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## Allen Ginsberg and the Theology of Eclectic Mysticism

*Abstract: Allen Ginsberg's contribution to the crystallization of the spiritual awareness of the Beat Generation was one of his life-time projects stirred by his becoming increasingly interested in deciphering more meaningful relationships between mind and body, microcosm and macrocosm, between the world experienced through senses and the incognoscible world. Ginsberg's appreciation of Judaism, Buddhism and Krishnaism represented the incipit of an Eastward trend in American faith. From Judaism and Blakean revelation to consciousness-expanding drugs and Buddhist principles, from Indian gurus to Krishnaism, Ginsberg developed a new type of spiritual revelation of eclectic nature. Able to reconcile apparently opposed concepts such as sacred and profane, body and soul, matter and spirit, nirvana and samsara, the poet created not only a philosophy of spiritual insight but also some of America's best known profane works which contain the most energetic affirmation of the sacred .*

*Key words: Beat Generation; religion; poetry; Buddhism; Christianity; Judaism; Krishnaism*

A decade before the death-of-God movement in philosophy and theology and the eastward turn in religion, the artists of the Beat Generation announced the death of the gods of materialism and turned to Eastern religions for spiritual revelation. Wandering prophets and mystical visionaries, the Beats were unable to discover God in conventional places, and so they hit the road from New York to San Francisco and then from Mexico City to Tangier. As the churches and synagogues of postwar America seemed void of any transcendental presence, and the Beats could not find any spiritual energy in the widely acclaimed postwar religious revival, they started their collaborative and experimental project with drugs, homoeroticism, jazz, mantra chanting, Zen meditation and spontaneous forms of literary creation. The Beats championed the blurring of distinctions between matter and spirit, divinity and humanity, the sacred and the profane and drawing heavily on Emerson and Thoreau, they aimed to get in contact with the nonverbal sacred, with the transconceptual level of intuition and feeling, with the sanctity of the ordinary and the sainthood of the hobo.

In the early 1950s, C. Wright Mills in *White Collars* deplored the spread of consumerist mentality and the decline in the independent middle class whereas William H. Whyte in *The Organization Man* warned against the growing precedence of economic and political circles at the expense of the authentic sense of community. The former identified the

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“synthetic molding” of this new culture of leisure as the main promoter of general social apathy and cultural meaninglessness. He incriminated the disintegration and destruction of the social and religious certainties of the previous centuries and the fact that traditional religious practice had been co-opted by a new universe of management and manipulation. Both writers acknowledged that the bureaucratically organized society rendered the individual powerless in terms of autonomy and self-decision, by constraining him into suffocating matrixes of powers.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the neo-orthodox theologian, considered that the illness of the century – the psychological restlessness derived from a conflicting consciousness. The irrational force of technology prevented society from achieving cohesion, adding to the sinfulness of human nature and the only remedy envisaged consisted in a return to humility. Merging moral reprobation with an apocalyptic sense of salvation, the volume *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1943) analyzed the relationship between human progress and political and technological transformations and reached the conclusion that the brutality and cruelty of previous political regimes (Nazism and Italian Fascism) came into being due to an inherently flawed mankind, unable to tell right from wrong. The same neo-orthodox message was conveyed by *The Irony of American History* (1952) in which the author commented on the incongruity between historical/contemporary reality and the imagined American exceptionalism. David Riesman, Billy Graham, Will Herberg, C. Wright Mills and Reinhold Niebuhr offered similar perspectives upon American realities and advocated a return to traditional principles. Whether they assimilated the moral evil with the communist threat or moral depravity, social enemy or political laxity, they all called for a pluri-dimensional renewal of the American society.

