

A New Kind of Jew: Allen Ginsberg and Asian Spirituality

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Abstract

The article examines Allen Ginsberg's spiritual path, and places his interest in Asian religions within larger cultural agendas and life choices. While identifying as a Jew, Ginsberg wished to transcend beyond his parents' orbit and actively sought to create an inclusive, tolerant, and permissive society where persons such as himself could live and create at ease. He chose elements from the Christian, Jewish, Native-American, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions, weaving them together into an ever-growing cultural and spiritual quilt. The poet never underwent a conversion experience or restricted his choices and freedoms. In Ginsberg's understanding, Buddhism was a universal, non-theistic religion that meshed well with an individualist outlook, and worked toward personal solace and mindfulness. He and other Jews saw no contradiction between enchantment with Buddhism and their Jewish identity.

1. Introduction

Americans remember the countercultural movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s as pivotal to the development of social norms, cultural practices, and spiritual expressions in turn of the twenty-first century America. One of the most inspirational figures, of that period, was a prophet-looking poet with a bird and long hair, singing mantras and calling for non-violence.¹ Many remember Allen Ginsberg's promotion of peace, freedoms to express and experiment, and advocacy of new cultural and spiritual venues. While he epitomized the new interest of Jews in Asian religions, few have thought about Ginsberg as a forerunner of a new kind of Jew.

¹ Todd Gitlin: *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987; John Schultz: *No One Was Killed: the Democratic National Convention, August 1968*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999.

Allen Ginsberg's interest in spirituality started early, in the 1940s–1950s, alongside his growth as a literary figure of avant-garde poetry, and the rise of the Beat group, whose fame and legend he helped create. Among other engagements, he became a major activist of freedom of artistic as well as sexual expressions.² He wove those activities and meshed them with his spiritual engagements, which for him, and others, reflected universal values and an agenda of inclusivity. Ginsberg came to represent a new wave of interest among educated Americans, and Westerners in general, in alternative, imported, and innovative forms of spirituality, helping to bring Hindu and Buddhist practices into the American mainstream. For Jews, and non-Jews too, he stood for a new model of individual in post-modern society. One who builds his or her life in diverse and inclusive environments, chooses at ease his or her cultural interests and spiritual pursuits, and creates a freer and more complex identity than modern society had previously allowed. Jews have ventured out of their quarters long before Ginsberg's outstanding example, but there was a new element in the Beat poet's agenda. He wove his different interests, discoveries and affiliations together, without negating one another. He did not give up or ran away from his Jewishness, but rather re-interpreted it and added numerous spiritual layers to it, creating his own intellectual, cultural, political, and religious niche. This article wishes to explore the spiritual choices and venues of Allen Ginsberg, and examine how they mesh with and reflect his larger world views and social and cultural agendas. It will grapple with the nature of religious affiliations in the Beat Generation and the counter-culture, taking into account Ginsberg's iconic standing within his literary, artistic and spiritual circles. To do so, one must explore Ginsberg's Jewish home, the cultural and spiritual journeys he took, and the agendas that motivated him along the way.

2. A Jewish Strive for the Universal

Ginsberg's personality and life choices as well as his intellectual, political, literary and spiritual pursuits were not typical to persons of his era and background. Most men of his generation turned up very differently than him, led a life far removed from his, and pursued careers and activities with little

² Ginsberg's book *Howl* brought about a ground breaking obscenity trial that became something of an ethos and a symbol. *Howl: The Obscenity Trial that Started a Revolution*, Oscill Scope 2010.

resemblance to his own. Still, the poet's actions and style had their roots in a particular environment, and upbringing.

Ginsberg's parents, Naomi and Louis, were not run-of-the-mill Americans of the 1920s–1940s. Both children of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, they advanced through the public school system and higher education, moving away from the working class world, in which they grew up, into a more educated, albeit frugal, middle class environment.³ Louis was a teacher and a poet. But the Ginsbergs did not function like a run of the mill American family. Their political views and affiliations were more radical than those of most Jews (and non-Jews) at the time. Looking upon America as potentially a land of promise, they considered their country to be in dire need of social reform. Naomi was a card-carrying communist, who took Allen and his brother to events and summer camps organized by the party. She also advocated nudism and vegetarianism, both utterly eccentric by the standards of the time.⁴ Yet, while the Ginsbergs were first and foremost Americans, and both Louis' ambitions as a poet and Naomi's political and cultural advocacies were far from tribal, the ethnic divides of the generation imposed limitations on their mobility, and their social milieu was composed mostly of secular Jews like themselves.

