to find serious biographies of most of the major Beat writers and some belated attention to the movement as a literary phenomenon, the only book-length treatment of Beat Buddhism I was able to locate (Tonkinson 1995) hardly qualifies as a scholarly work and was published not by an academic press but as a special feature of the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle*. Prothero hypothesizes that this is because of the movement’s reputation as rebellious and antinomian—in its heyday the movement was characterized in identical unsavory terms by publications representing interests as diverse as *Life* and *Playboy*, with the latter describing the Beats as “nihilists” and the former claiming that the Beats were at war with “Mom, Dad, Politics, Marriage, the Savings Bank, Organized Religion, Literary Elegance, Law, the Ivy League Suit and Higher Education, to say nothing of the Automatic Dishwasher, the Cellophane-wrapped Soda Cracker, the Split-Level House and the clean, or peace-provoking H-bomb” (Prothero 1991: 206). Norman Podhoretz of *Partisan Review* went further still, claiming that the Beats were “hostile to civilization” and that the movement as a whole amounted to “a revolt of the spiritually underprivileged and crippled of soul” and “an affirmation of death” (ibid., 206). One couldn’t ask for a more passionate disavowal of the Beats or a more thorough polemic that the movement was profoundly antireligious.

This could not contrast more with the Beats’ representation of their movement and its aims, with Jack Kerouac going so far as to reinterpret the crucial term “Beat” (a term for someone down and out originally borrowed from criminal street jive) as a noun derived from the adjective “beatific,” a specifically religious term familiar from such phrases as “the beatific vision” (ibid., 206–207). Several of the representative Beat writers were practicing Buddhists, influencing the entire movement to such an extent that Buddhist ideas and imagery suffused Beat literature as a whole. Ginsberg and Kerouac especially emphasized the positive and constructive elements of their spiritual vision, arguing that literature such as *On the Road* and *Howl* should be understood as religious affirmations of what is good and holy rather than as purely critical undertakings: “For the crucifix I speak out, for the Star of Israel I speak out, for the divinest man who ever lived who was German (Bach) I speak out, for sweet Mohammed I speak out, for Buddha I speak out, for Lao-tse and Chuang-tse I speak out” (ibid., 206–207). Or, as Allen Ginsberg put it less lyrically (and rather more bluntly): “Howl is an ‘Affirmation’ by individual experience of God, sex, drugs, and absurdity . . . the poems are religious and I meant them to be” (ibid., 207).

But for the most part, Beat asseverations in no way diminished scholarly wariness about the Beat movement and its spirituality—as Prothero concludes, “the tendency among literary scholars is to see these [religious] concerns as tangential rather than constitutive” while “historians of American religion who have explored beat spirituality have tended to focus almost exclusively on the beats’ engagement with Zen and then to dismiss that engagement as haphazard” (ibid., 207).

It is my contention that the mainstream scholarly neglect of Beat spirituality is in some part political and in some part theoretical in origin, ultimately representing (and also replicating) a hegemonic view of “religion” derived primarily from Christian sources. This prejudice would have been most evident in the 1950s and 1960s
when the Beats were an overt target of mainstream disapproval, part of a “counterculture” that learned representatives of culture found threatening to their most cherished values. Because the Beats attacked many values of the Christian establishment, they were unlikely to be understood as religious by members of that establishment, such as learned professors of religion.

But for other, more theoretical reasons this neglect largely remains in religious studies even today—Beat spirituality is tarred as “superficial,” “syncretistic,” or “tangential” to the Beats’ “main” concerns, as if alternative spirituality had been nothing to the Beats but a particularly “hep” way to infuriate “the man.” This neglect continues because religious studies vestigially retains problematic theoretical components such as the Eliadean fetishization of “the center,” a presumptive requirement that religious practice be “monoreligious” in order to be genuine, a bias toward accounts of religion provided by learned elites rather than practitioners, and a Durkheimian assumption that religion is somehow at its most genuine when it is organized into church or sect rather than personal or familial in form (a “societal” element that somehow distinguishes “religion” from other categories such as “magic” and “spirituality”). For instance, according to one theorist, spiritually inspired peregrinations are “pilgrimages” when pursued in reference to highly organized and socially stratified systems of belief and practice such as Judaism and Christianity, but become a form of “existential tourism” when pursued in the interest of “spirituality” or “self-understanding” by hippie readers of Hermann Hesse (Cohen 1992: 54–55). The contempt for countercultural pilgrims could hardly be more transparent.