Others adopted the format of American jeremiads, dramatic strategies of reviving the culture of the sacred in an entirely secular America. Merging the religious spirit with conservative propaganda, evangelists started a crusade aimed at reforming the American spirit. In Billy Graham’s words, patriotism equaled religious faith. “If you would be a true patriot, then become a Christian. If you would be a loyal American, then become a loyal Christian”. Many other anti-communism militants and catholic orators followed. The message of religious nationalism of Msgr. Fulton J. Sheen’s expressed in *Life is Worth Living* (1952) attracted more than twenty million viewers. Urging America to sever its ties with the alienating European philosophy, he claimed to embody the wishes of all Americans, “sick of being thrown into a Darwinian pot to boil as a beast, or into a Freudian stew to squirm as a libido, or thrust into the Marxian sandwich.”(qtd in Lardas 48) In that time of ecumenical upsurge, “New York Intellectuals” as Lionel Trilling and Daniel Bell favored the inauguration of a post-ideological and post-religious age, while David Riesman took up the defense of autonomous individualism in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). His theory identified crisis not with the “working of capitalism progress” but rather with the emergence of “other-directed” individuals who, unable to make use of an internal set of moral values or internalize the sense of tradition, responded automatically to the cultural patterns around them. Similar fears were voiced by Herbert Marcuse and Eric Fromm who indicted the society of the 1950s for developing and playing silent allegiance to the false consciousness of the American mass culture. The pervasive doubt and intense self-questioning in the works of David Riesman, Vance Packard, C. Wright Mills, Paul Goodman, and Betty Friedan resulted in the creation of a strong ground of social criticism, while most artists tackled the new problem of the century- the effacement of individuality

in a world intent on eradicating personal consciousness.

Despite the fact that church affiliation increased dramatically in the early 1950s, many Americans were deeply suspicious of institutionalized faith and preferred personal experience over other models of religious authority and regarded personal ecstasy as a seductive way of practicing religion. As the public no longer vibrated to concepts like war, soldiers, holocaust and race, more private issues were brought to light. The cold war, the Vietnam War and Korean War delineated a static frame of reference for the social and political America to which the young generation related in a very particular way. Moved by the boredom ensured by privilege and affluence, the nay sayers of the counterculture in the making responded by campus rebellion and free intercourse, drug addiction and political protests. When Kerouac encountered Buddhism, Ginsberg became acquainted with the world of hallucinogens and Burroughs showed his fascination for Scientology, their incipient collaborative project catalyzed into a fully developed framework of religious ideas.

This article aims to describe Allen Ginsberg's mystical experiences, invoking the metaphysical idiom contained or revealed not only in his poems, but in his confessional prose texts as well. In doing so, we will examine the distinct contours of Ginsberg's religious thought, analyze the extent to which his religious fervor responds to the foremost intellectual developments of his time and whether his involvement in political and social events enact his mystical experiences or reveal his spiritual torments. But in Ginsberg's case, religion starts as poetry rather than theology, so one should probably bear in mind that any theoretical attempt, no matter how well intentioned, to transform Allen Ginsberg's vision of the sacred into a logical and strictly coherent system is likely to strain at artificiality.

Poet laureate of the Beat Generation, founding member of a major literary movement, champion of human and civil rights, psychedelic proselytizer, ashram chanter, May King, supporter of 60s radicalism and 70s anti-nuclear activist, mentor and practitioner of Buddhist incantations and Zen Judaism, world traveler, spiritual seeker, photographer and songwriter, teacher and co-founder of a poetics school—Allen Ginsberg was an authentic cultural force of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who championed the beginning of America's spiritual revival.

An American by birth, Ginsberg developed a global consciousness through his extensive travel and this greatly affected his writings and outlook. He spent extended periods of time in Mexico, South America, Europe and India. He visited every continent in the world and every state in the United States. The products of such life experiences took the form of some of his best known and artistically refined poems and essays.

Oswald Spengler was a major source of inspiration for most of the Beat Generation representatives, although each of them discovered him in various stages of their literary development. Spengler's cyclical theory of the rise and decline of civilization put forth the idea according to which all historically viable human societies begin as vibrant cultures, transform into stagnant civilizations, and then collapse into chaos only to be reborn as new, organic cultures. Spengler's original purpose was to provide moral comfort to a defeated Germany in the wake of World War II, but Lardas claims that the Beats read him in light of "typically American concerns: individualism, democracy, and a pastoral vision of self and country set apart from the corrupting influences of the European aristocracy" (41). Consequently, the Beats used Spengler's analysis as a methodology meant to empower