Although he did not follow closely his parents' political affiliations and ventured way beyond their geographical and cultural orbits, Ginsberg was influenced by his parents' values and visions. "America I used to be a communist when I was a kid I am not sorry," he wrote many years later in "America," a poem in which he aired his complains and feelings about his country.⁵ He pursued what many of his contemporaries considered a radical, culturally progressive, and socially oriented, worldview, and he often looked upon American society and government as betraying the country's true values and goals.

Throughout his life, Ginsberg would demonstrate a large measure of defiance or disregard for mainstream society's rules and regulations. As a poet and cultural spokesperson, Ginsberg gave voice to his heart and mind in a direct, undiluted manner, even when the content, or style, did not correspond to social conventions. His constant advocacy, in different times and ways, of an open, tolerant and inclusive society that transcends tribal and parochial

³ Naomi Ginsberg was born in White Russia, but grew up in America.

⁴ For an exploration of Allen Ginsberg's family and childhood see Bill Morgan: *I Celebrate Myself: The Life of Allen Ginsberg*, New York: Penguin 2006, pp. 4–32.

⁵ Allen Ginsberg: *Howl and other Poems*, San Francisco: City Lights Books 1959, p. 40.

boundaries also had its roots in his early life encounters. This outlook corresponded to his spiritual pursuits, and the manner he acted on and viewed his religious choices.

As far removed from his background as Ginsberg would journey, he ultimately remained the child of East European immigrant Jews who were eager to acculturate, and his personal agenda was to transcend his original cultural surroundings, which he considered limited and unfulfilling. Likewise, he remained the faithful son of the radical and unconventional Naomi Ginsberg, albeit, unlike his mother, and against many odds, gained much appreciation in the social circles into which he wished to be admitted. Remarkably, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Ginsberg served as an icon and leader for a large movement of cultural change, and new spiritual expressions, while remaining unabashedly the neurotic, non-conformist, East-Coast intellectual Jew that he was. The fact that Ginsberg became a hero and a prophet for people who came from very different backgrounds, some of whom grew up distrusting people such as he, signified a new chapter in American social, cultural, and religious history. A generation earlier, a person like Allen Ginsberg would, almost certainly, been shunned, marginalized and censored.

3. Creating Inclusive Environments

During his undergraduate years at Columbia, Ginsberg began venturing beyond the social circle in which he grew up, often attracted to creative ‘on the edge’ characters. His early life experiences, especially his mother’s unstable mental health, brought him to look upon unconventional behaviors as acceptable human traits, and view eccentric, or tormented, people as inspiring and righteous.⁶ One of his most powerful, as well as acclaimed poems, *Howl*, relates to, and tells the story of friends and acquaintances who had demonstrated erratic behavior, on account of traumas and mental suffering, thus normalizing and legitimizing their personalities, and stirring sympathy and compassion for their actions.⁷ Aiming at the spiritual, Ginsberg added an

⁶ Bill Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself*, p. 13.

⁷ On the poem and its effects, see Michael Schumacher: *Dharma Lion: A Biography of Allen Ginsberg*, New York: St. Martin’s Press 1992, p. 207; *Howl for Now: A Celebration of Allen Ginsberg’s Epic Poem*, edited by Simon Warner, Pontefract: Route 2005.

element of mysticism to his poetic manifesto, depicting the tormented figures as martyrs.

Most of Ginsberg's new friends came from middle class white Protestant backgrounds. Many possessed physical, athletic, and social gifts, which provided them with, at least potentially, better standing in society, and more confidence at making connections than himself.⁸ Yet, Ginsberg would soon become the leading figure of a growing circle of creative yet unconventional artists and writers.⁹

This position was not self-understood. As a rule, Jewish students in the 1940s befriended other Jews, and for many of his new acquaintances Ginsberg was the first Jew with whom they became close.