In order to demonstrate that the Beats were religious and their ideas could serve as the basis for a proper pilgrimage, I will begin with a two-part analysis that first deconstructs some inherited paradigms in the field of religious studies, and then isolates specifically “religious” dimensions of the Beats’ vision.

RELIGION

“Religion” is not a native category. It is not a first person term of self-characterization. It is a category imposed from the outside on some aspect of native culture. It is the other, in these instances colonialists, who are solely responsible for the content of the term.

—Smith 1998: 269

The first Christian presupposition about “religion” that informs scholarship in religious studies is that there is, in point of fact, such a thing as “religion” as distinct from other forms of human endeavor, and that it is a natural, confessionally neutral category of description. On this account, the Beats would be “religious” if their beliefs and practices conformed to the characteristics of the descriptive taxon “religion,” and their peregrinations would be “pilgrimages” if they could be shown to be religiously motivated, integrally related to whatever was “religious” in the Beat phenomenon. In common use, “pilgrimage” means something like “religiously motivated travel” and therefore it can only be as coherent as the category (“religion”) upon which it is
logically dependent—if there is no such thing as “religion,” there is no such thing as a “pilgrimage,” Beat or otherwise.

Constructions of “religion” vary, but most of them are dependent in some way upon Christian presuppositions, distorting the interpretation of other, non-Christian phenomena they might otherwise be willing to grant the descriptive label “religion.” Scholars generally agree to call the so-called world religions “religions,” even if they are not agreed that there is some genus “religion” of which each is a species or what its defining characteristics might be. In this way “religion” functions more as a political category, isolating complexes of belief and practice somewhat resembling Christianity that have sufficient clout to demand recognition as “religions” in their own right, rather than as a neutral descriptor—large, institutionally well-organized, historically influential traditions of belief and practice with an ordained clergy and a textual canon belonging to historical or contemporary hegemons are likely to be termed “religions,” with everything else being relegated to some prestige-inferior category such as “popular religion,” “new religions,” or “indigenous spirituality.”

This style of defining “religion” and “religions” casts a long and pejorative shadow over forms of “religion” that cannot claim this kind of geopolitical significance, and in the case of Asian material it quickly leads to incoherence and distortion. Is there a certain sine qua non of Hinduism, or is the category simply a colonial and postcolonial grab bag for Indian religious currents that it seemed helpful to define as something distinct from other locally significant cultural hegemons, such as Islam and Christianity? Is doctrinal disagreement between “Buddhists” and “Hindus” a dispute over dharma between rival philosophical approaches within a common religion (as most traditional Hindu accounts and the Indian constitution represent matters), or is it a matter of contention between competing religions (as Ambedkarites and most Western scholars understand affairs)? Are mainstream Chinese religious practices an incoherent “syncretism” of elements derived from Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism? Or is it meaningless to speak of anyone in China (except for a few of the most fanatical monoreligionists among the ordained clergy, perhaps) as a practitioner of anything other than “Chinese religion”? Are the Japanese a “confused and irreligious people” (as a missionary I once knew insisted) for claiming not to be “religious” but going to the shrines of various (supposedly incompatible) “religions,” or are they practitioners of some one coherent thing called “Japanese religion”? And what is the “religion” part of “Indian religion,” “Japanese religion,” “Chinese religion,” and so forth if “religion” is not a native term yet “religion” is so pervasive in Asian societies that one can scarcely distinguish “secular” from “religious” motivations and practices? Teaching undergraduates about Asian religions is a matter of first telling them that Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, and so on are “religions” like we have in the West and then spending the rest of the semester correcting all of the erroneous or prejudicial assumptions they will have formed on the basis of the word “religion.”

One can labor to untie this Gordian knot of potentially irreducible theoretical incoherence, or like Alexander (or Manjushri?) cut it by maintaining that “religion” is much more useful as a political or theological category than as a description of anything in the wild. This would leave us with a few obvious options—call nothing
 whatsoever religious (because as nonconfessional scholars we are not supposed to be motivated by political or theological interests), keep the concept “religion” but radically change the definition of our project to allow for normative concerns as acceptable manifestations of scholarship, or defer to self-definition and allow any interest wishing to characterize itself as “religious” to do so, while realizing that incoherence might result. The most common approach is the least acceptable—treating “religion” as if it were a purely descriptive term, but disqualifying a number of claimants to the term (such as countercultural Beats and hippies) on the basis of hidden Christian presuppositions.