them to cure America of her spiritual ills and to imagine new ways of living in a virgin America again, a country returned to the purity of its original myths and ideals. The Beats' purposes and activities were religious, according to Lardas, in as much as they aimed to consecrate the sacredness of the everyday – the main Spenglerian feature of a productive culture. Conceptualizing sacredness within a theological framework, the Beats interpreted it as a way of expressing America's basic ideals- absolute freedom and liberty. Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs also imagined the act of writing as a way of enacting the "new vision" of a sacred universe. Their newly developed "theology of experience" was meant to transform their "liminal" experiences into literary works that would establish a spiritually liberating "dialogue" with the reader. The Beats in general and Ginsberg in particular hoped that their writing would serve to expiate the sins of America and prophesize the new vision to an America suffering from the "late civilization" syndrome.

The Bible was another staple in Ginsberg's spiritual orientation and one may rightly assume that his understanding of the Bible was profound and complete. Familiarized with the Jewish percepts and biblical details, he was able to sense the connections between Christian religion and the Old Testament.

The Bible is fantastic, complete history of the Jews from Adam, to God speaking on Sinai, telling them they are chosen people, and the building of holy empire of seed of Abram Isaac and Israel, all forefathers to whom God prophesied – with Jews always violating the covenant they made with God in Moses' time when he first laid down permanent Law for them. Then the culmination of peaceful holy land in wise Solomon's time, the building of the Temple and after that, Spenglerian degeneration, all told in detail, whoring and queerness and worship of Moloch, till God finally gives up and breaks down the walls of Jerusalem and disperses them all into captivity, Babylon and elsewhere. It's a huge vast Shakespearian tragic cycle book, fantastic plot. I am beginning to see how important Christ is in relation to Old Testament – he just turns it upside down, revokes the old God-spoken holy laws in person. (Ginsberg, *Journal* 95)

While visiting the Vatican and Saint Francis monastery in Assisi, Ginsberg hoped that he would find answers to many questions and intended to find the religious significance of his mystical experiences. But he was regarded with suspicion and disdain by the monks who had refused him shelter and he, in his turn, called the Catholic Church "a vast nasty control organization". Intrigued by the fixed monastery regulations and flat routines, appalled by their pseudo logical discourses, he describes the Franciscan monks as "a bunch of hard up fig-leaving, psychotic politicians". (as qtd in Miles 341-2)

The climax of his youthful attempts came in 1948, when, while reading Blake's *The Sunflower!* he was overcome by the voice of the Romantic poet. From that moment on, his microcosm became infused with the active presence of the cosmos, and began looking for evidence of the universal in all the surrounding objects.

What I was seeing was a visionary thing...and a sense of cosmic consciousness, vibrations, understanding awe, and wonder and surprise. And it was a sudden awakening into a totally deeper real universe than I'd been exiting in...the total consciousness then, of the complete universe. (Ginsberg, *Journals* 122-3.)

When the Blakean vision stopped and the moment of revelation the poet had experienced

in his youth proved elusive, Ginsberg strived to summon that sensation by catalyzing his emotions with the help of various experiments with mind – altering drugs. He inhaled ether, used heroin and used the recipe of ayahuasca from Indian witch doctors who smoked hashish on the bank of the Ganges. But when neither laughing gas nor mescaline helped, ten years later, haunted by the same desire to taste eternity, he would turn to LSD. Yet, he could never abandon the grip of horror felt while fearing that he might not “see Eternity” after all or that he “might get eaten alive by God”(Ginsberg, *Allen* 87). For Ginsberg, each session of drug intake turns into a miraculous experience. Drinking ayahuasca or yage, he feels detached from his corporal limits, yet inside his body. He has the feeling of becoming one with the universe, a “whisper of consciousness” coming from “Above”, and going “Beyond”. “Slowly drifting away but still thinking in my body, till my body turned to passive wood and my soul rocked back and forth, preparing to slide out on eternal journey backwards from head in the dark”(qtd in Miles 234). Drug-taking sessions become ceremonial activities that need to be performed on special occasions, with the potion prepared from a fixed recipe, while the gestures which accompany the event proper have a strict pattern and order. “Yage” becomes the mystical name for the voyage into the unknown with its experience of communal fraternity and the realization of Infinite Intimacy with mankind. The moments of sober “awakening” highlight the void of contingent existence and intensify the desire of living the experience again. The next session is approached with fear and excitement and the further one goes into the ayahuasca mystery, the deeper one penetrates the mysteries of the universe. “[...] I visit the moon, see the dead, see God, see the Tree Spirits”. (Ginsberg, *Journal* 90)