This is particularly remarkable when one considers the fact that Ginsberg was not trying to 'pass', by adopting ways and mannerism that were not his own, or fabricating a false background or lineage. Such occurrences were not unknown among Jews of his generation.¹⁰ While he was at times uncomfortable with some aspects of his being, such as his sexuality, the young poet did not pretend to be someone he was not, and his openness about himself was, at times, striking.¹¹ Likewise, while he strived to venture out of parochial constraints and obtain recognition, he did not befriend people for their social standing, money or political power, but rather for their creative and outstanding personalities. He also made acquaintances with men and women with strong positions in the world of arts and letters, and was enchanted by leaders with ability to guide him on spiritual paths. He was also taken by sexual appeal and good looks. Ginsberg in effect was struggling to create what the historian Jacob Katz called a neutral society, in which Jews like himself could work and study as well as love and live with non-Jews as a matter of course.¹²

As a young man, Ginsberg struggled to complete his studies, make ends meet, fulfill his military duty, and fight a series of emotional demons, including struggling against, and then gradually coming to terms with, his sexual

⁸ David Meltzer: "The Poem and I are Fifty," p. 21.

⁹ I Celebrate Myself, numerous pages.

¹⁰ Tobias Wolff's father was one of many such Jews who 'crossed' at that time. Tobias Wolff: In Pharaoh's Army: Memoirs of the Lost War, New York: Knopf 1994.

¹¹ See, for example, Ginsberg's letter to Wilhelm Reich of March 11, 1947, in: The Letters of Allen Ginsberg, edited by Bill Morgan, Philadelphia: Da Capo Press 2008, pp. 16-17.

¹² Cf. Jacob Katz: Out of the Ghetto, Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1985, 195.

preferences. His leadership position within a group that would attract national, as well as international, attention would become more evident in the 1950s and reached its full bloom in the 1960s, with Ginsberg laboring actively towards the creation of the movement's aura.¹³ His tolerance of his friends' weaknesses proved to be a great asset, placing him in a central position within the emerging group of Beat writers and artists. To begin with, he was the one person on friendly terms with everybody else in his circle of un-Orthodox avant-garde writers, artists, and musicians, serving as a connecting link. They would not have otherwise cooperated with each other and created the Beat group as an identified cultural-literary movement. At times, he offered refuge in his home, or financial support, to needy friends and colleagues. Ginsberg often recruited fellow writers and artists to appear in different events, including poetry readings, concerts, summer schools at the Buddhist Naropa University, which he helped establish, and series of lectures at Brooklyn College, where he became an instructor.

Among the beneficiaries of Ginsberg's efforts was Jack Kerouac, who was to become the most popular novelist of the Beat generation. Ginsberg tirelessly advocated the publication of Kerouac's most known novel *On the Road*.¹⁴ Kerouac, however, did not always reciprocate the love his Jewish friend bestowed on him. The relationship between the two points to a sore element in the otherwise seemingly surprising acceptance of Ginsberg in many cultural circles in America. Friendly in the early years of their acquaintance, Kerouac, who came to represent the open and liberated values of the Beat Generation, retreated from the open adventurous life of the early times, and expressed prejudice against Ginsberg's ethnic affiliation. While Ginsberg did not seem traumatized by such incidents, they were a reminder of the novelty of the spaces he was trying to carve for himself and others in America that only started lifting its social and professional restrictions on Jews and other

¹³ "The Birth of the Beat Generation" by Steven Watson, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1560139550926388&set=gm.766448850137225&type=1&theater> (13.11.2017).

¹⁴ The index in Morgan's biography of Ginsberg, *I Celebrate Myself*, which includes a special entry "Ginsberg's promotion of" [Kerouac's writings], referencing to 20 different pages in the biography. Kerouac's biographer, Tom Clark, plays down Ginsberg's contribution, Jack Kerouac: A Biography, New York: Marlowe and Company 1984.

minorities. In spite of Kerouac's bigotry, Ginsberg named the Naropa School of Disembodied Poetics in memory of his friend.¹⁵