Cohen did not tell us exactly which scholarly presuppositions informed his classification of Beats and other countercultural travelers as “existential tourists” rather than genuinely religious pilgrims, but it is possible to imagine some of the Western biases that are front-loaded into the concept “religion” and see how they might result in such a judgment.

First of all, one might argue that the Beats were part of no organized religious tradition, at least not in a form that would be recognized by informed or authorized exponents of the tradition such as lay scholars or the ordained Buddhist clergy—or even significantly less highbrow popularizers such as Alan Watts and D. T. Suzuki. Despite the Beats’ use of Buddhist ideas, one would not consider them Buddhist. One might appeal to some particular doctrine or practice considered a sine qua non for Buddhism (perhaps refuge-taking or the so-called dharma seals) and argue that because the Beats didn’t honor this point, they should not be considered Buddhists. One could point to the interest in and practice of non-Buddhist religions by several key Beat authors as evidence that the Beats didn’t take Buddhism very seriously because it was not an exclusive interest. For instance, one could disregard Kerouac’s massive manuscript *Some of the Dharma* or Rexroth’s decades-long Buddhist practice because Kerouac and Rexroth were institutionally Roman Catholic, Ginsberg’s Buddhism because he wrote the poem “Kaddish,” or Snyder’s Buddhism because he combined it freely and unselfconsciously with elements derived from several religious traditions. Minus tokens of mainstream, institutional Buddhist affiliation in a form “packaged” to be recognizable to the Western scholar, one might conclude that what the Beats practiced was spirituality (a messy, individualistic affair of no relevance to students of religion) rather than a properly Durkheimian religion (which requires overt signs of institutionalization).

The problems with this line of critique are many. First, there is the matter of this judgment requiring one to invoke a substantial number of repudiated or questionable scholarly categories to make it coherent, mostly derived from a peculiarly Western perspective on the nature of religion.

One obvious difficulty is the implicit privilege accorded to cultural elites to determine the “orthodox” form of a religion and exclude nonconforming lay practitioners. Though this masquerades as a neutral description of “objective” features about a religion such as status and group membership, in-group/out-group assignments are almost never taken as a given by the practitioners being excluded, so this is really a form of political intervention on the part of the scholar to back one faction over
another. Imagine a scholarly, nontheological description of Christianity in which the Roman Catholic belief that Protestantism is a heresy was taken for granted by the scholars, and Protestants were entirely excluded from the subsequent description of Christianity. Now imagine one “authority” (Alan Watts) describing Beat Buddhism as “phony” Buddhism and nearly a half century of scholarship going along with the description and saying that the Beats were not religious, and one should immediately perceive the difficulty (Watts 1959). The only difference is that in the first case, one is marginalizing a respected mainstream population in Western society and not a controversial countercultural group, making it more difficult to perceive the interpretive double-standard.

If this weren’t sufficient reason to avoid valorizing elites to the detriment of everybody else, there is also the matter of it being bad anthropological practice to limit one’s description of a religion to the account given by elites because of all of the things that will inevitably get left out of the picture. Elites focus on official, written down, institutionally centered traditions of church, temple, or monastery. These traditions embody a fraction of the actual religiosity of the group as a whole, whose members often have more practical concerns that manifest themselves in what is pejoratively called “folk” or “popular” or “lay” religion. Imagine an account of Latin American Catholicism that centered on scripture, catechism, and the sacraments without reference to lay devotion, vows, milagros, veladoras, home altars, Carnival, Espiritismo, and the Day of the Dead and one can get a good idea of how Buddhism might be described if the only resources one paid attention to were Zen monks and scholars studying monastic literary productions. The fact that elite and popular accounts of a religion differ is not a reason to marginalize or ignore popular accounts; it is an invitation to ask further questions to gain a more accurate picture of the religion in all its interpretive complexity.