There is an inextricable link between the process of drug addiction and mystical stances, as the latter category is occasioned and actively maintained by the process of drug intake. The need for a divine presence is more acutely felt during trances: “Someone to take on the responsibility of being the creative God and seize power over the universe”. (Ginsberg, *Deliberate* 73-4) Since mystical power is conceived as an asset -subject to dispute and seizure, rather than as an inherent quality of a unique creator, the nauseated individual in full mystical crisis dares to challenge names and vocations. “I decided I might as well be the one to do so – Pronounced by nakedness as the first act of revolution against the destroyers of the human image. The naked body being the hidden sign” (Ginsberg, *Deliberate* 76). Nakedness becomes the sign of self-empowerment, the element of power through innocence. The moment of transcendent illumination is bordered in time by sickness (in the first stages of the drug intake) and by mystical madness (in the last ones). After Timothy Leary’s experiment with *Psylocybe mexicana*, Ginsberg assumes the Christ's pose, and calls himself the Messiah who came into this world to walk through streets and ask people to stop hating. Mixing mystical exaltation with political desires and social frustrations, he plans an international / intergalactic revolution, an enterprise verging on idealist purposes and ludicrous intentions.

Take a plane up here immediately. The revolution is beginning. Gather all the dark angels of light at once. It’s time to seize power over the universe and become the next consciousness. (Ginsberg, *Journal* 99)

This clownish performance is eventually ended by researchers and when the behavioral effects of the drug wear off he painfully experiences the “control of the universe slipping

out of my hands”. (Ginsberg, *Journal* 99)

In India, Ginsberg had the opportunity of enriching his book knowledge about deities and religious life with first-hand experiences concerning spiritual traditions. He is amazed to find out that, unlike in the Western typology, “the universe is a big illusion” and time and history are lived differently there. Gods are subjective forms of meditation and circumscribe a certain aspect of existence. The effervescent spiritual life made manifest in parades, in marching through towns or in the long conversations with the Dalai Lama fascinated Ginsberg. But the aspect of Indian civilization that he considered most appealing was the climate of peaceful tolerance and the respect for the individual despite his oddities and eccentricities.

Indians really sophisticated as far as letting everybody be as crazy as they want and taking as formal personal method of relating to Gods, all very proper and dignified. The Moslems and Jews and Christians seem really mean and stinky in this respect, the more I think of it (qtd in Miles 308).

After a few days in Calcutta, Ginsberg became very familiar with the customs and rituals of India. He took delight in drinking “bhang” – a mixture of marijuana and almond milk and smoking ganja – high grade marijuana. Soon he was staying in the tents with the ash-smearred heads, passing the pipes around while singing mystical songs to Shiva and Krishna. Much of the information and inspiration that Ginsberg found in India would become part of the popular culture of the 1960s. When associating Ginsberg with eastern spiritual traditions, one usually thinks of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist meditation master who became his friend and life-long teacher. However, few are aware that Ginsberg took a painstaking interest in Krishnaism, too. He befriended A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of hare Krishna movement in the western world. Ginsberg involved both spiritually and financially in the cause, as he donated money, materials and lent his reputation to help the swami establish the first temple. When Maharishi actually came to New York, he was greeted with flowers by teens and devotees who listened to every word of his speech. Some reports which Ginsberg saw and read in the press startled him since he was not at ease with statements like “Poverty is laziness” and “Communism equals weakism”. The divergence between them intensified when Maharishi condemned the American youths for transforming pop stars into spiritual leaders and deplored the drug abuse taking place in the American society. Although many of Bhaktivedanta Swami’s prohibitions repelled Ginsberg, he incorporated the Hare Krishna mantra as part of his philosophy and declared that it brought him a state of ecstasy. Krishna mantra is the chant in which the different names of Vishnu are uttered in a certain order, in a rhythmical crescendo: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare; Hare Rama, Hare Rama; Rama Rama, Hare Hare became words-legend, repeated at many youth meetings in the 1960s and 1970s. Along with other counterculture ideologists such as Gary Snyder and Alan Watts, Ginsberg laid the groundwork for the inclusion of Krishna chanting into the hippie movement.