By the early 1960s, interest in the literary styles of the Beat writers grew considerably, and their publications were soon to become part of the generation at large. This development affected Ginsberg's growing fame and prestige. In the late 1960s, Ginsberg assumed a more influential cultural and political role, coming to play a father figure for the much larger countercultural audiences that came about during that time and adopted many of the Beat generation's values and styles. These ranged from more daring expressions in literature to explorations of new spiritual venues. Ginsberg's spiritual choices became more publically significant, with many paying attention to his moves and he often acted as a moderator and peace maker.¹⁶

One of Ginsberg's ventures, which he helped finance was the Committee on Poetry, which he founded in 1966. It offered material and legal support to fellow poets and colleagues, as well as cultural rebels such as Timothy Leary, the advocate of LSD, who became entangled in legal battles. Like his friend, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Ginsberg experimented with hallucinating drugs, advocating their usage as a means for spiritual and intellectual growth.¹⁷ He was Leary's friend and associate and offered moral and public support. In this realm, as well, Ginsberg served as a prophet for a new age, in which, for many, the rights to individual fulfillment and spiritual growth have become legitimate values. As with other spiritual ventures, he saw such drugs as connected to a larger worldview and cultural agenda.

4. Kaddish, Jewishness and Israel

Alongside literary, cultural and political activities, Ginsberg became a pioneer of new venues and forms of spirituality that Americans have adopted, since the 1960s, more than before. He came to signify an era in American religion, which has been marked by greater freedom to pick-and-choose, move from

¹⁵ <https://www.naropa.edu/academics/jks/> (13.11.2017).

¹⁶ See the transcript of "The Houseboat Summit," February 1967, reprinted in Conners, *White Hand Society: The Psychedelic Partnership of Timothy Leary and Allen Ginsberg*, San Francisco: City Lights Bookstore 2010, pp. 271–301.

¹⁷ Jay Stevens: *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream*, New York: Grove Press 1987; Conners, *White Hand Society*. On Ginsberg's thought in this realm, see his correspondence with Timothy Leary at Green Library, Stanford University.

one community and spiritual system to another, and, either continue the journey, or settle in a spiritual and communal niche of one's liking.¹⁸

Ginsberg grew up in a secular Jewish home. However, even this seemingly spiritual void, left a deep mark on him. The family followed Jewish rites of passage, including Jewish funerals and the reciting of *kaddish*, the traditional Jewish mourner's prayer. The Beat poet was absent when his mother, Naomi, died and he did not attend her funeral. The few mourners who did participate refrained from reciting the kaddish, and pained Ginsberg wrote an epic poem, *Kaddish*, in lieu of the kaddish not recited for his mother. When writing *Kaddish* in 1960, Ginsberg was far from leading a traditional Jewish life and had no affiliation with Jewish congregations, or groups, although he took some interest in Jewish mysticism and thought and related to Jewish history and symbols.¹⁹ Still, it was important for him to commemorate his mother by reciting, in a literary form, an individualized version of the Jewish traditional prayer recited in honor of family members who died. Ginsberg's *Kaddish* follows the rhythm, but does not repeat the words of the traditional prayer. The mostly Aramaic prayer exalts and affirms the majesty of God in the face of loss and grief, without actually relating to the deceased individual and the specifics of his or her life. Ginsberg personalized it, tailoring its content to his mother's life experiences, while maintaining its powerful effect and its connection to realities beyond the deceased's life. The poem appealed to many Jews of Ginsberg's generation, who appreciated, in addition to its poetic elements, its personalized commemorative value. Perhaps unwittingly, Ginsberg served as a Jewish reformer, giving a voice to many Jews of his generation who considered the traditional Jewish prayer to be too remote and abstract.

Kaddish was a hit among educated Jews everywhere and could be found, during the 1960s–1980s, on almost every bookshelf of Jews who read poetry in any form. Without realizing it, Ginsberg opened the way for a number of Jewish writers to place new spiritual meanings on the traditionally recited

¹⁸ Louis Rambo: *Understanding Religious Conversion*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1993; Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, Cambridge: Harvard 2006.