Perhaps the strongest presupposition at work in dismissing the Beats is the Western monotheistic notion that religious traditions are supposed to be practiced exclusively, and that any apparent combination, mixture, or dual allegiance is “syncretism” rather than a genuine practice of the given religion(s). If someone practices Buddhism on one occasion and Christianity on another, he or she is thought to be deeply confused or a member of some tertium quid syncretistic religion, rather than a “real” Buddhist or a Christian (or both). The same conclusion is often reached when people practice Buddhism and Shinto in Japan, at least by some nonscholarly Western observers. The prejudice is sufficiently wired into Western presuppositions about religion that even scholars can find it difficult to think outside the box despite professional training in Asian religions—they might explain that Buddhism is especially “tolerant” for allowing these “extraneous” practices, failing to recognize that these practices are integral (not extraneous) to some particular Buddhist’s practice of his or her religion.

However, a moment’s reflection would reveal that this attitude is more or less unique to Western monotheism and even there, it doesn’t work, with well-documented exceptions among Catholic practitioners of Santería and Candomblé in Latin America. In Asian religion, the notion of syncretism doesn’t work at all—where in Asia can you find “pure” Buddhism or “pure” Hinduism unalloyed with elements
from other traditions, practiced exclusively by those seeking to be the religion’s adherents? Not even in Sri Lanka or Tibet could one argue this is the case, with non-Buddhist deity worship being important in Sri Lankan Buddhist ritual and elements of a pre-Buddhist indigenous tradition (Bön) being practiced alongside Tibetan Buddhism. There is no “syncretism” of Buddhism or Hinduism (or even Judaism or Christianity) because there is no “pure” Buddhism or Hinduism or Judaism or Christianity anywhere to be syncretized—there is simply whatever adherents of these traditions actually practice at a particular place and time, which involves a dialectic of differentiation and appropriation from contiguous traditions. “Historically speaking, to say that Christianity, mystery religions, or Hinduism are syncretistic is not to say anything that distinguishes them from anything else” (Baird 1971: 146). In light of the foregoing, the complaint that the Beats were “syncretistic” or had additional religious interests should have no probative force against the genuineness of their Buddhism.

A softer form of the syncretism argument involves the question of a “center,” symbolic or otherwise—at the very least, Buddhist symbols and referents should provide an organizing center to the Beat worldview and a physical direction to their pilgrimages if their religiosity is allowed to count as authentically “Buddhist” in the eyes of scholarship. On this rationale, one might admit there are Buddhist elements in Beat literature, but dismiss them in Stephen Prothero’s words as “tangential rather than constitutive.” This criticism is Eliadean, an insistence that religions must have a defining center or centers, and if they don’t, something essential to the nature of religion is lacking.

This criticism fails for the same reasons as the last. First of all, it is Western in orientation and finds a major exception in Japanese Buddhism, whose premier pilgrimage site (Shikoku) has no center at all in homage to the Buddhist notion of emptiness. In addition, one would be hard pressed to identify a unique center (or centers) in Buddhism, except by sect; material that is distinctly Mahāyāna or Theravādin will not qualify, but material that is pan-Buddhist generally has its significance radically reinterpreted or diminished in Mahayana, so although it is shared it does not constitute a center for the religion as a whole. Thus Paul Williams in Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations devotes his introductory pages to the empirical claim that there is no unique element that establishes Buddhism as such: “If we look at this enormous literature, claiming a disputed canonical authenticity, what we find in reality is a shifting mass of teachings with little or no central core, many of which are incompatible with each other and within which we can sometimes detect mutual criticism” (Williams 1989: 4).

And, certain sects of Buddhist may argue, this can be construed as a particularly wholesome and Buddhist state of affairs. If one followed Nāgārjuna, for instance, one would not argue that there is an “essence” or “center” to Buddhism that makes it substantially different from something else, because one would not wish to argue this for anything, including the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha: “those who see essence and essential difference and entities and non-entities / they do not see the truth taught by the Buddha” (Garfield 1995: 40).
Or, put more succinctly for the question of religious identity:

The essence of entities  
Is not present in the conditions, etc.  
If there is no essence,  
There can be no otherness-essence. (Garfield 1995: 3)

Identities (including religious ones) are dependently arisen, mutually implicated, conventional, impermanent, changing—and because of this mutability and non-duality, it is possible for there to be an upāya (or expedient means) to reach sentient beings in any situation, rather than a one-size-fits-all authoritative version of Buddhism that forever distinguishes the sacred and the profane. Thus Williams: “Mahayanists in particular see adaptation, and perhaps even syncretism [sic!], as a virtue in the Dharma, enabling teachings to be adapted to the needs of hearers, and thereby indicating the wisdom and compassion of the Omniscient Buddha” (Williams 1989: 2). Given Williams’s Madhyamaka approach, the lack of a center and a firm, unchanging basis for Buddhist identity is far from a defect but one of the religion’s principal advantages, so it should engender no panic if Beat Buddhism is reckoned “some of the dharma.”