An authentic priest with political prerogatives, Ginsberg played a decisive role in the preceding days of the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Chanting Hare Krishna mantras into full lotus position, he was soon followed by groups of chanters moving through the park. A day before the 1968 Convention, tailed by police forces, Ginsberg sat

near the stage repeating the Sanskrit syllable Om, and was amazed to see the crowds following him for eight hours. He later defined this spontaneous overflow of emotions as an event of particular spirituality and of grace, visionary and productive at the same time. His intention to create a “mid Heaven” a perfect union between material representation and metaphysical connotations was a mystical project which Ginsberg would address for many years during his life. In his ritualistic demonstrations, Ginsberg entrusts language with a performative role, with the ability to outdo its own referential power. Saying becomes doing in this sacred practice and words achieve materiality and substance. In between speech and action, in the realm in which utterances are invested with the force of action, the names of gods are one with the gods themselves.

Ginsberg’s religious imagination intends to counteract the over-deterministic cultural atmosphere of the American space in order to identify the sacred reality beyond. His attempt to view the world in a new light represents an alternative way of looking at the world that gives it meaning through the discovery of a new set of values. His defiance and resistance against the authorities is legitimized by religious concerns for the spiritual well being. In religion, Ginsberg finds a viable *modus operandi* which can make the human spirit coextensive with the limitless cosmos. A way of assembling ideas and images, religion also becomes a complex strategy that allows the transformation of Ginsberg’s poetics into Ginsberg’s style.

Over the years, Ginsberg’s Buddhist philosophy underwent a process of refinement and changed from an intuitive corpus of practices to a spiritual system legitimized by intellectual preoccupations and informed by meaningful explanations. Throughout his life, he met a large number of Zen masters, lamas and swamis who shaped his religious convictions and gave him a better command of the mantras. Ginsberg’s painstaking search for gurus is a permanent attempt at self-discovery. All the conversation he had with the holy men from India directed him to acknowledging and worshipping his own body. The Blakean vision made him associate the idea of a spiritual leader with Blake, but all the terms of advice received later demanded that he get into his body, by living and inhabiting his human form, rather than by escaping its limitation through drugs.

After vacillating between the two eastern religious orientations, Tibetan Buddhism and Krishnaism, Ginsberg finally crystallized his spiritual affiliation by late 1960s. The early 1970s found the poet taking classes at Trungpa’s Naropa institute of Colorado as well as teaching poetry classes there. On 6 May 1979, Ginsberg committed himself fully to the Buddhist faith, by taking the refuge and the Bodhisattva vows. At Dharmadhatu meditation center, Ginsberg underwent the traditional Buddhist “Three-refuge ceremony” and took the vows of Buddhism. In these three vows, Ginsberg pledged to take refuge in the Buddha (as a God or as a spiritual state of “awakenedness”), in the dharma (the teachings of the Buddhist knowledge) and in the sangha (the Buddhist congregations). He was given the refuge name of Lion of Dharma and assigned a new mantra for meditation. Apart from these refuge vows, Ginsberg took the Bodhisattva Vows.

Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to liberate them all”, translated by him as a promise to enlighten and help any human creature. “Obstacles are inexhaustible. I vow to cut through them”, was explained by a promise for tolerance and general understanding for human frailties. “The gates of the Dharma are countless. I vow to enter every gate.” (qtd in Miles 450-1)

Rather than explaining the vow as a pledge for cultivating knowledge and exploring any path to enlightenment, Ginsberg favors the notion of peaceful understanding of any situation, in its multiplicity and paradoxical character. Finally, the last vow is a synthesis of the previous ones. "The Buddha Path (of awakened mind) is endless. I vow to follow through". (qtd in Miles 450-1)