¹⁹ When outside of the United States, Ginsberg made efforts to visit sites with Jewish historical meaning. See, for example, Allen Ginsberg's letter to Nicanor Parra, of August 20, 1965, in: *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, edited by Bill Morgan, Philadelphia: Da Capo Press 2008, p. 303.

kaddish.²⁰ While not acting on behalf of the Jewish community, or groups or sections within it, and while Jews who were officially associated with Jewish establishments failed to recognize him as an avant-garde explorer of new Jewish venues and identities, Ginsberg served as a forerunner of a new type of Jew in the Post-Modern world. Amazingly, it was Jack Kerouac, who did not care much for Jewishness, who recognized his friend's pioneering role in molding a new kind of Jew. Kerouac's prejudiced remarks notwithstanding, Ginsberg's social circle was one of the first of its kind to open up to Jews and look upon them as colleagues, friends and lovers, with little or no stigma attached. Kerouac insightfully recognized this avant-garde reality, identifying in Ginsberg's stand within the larger cultural scene a sign of a new phase in the position of Jews within American society, as well as in what it means to be Jewish. He lamented, in Christian terms, the Jewish community's lack of recognition of Ginsberg's role.²¹ "It's most important for you to realize that... the Jews are bound to neglect their own best Ginsberg Jesus, the prophet is without honor..."²²

Somewhat surprisingly, *Kaddish*, and Ginsberg's work in general, were well-received in Israel, at that time a highly ideological society, where literature often endorsed the Zionist outlooks of the mainstream, and where most of the cultural elite would have rejected Ginsberg's Jewish agenda. However, the anti-establishment bohemian left embraced the Beat poet's style and messages wholeheartedly. Nathan Zach, a literary *enfant terrible* and an icon of a new individuality in Israel, translated Ginsberg's poetry into Hebrew, acquainting Israeli audiences with the American poet.²³ HaBimah, Israel's national theater, staged a production of a play version of the poem, with Lea Koenig, a leading actress, playing Naomi Ginsberg, and running naked on the stage.²⁴ Dan Omer, another cultural rebel, came up, in 1966, with a compilation of Beat poetry

²⁰ For example, Leon Wieseltier: *Kaddish*, New York: Knopf 1998. The book, which explores the history and meaning of the ancient prayer, intermingles with the author's experiences during his year of mourning his father; See also, Kate McLoughlin: "Dead Prayer? The Liturgical and Literary Kaddish," in: *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 25 (2006), pp. 4–25.

²¹ Jack Kerouac to Allen Ginsberg, May 11, 1955, in Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg: *The Letters*, edited by Bill Morgan and David Stanford, New York: Viking 2010, pp. 287–289.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 288.

²³ *Am Oved* published Natan Zach's translation of *Kaddish and Other Poems* (1958–1984) in Hebrew in 1988.

²⁴ On the staging of *Kaddish* in HaBimah, see Rivka Raz: "Mourning an Unbalanced Mother," in: *Seven Days* (1972), pp. 12–13, 21.

in Hebrew, *Nahama: Shira Beatnikit Americayit (Howl: American Beatnik Poetry)*.²⁵ The small anti-establishment segment of Israeli culture embraced the Beat writers as a means of giving voice to their own yearning for a more open and inclusive society.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Ginsberg's attitude towards Israel was different than that of most American Jews of his generation, and was closer to that of his Left-Wing Israeli admirers. He was no Zionist, but rather an advocate of integration of all individuals into a tolerant pluralistic society. He initially saw, in Israel, a reflection of the Jewish parochial milieu, which he had long left behind. His reply to Gershom Scholem, the leading scholar of Jewish mysticism, who asked him about the prospect of building his home in Israel tells it all. "If I wished to settle in the Bronx, I would have done so in the Bronx near me [in America]," Ginsberg asserted.²⁶ The Bronx at that time claimed a Jewish population of about 600,000, and symbolized, for Ginsberg and others, a heavily Jewish ethnic concentration that lacked sophistication and imagination, the opposite of an open multi-cultural environment to which he aspired.²⁷ Still, he was interested in Israel, travelled to that country, and spent two months there in 1961–62, meeting thinkers, writers and artists and visiting relatives and sites. He did not fall in love with Israel, noticing its various issues with penetrating eyes, but he also did not condemn, at this stage, the place and its people.²⁸ He realized that it was not a home or culture where he would want to settle.