While elite in orientation, Williams’s approach offers a rationale for how the Beats might be perceived as authentically Buddhist. Though the Beats lack a center, a center is not necessary (or even desired)—there is no such thing as a “center” to Buddhism, and if Buddhists believed there were a center, they would be bad Buddhists, because Buddhists are supposed to avoid “essentializing” and realize the inherent emptiness of concepts and phenomena. This includes the concept of Buddhism itself, and so if the Buddhism were thought of as having a defining core essence, paradoxically it couldn’t be Buddhist. On this approach the Beats’ Buddhism cannot be impugned for lack of a center. Moreover, the syncretism argument has no purchase against the Beats either—if there is no such thing as “pure” or “essential” Buddhism, it is meaningless to speak of Buddhism being adulterated or mixed with other traditions, or to criticize the Beats for doing so. Beat “syncretism” (if such a thing could even exist) might be considered a virtue, a legitimate adaptation of the Dharma to meet the religious needs of Western practitioners of Jewish or Christian background.

**Dharma Bums: Characteristics of Beat Buddhism**

In a way the Beat Generation is a gathering together of all the available models and myths of freedom in America that had existed before, namely: Whitman, John Muir, Thoreau, and the American bum. We put them together and opened them out again, and it becomes like a literary motif, and then we added some Buddhism to it.

—Gary Snyder, quoted in Tonkinson (1995: 172)

The Beat movement consisted principally of a trio of East Coast friends who had met and collaborated in the 1940s at Columbia University—Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg. Its character can be conveniently divided into two
distinct but integrally related phases. First, there is Beat literature of the 1940s and early 1950s, which includes Ginsberg’s poetry up to and including the publication of *Howl* and Kerouac’s *On the Road*. In the 1950s, Kerouac and Ginsberg migrated to the West Coast and became immersed in the local San Francisco poetry scene, leading ultimately to their literary success with Ginsberg’s recitation of *Howl* at the famous “Six Poets and the Six Gallery” reading in 1955. Ginsberg’s poems were immediately seized upon and offered publication by Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Lights bookstore (who was present in the audience), and the night’s reading introduced Kerouac to San Francisco poets Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen, who became affiliated with the Beat movement and shared Kerouac’s recently acquired interest in Buddhism. Kerouac encouraged his older friends to become interested in Buddhism, with Burroughs advising Kerouac against his new religion and Ginsberg eventually exploring Buddhism after initial reluctance. This second phase, then, expanded the Beat movement to incorporate new San Francisco poets with a previous interest in Buddhism, at the same time turning the New York Beats’ religious interests in a more Buddhist direction. If *On the Road* (1955) and *Howl* (1955) were the epitome of the Beats’ earliest religious sensibility, Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums* (1958) and Snyder’s *Mountains and Rivers without End* (1996) were the image of the new.

The discontinuities between the first and second phase of Beat religiosity are relatively minor, concerning the explicit realization in Buddhist language of what had been implicit in the earlier works of the Beat movement. In both periods, the Beats combined ruthless criticism of Western modernity, an apocalyptic sensibility, and lyrical celebration of marginality in messianic terms—“the madman bum and angel beat in Time, unknown, yet putting down here what might be left to say in time come after death,” Ginsberg described the Beat hero in *Howl* (Ginsberg 1984: 131). The ultimate progenitor for this complex was Ginsberg and Kerouac’s 1940s reading of Spengler’s *Decline of Western Civilization* at the urging of Burroughs, and a subsequent emulation of the *fellaheen* (the down-and-out classes) as bearers of cultural transformation and regeneration (Prothero 1991: 209).