Ginsberg agreed on a few crucial Buddhist points |which were part of the Mahayana tradition's Yogacara school. According to such principles, life is characterized by suffering (dukkha) and impermanence (anicca). Yet he also believed that this world, at least as it appears to our senses, is ephemeral and illusory. The awareness of what Ginsberg called "the phantom nature of being" was tremendously liberating as it enabled him to confront suffering and death as relative obstacles in this world playing upon the game of appearances and to see their relative insignificance from the absolute standpoint of heaven or nirvana. This led him to the paradoxical denial of the absolute reality of the material world as he affirmed vigorously spiritual experiences in it. Although Ginsberg's contribution to the proliferation of the dharma in the context of the 1960s America is beyond dispute, his authenticity in promoting Buddhist principles is often questioned by scholars of religion. Even closer acquaintances of the Beat group were merciless in quantifying the impact of Zen Buddhism upon the American religious landscape. Calling Ginsberg a holly goof or dilettante, Watts indicts him for having promoted a degenerated version of Buddhism.

The Beats imagined a new form of Buddhist mysticism by adjusting Buddhism's ancient wisdom to a "new world" context, and by articulating this vision in the vernacular spoken in the streets. This liberated an American's understanding of the Buddhist religion from tight academic rigor and haughty religious translations, thus introducing Buddhism to Americans in a refreshing way- Zen Buddhism. Despite the excesses and distortions which Zen spirit suffered at the hands of Beat productive interpretations, Beat writers might have experienced clear satory experiences. Since there is no unique authoritative way of reaching satory, a certain way may produce the revelation of a perfectly genuine spiritual experience. The years of meditation and practice under a qualified master as path to enlightenment ties in perfectly with the philosophy of effortless experiences as a way to satory through mundane acts.

In the teachings of Buddhism, in their invocation of the horizonless space and that state of cosmic, all-encompassing awareness, the Beats found the cure against political restrictions and social coercions. The pervasiveness of fear and death as ubiquitous presences in the aftermath of World War II were countered by the fundamental Buddhist teaching of the impermanence of life. To the trend of consumerism emergent in the 1950s, Buddhist principles suggested the practical alternative of a mendicant and homeless life. If the Christian practice distinguishes the good from the evil, Zen ideas unite and adapt the two dimensions of living in the world. The alienated Westerner, willing to reintegrate himself in the larger, natural order of things, and to experience the wholeness of the material and transcendental, of the conscious and unconscious, finds the perfect spiritual location in Zen ideology. Consumerist America preached the man's dependency on money market and Stock Exchange and restrained his individuality by constantly reminding him of his addiction to Government institution. Zen Buddhism regains this aspect of material existence in the light of holiness, by introducing the concept of a fully human individual, neither solemn nor ascetic, yet totally immersed in sage wisdom. For the representatives of



the Beat generations, Zen has a distinct flavor and if they do not practise it like Snyder or Watts, at least they popularize the terms of Eastern philosophy through their writing. The Beats conceive the world as an inseparable, integrated continuum, a sum of parts so deeply interrelated that no fracture, distance or separation can be detected between them. The awakened man of Chinese Zen is the ordinary, perfectly mundane individual, who retains little of the lofty, superhuman mastery and control over his nature.

Ginsberg's study of eastern religions was fostered by his discovery of mantras and rhythmic combinations used for inducing a spiritual trance. This intricate use of rhythm, breath and sounds became the matrix of a new type of poetry. In many of his poems, he would incorporate such structures, transforming his poetic pieces into authentic poetic prayers. In other cases, he would preserve such elements as a prologue recited prior to the poetry reading session as such. Considering Christian religion limited and limiting, Ginsberg tried to have access to a higher consciousness and decipher meaningful relationships between mind and body, microcosm and macrocosm by turning to Buddhism. Like the Zen devotee, he intended to escape the conventions of ordinary life and find again the pattern of things, thus reiterating the process of creation. With its politically ordered and hierarchic cosmology, the Christian cult is perceived as artificial, meant to estrange men from nature. Closer to his spirituality, Zen Buddhism represents the longing for an "original inseparability" between man and nature. Drawing on Emerson's ideal of the poet-prophet and on the visionary romanticism of William Blake, mixed with the Buddhist strategy of confounding the sacred with the profane, tainted by the relativism of Zen ideology, Allen Ginsberg created a new receptacle of American values, a new philosophy of rebellion and a theology of acceptance.

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