His evaluation of Israel turned more negative after his visit to the country in 1987–88. Arriving during the First Intifada, twenty years after the 1967 War and the beginning of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, he paid close attention to the political views of different segments of the population, and the realities of the country. He made efforts to meet with Palestinian writers and editors of newspapers, heard their complains, and came to identify with

²⁵ An Anthology of American Beat Poetry, edited and translated by Dan Omer, Jerusalem: Marcus 1967.

²⁶ On the exchange between Ginsberg and Scholem, see BBC Face to Face Interview, 1994 (ASV#21).

²⁷ On New York Jewry at that era, see Jeffrey Gurock: Jews in Gotham: New York Jews in a Changing City, 1920–2010, New York: NYU Press 2012.

²⁸ On Ginsberg's visit to Israel, see his journal in Green Library, Stanford University.

their point of view.²⁹ He also met with Israeli journalists, such as Uri Avneri, and politicians, including Ehud Olmert. His investigation of the country this time was more political than the in the previous visit, and his conclusions more critical of Israeli policies. Upon returning to America, he tried to muster PEN, the association of poets, to a campaign in favor of the Palestinian cause. In one, conversation with Jewish spiritual leaders, including Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Roger Kamenetz, he projected his alienation from what he saw as tribal skirmishes of the Middle East, and what he considered to be less-than-generous Israeli treatment of the Palestinians. If being an American Jew meant support for Israeli policies, he was not Jewish.³⁰ In distancing himself from Israel and those who supported it, Ginsberg was a forerunner of others in the American Jewish intelligentsia, who became disappointed with Israel at the turn of the twenty-first century, at the same time that they have continued to take interest in the country and its issues. His, and others, universal values trumped parochial concerns.

Ginsberg refused to limit himself to Jewish cultural, social or religious venues. Instead, he wove his Jewish identity into a broader, ever-growing, quilt, consisting of numerous cultural, religious, and aesthetic influences, and situated in a pluralistic and inclusive social milieu. In all of these aspects, Ginsberg served as an avant-garde example to a new kind of Jew, who explores and chooses, at times, new spiritual homes, or amalgamations of different layers of experience and culture. Famously, he served as a catalyst and symbol for a relatively large number of Jews who have become practitioners of Americanized Asian spiritual groups, or other New Religious Movements, while often maintaining their Jewish identity.

5. Buddhism as Part of the Quilt

Until 1962, Ginsberg's spiritual interests remained mainly in the Jewish-Christian path. His poetry invokes the Jewish-Christian God time, and time again, albeit transforming and revolutionizing the meaning of righteousness and holiness. "Holy Holy Holy," which accompanies *Howl*, is a good illustration

²⁹ On the schedule of Ginsberg's visit, the people he met, and his impressions, see his journals and correspondence, Green Library, Stanford University.

³⁰ Roger Kamenetz: *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India*, New York: Harper Collins, 1994, pp. 235–241.

of such deeply religious poetry, which is at the same time defiant, calling for a new understanding of humans, their emotional needs, and their personal rights. Starting during his studies at Columbia University, Ginsberg took interest in Christian spirituality, showing attraction to the mysticism of Francis of Assisi and William Blake. Blake, in particular, influenced Ginsberg and affected his poetry. Writing in a very different time, place, and cultural environment, Blake offered an example of mystical religious poetry and apocalyptic imagery that were, at least in theory, non-theistic. This infatuation did not bring about a change of loyalties or adoption of new communal affiliations. Ginsberg rather added elements of Christian spirituality, English Protestant and Medieval Catholic mysticism, into what would become a growing amalgam of spiritual pursuits. In this regard, Ginsberg was a forerunner of a postmodern religious era, in which individuals pick, choose, and combine their spiritual, cultural, esthetic, and communal interests. A constant pilgrim, Ginsberg, and many who followed in his footsteps, have come to search and select paths, religious affiliations and cultural networks, shifting and re-arranging them along the way, or amalgamating different traditions, practices and identities to suit their spiritual, emotional, and communal needs. Remarkably and tellingly, the religious images and themes in Ginsberg's poetry remained Western, American, Jewish, and Christian, even as he adopted Hindu or Buddhist practices. Deborah Baker suggested that Ginsberg's visit to India was a spiritually transforming journey in his life.³¹ He and his companion, Peter Orlovsky, followed the poet Gary Snyder, and his wife Joanne in visiting India, in 1962, and staying for a few months. In a manner that would become a pattern, Ginsberg did not become a devotee of a particular Hindu deity, or follower of gurus. In fact, he hardly sought Swamis or Holy Men, and, although his experience had a strong spiritual component, his visits to temples were more tours than pilgrimages.³²