The Beats’ enemy is a capitalistic, authoritarian, mechanized, military-industrial Moloch—the devourer of “brains and imagination,” “visions . . . omens . . . hallucinations . . . miracles . . . ecstasies . . . dreams . . . adorations . . . illuminations . . . religions . . . the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit” (Ginsberg 1984: 131–132). With the entire productive matrix of Western society implicated in the demonic, liberators must come from the outside—criminals like Herbert Huncke (Burroughs’s muse and narcotics supplier, the original source of the designation “Beat”) or the light-fingered Neal Cassady (“N.C., secret hero of these poems, cocksmen and Adonis of Denver”; Ginsberg 1984: 108). The turn to marginal figures such as Huncke and Cassady is because of their criminality rather than despite it, and ideal Beat seekers would be those “who crashed through their minds in jail waiting for impossible criminals with golden heads and the charm of reality in their hearts who sang sweet blues to Alcatraz” (ibid., 128), whose meltdown of conventional norms afforded them unique, unhindered perception of reality (a “naked lunch,” to use Burroughs’s phrase). This unique perception was described in explicitly religious terms as a kind of *unio mysti*...
Beat heroes are those “who studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bop kabbalah because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas” (ibid., 130). This naked, mystical consciousness was to be induced through whatever means possible—madness, criminality, sexual indulgence, drugs, exhaustion, nervous collapse, directionless travel, free-form musical improvisation, or the Beats’ own spontaneous prosody which

. . . rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn shadow of the band and blew the suffering of America’s naked mind for love into an eloi eloi lama sabachthani [sic] saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years. (ibid., 131)

So in this first phase of Beat religiosity, the goal is an evocation of a spontaneous, unhindered perception of reality through a number of radical “self-deprogramming” tools meant to destabilize one’s conventional perception of reality so that one can perceive and articulate a new vision to displace an older order one considers at once decadent and demonic.

The second, explicitly Buddhist phase of this religious sensibility extols the preexisting Beat lifestyle in the iconic figure of the “Dharma Bum” and adds meditation to the unofficial repertoire of techniques capable of unbolting the doors of perception. It is largely the result of Jack Kerouac’s 1954 reading of Thoreau’s Walden that led him to explore Eastern philosophies informing Thoreau’s Transcendentalism (Tonkinson 1995: 24). True to Beat eclecticism, Kerouac turned to the Upanishads and to Buddhist sutras and even his own Catholic upbringing, treating the question of their immediate provenance with ignorance or indifference. Before long, he would be engaged in a frantic, autodidactic investigation of Buddhism, living in retreat, meditating, composing sutras, and devouring nineteenth-century translations of Buddhist texts available through Dwight Goddard’s Buddhist Bible, the Harvard Oriental Series, and Sacred Books of the East (Kerouac 1997: 8). He also began to impose his enthusiasm upon his friends, urging them to adopt Buddhism.

Kerouac’s fascination was with Buddhist religious experience (to be obtained through meditation) and a particular Buddhist lifestyle (that of itinerant wandering, the Indian śramaṇa tradition described in the Pāli canon). Properly united, he thought, the two elements should lead naturally to liberation. Kerouac’s first interest (meditation practice) inspired a set of rules for “spontaneous writing,” which Allen Ginsberg also adopted. The focus here is on using meditation to attain a “natural mind” without intention or premeditation or self-censorship in order to improvise a creative text—a sort of written equivalent of jazz, with positive results being attributed to Pure Mind or the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Tonkinson 1995: 28–29). Kerouac’s second interest was in those who like the Beats lived life “on the road” in pursuit of spiritual transformation. Here Kerouac’s attention focused on bhikkhus and
those like them—hobos and St. Francis and so-called Zen Lunatics. Gary Snyder, whom Kerouac met in 1955, seemed to Kerouac a long-lost companion, combining the two desiderata in a single person—being himself a Buddhist practitioner (living for a time in an disused shack surrounded by dharma books in the San Francisco foothills), meditating, and translating the works of the ninth-century Ch’an recluse Han Shan from the Chinese. Under the pseudonym of Japhy Ryder, Gary Snyder became Kerouac’s prototypical “Dharma Bum” in the novel of that name, emblematic of everything Beat Buddhism considered sacred:

I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of ’em Zen Lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures. (Kerouac 1958: 97–98)

Ideally, the Beat lifestyle should be lived “on the road,” without foundation or center or roots, itinerant, involving spontaneous directionless travel in search of highs and epiphanies and one’s “original mind”—imitating those who “drove crosscountry seventytwo hours to find out if I had a vision or you had a vision or he had a vision to find out Eternity,” in the words of Ginsberg’s Howl (Ginsberg 1984: 128). This is the case whether one is reading the pre-Buddhist Beat manifesto On the Road or the postconversion Dharma Bums, whether the genre is “bop [jazz] apocalypse” or a meditation-induced, “spontaneous” sutra—for the Beats, the scenery changes, but the song remains the same.

ON THE MIGRATORY HABITS OF BEATS, HIPPIES, AND SCHOLARS

There is an inner
anterior image
of divinity
beckoning me out
to pilgrimage.
—Ginsberg 1984: 106

As I have demonstrated earlier, describing the Beats as “religious” is neither more or less problematic than using the term “religion” at all—one may consistently reject the “religious” nature of Beat Buddhism if one wishes, but at the cost of dropping “religion” as an analytic category, smuggling normative/theological notions into one’s definition of religion, and/or dismissing other phenomena generally regarded as “religious.” For this paper, I have adopted the strategy of deferring to self-definition—in lieu of what to my mind are coherent, nontheological criteria for what should count as religious or as belonging to a particular religious tradition, I believe it is a matter better left to the practitioner. In the Beats’ case, this means I have accepted their
self-designation as Buddhists. I have also done my best to describe the nature of that Buddhism—critical, creative, open-ended, eclectic, and concerned with evoking a spontaneous, unhindered perception of reality through a cornucopia of “self-deprogramming” tools including (among its less extreme means) meditation and a lifestyle of deliberate itineracy in imitation of Buddhist precursors. I believe it is best to adopt the same strategy in order to resolve the question of whether Beat peregrinations should count as pilgrimages—first consider what kind of thing a pilgrimage is (if anything), and then describe the nature of Beat pilgrimages.

For Cohen and the like-minded, the answer to whether a Beat can be a pilgrim is no, because for these authors pilgrimage requires orientation towards a preexisting center of meaning and value, which arguably the Beats do not possess. Perhaps the Beats travel in search of a “center out there,” but they do not travel toward an already recognized center as pilgrimage is presumed to suggest. The Beats and countercultural travelers can lean in the direction of pilgrimage as “existential tourists”—even be a bit more pilgrim than tourist on Turner’s sliding scale—but they cannot be complete, bona fide pilgrims for want of this already established center (Cohen 1992: 54–55).

I would argue on the other hand that the concept of pilgrimage is as inherently unstable a concept as “religion,” subject to the same line of attack because of its dependence upon “religion” as its raison d’être. The distinction between “tourism” and “pilgrimage” comes down to whether one’s motivations for travel are considered to be genuinely and sufficiently “religious” to count. “Pilgrimage” is imagined to require a center insofar as “religion” is theorized to require a center and “pilgrimage” is conceptualized as a religiously motivated form of travel. Thus the conceptual confusion arising from autobiographical accounts of so-called Chinese pilgrimages in which the center is absent or obscured because pilgrims’ intentions are left undisclosed or appear to have a serious “secular” component (such as drinking too much or visiting brothels). There is an initial inclination to say that this is “religious” and “pilgrimage” by structural analogy to similar peregrinations in the West, but the differences in approach between the kinds of “religion” involved (a Western one centered on belief or motivation and invested in a strong sacred/secular divide and an Asian one relatively less invested in dichotomies between sacred/secular and faith/practice) immediately destabilize the comparison. Rather than embrace inconsistency or introduce specifically Christian normative presuppositions into what counts as “religion” or “pilgrimage,” one should defer to self-definition if one is unwilling to discard the concept of “pilgrimage” altogether. “A pilgrim is a traveler that is taken seriously,” perhaps—or in slightly different words, “a tourist is a traveler who doesn’t want to be called a pilgrim.” Since the Beats emphatically considered themselves pilgrims (cf. Ginsberg quote above), we should recognize their peregrinations as pilgrimages.

Having established that the Beats were pilgrims, it is necessary to describe the nature and characteristics of Beat pilgrimage. In order to do so, it is helpful to consider both the Beats themselves as pilgrims and a number of pilgrimages their writings subsequently inspired. In the first category, one might include Jack Kerouac’s
cross-country zigzag from New York to San Francisco and back again (through multiple diversions) in *On the Road*; Gary Snyder’s refuge in the Pacific wilderness in *Turtle Island*; Ginsberg, Snyder, and Kerouac’s Buddhist pilgrimage to Mt. Tamalpais and environs in *Dharma Bums* and *Mountains and Rivers without End*; Allen Ginsberg’s *Indian Journals*, which describe a sojourn to India in 1962–1963; and Tom Wolfe’s *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, which describes a Magic Bus filled with Ken Kesey’s “Merry Pranksters” and Neal Cassady at the helm, traveling through America to experience the divine through the use of psychedelics. What these diverse narratives have in common is the apparent geographical aimlessness of the travel and focus on the journey itself as primary means of transformative experience. Instead of a “center out there,” the center is simply not there—the liminality of pilgrimage is undertaken for its own sake.

Beat literature inspired a younger generation to engage in their own counter-cultural travel, sometimes domestic but most characteristically abroad. In the mid-1960s continuing through the mid-1970s, an unknown number of Westerners participated in an overland trek on no precisely fixed route from Eastern Europe through Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan into India and Kathmandu and sometimes points farther east. This clandestine route was known by many names—“the Road to Goa,” “the Road to Kathmandu,” and (most famously) “the Hippie Trail.” Beats like Snyder and Ginsberg were considered the pioneers of the route for having made early trips to India that inspired collective interest. These travelers were mostly backpackers (Kerouac’s “rucksack revolution,” Cohen’s “existential tourists”) who toted copies of Kerouac’s *On the Road* and Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* and took buses and/or hitchhiked the route impecuniously, often without guidebook or itinerary.

Like their template in *On the Road*, these pilgrimages have no recognized starting point, have no fixed destination, occur along no set time frame, and have no requisite practices, and there isn’t a standardized vocabulary to refer to the pilgrimage (as the competing slang names “Road to Goa,” “Hippie Trail,” and so on attest). Nor were the routes “routes,” per se—once a certain number of Beats or hippies had beaten a path to a particular location, others might choose to follow as a matter of interest or convenience, but in principle they could set off for some place more exotic, such as Mongolia (or Des Moines). The element of decentralization is not accidental to counter-cultural pilgrimage, but intentional and constitutive. The fact that there is no one particular goal for pilgrimage should not be understood as a result of secularization, as if no place were holy for these countercultural pilgrims, but because all places are holy and can serve as a proper destination for pilgrimage:

> Everything is holy! everybody’s holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity! Everyman’s an angel!
> The bum’s as holy as the seraphim! the madman is holy as you my soul are holy! . . .
If all places are holy, one might question why one would travel at all, rather than remaining at home to enjoy one’s particular sacred space. Perhaps there is something about journey itself that makes it possible to perceive the omnipresent sacred where one had previously seen the commonplace—a reconfiguring of perspective that comes about through the process of alienation and reintegration that far-flung travel affords. One could even live one’s life continually “on the road” like Kerouac’s sainted bhik-khus, cultivating mental openness by using long-distance travel to resist the formation of any habitual identity or established sense of place. This itineracy dovetails nicely with the Mahāyāna Buddhist emphasis on nonduality and emptiness, allowing one to experience nirvāṇa in saṃsāra because one harbors an attachment to no thing (and no place) in particular, while at the same time accepting all. The religious object of Beat Buddhist pilgrimage appears to be its very indeterminacy.

In the end, however, the best account of countercultural pilgrimage is not a scholarly description like this but the first-person description of the traveler herself, because scholarly descriptions are abstractions that provide a sense of closure, detachment, and fixity to something deeply existentially invested and radically undetermined. If scholarly tools are brought to a sustained, monograph-length study of countercultural pilgrimage, probably the best method would be a kind of phenomenological analysis based upon the scholar’s participant-observer status:

Get drunk all the time. Go someplace and score.
Walk in and walk out of the Asp.
Hike up Tam.
Keep quitting and starting at Berkeley
Watch the pike in the Steinhart Aquarium: he doesn’t move.
Sleeping with strangers
Keeping up on the news
Chanting sutras after sitting
Practice yr frailing on guitar
Get dropped off in the fog in the night
Fall in love twenty times
Get divorced
Keep moving—move out to the Sunset
Get lost—or
Get found. (Snyder 1996: 27–28)

WORKS CITED