³¹ Deborah Baker: *A Blue Hand: The Tragicomic, Mind Altering Odyssey of Allen Ginsberg, a Holy Fool, a Rebel Muse, a Dharma Bum, and His Prickly Bride in India*, New York: Penguin 2008. See also, Ginsberg's poetry and letters of the period. Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poetry, 1947–1980*, New York: Harper Perennial 1984, pp. 290–322; *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, pp. 256–287. The references to Ginsberg's writings include poems and letters from Japan, which was also an important station along the way.

³² On visits to temples, see Allen Ginsberg: *Indian Journals March 1962–May 1963*, New York: Grove Press 1996.

Following his visit to India, Ginsberg advocated Hindu practices, as he understood them. These consisted mostly of pacifism, a teaching or standing that helped build his aura as a prophet for the Vietnam Era generation, as well as the chanting of mantras. However, merely a few years later, Ginsberg shifted his major spiritual attention to Buddhism. He did not undergo a conversion experience, did not follow any orthodoxy and did not tie himself for a lifetime to one Buddhist school or interpretation. His was a 'tailor it for your needs' Buddhism, alternating between teachers, and choosing elements of the systems that suited him best. Ginsberg however was more systematic about Buddhist practices and affiliations than Hindu ones. He consulted with teachers and carried exercises almost daily. Still, his Buddhist practices notwithstanding, Ginsberg remained intellectually and spiritually independent. He maintained Hindu practices, related to Jewish ethnic and religious symbols, such as the Wailing Wall, and his poetry continued to reflect Jewish and Christian imagery.³³ Moreover, while mostly following one school of Buddhism, he also found merit and consulted with masters of other branches of the tradition.

In the early 1970s, Ginsberg became a follower of Chögyam Trungpa (1939–1987), a Tibetan Buddhist meditation master, who studied in England, and moved to the United States in 1970. The charismatic Buddhist leader related to Ginsberg with particular respect as a dear supporter and friend, and although the Beat poet became a devotee, he remained independent. The choice of Trungpa as a spiritual instructor and friend suited Ginsberg, who benefited from the peace and serenity the Buddhist exercises offered, but did not wish to follow a spiritual master on other aspects of his life. Trungpa did not interfere with Ginsberg's choices. For example, he did not wish to curtail Ginsberg's sexual life, or other personal or cultural choices Ginsberg made. Ginsberg's sexuality meshed well with his choice of Buddhism. Many of the leaders of Asian-American New Religious Movements condemned gay and bi-sexual behavior, but Buddhist masters often condoned it. This placed a number of Buddhist groups on the progressive side of the American religious spectrum, and allowed spiritual seekers, such as Ginsberg, to feel that their religious affiliations went hand in hand with their universal values, and meshed with their

³³ The multi-faiths effects on the thoughts and practices of Ginsberg came up amazingly in the Chicago Seven Trial (December 11–12, 1969), where he was a witness for the defense. Note his answers about his faith practices, Allen Ginsberg: *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews 1958–1996*, edited by David Carter, New York: Perennial 2001, pp. 201–204.

social, political and cultural views.³⁴ So while Buddhism turned into a central part of Ginsberg's spiritual quilt, it did not overshadow other components of his extensive and varied activities, social engagements, cultural interests and intellectual and spiritual pursuits.

While maintaining his independence, Ginsberg became devoted to Buddhist causes as he saw them. Wishing to support his teacher, and Naropa, the university Trungpa founded in 1974, Ginsberg utilized his position within a large circle of avant-garde American writers and established the Jack Kerouac's School for Disembodied Poetics. He recruited and brought over a number of distinguished poets to teach in the program, and raised funds for its finances.³⁵ Amazingly, such instructors, including known men of letters, were not paid. The school merely provided dormitory space. It took Ginsberg's extensive network of friendships and gifts of persuasion to bring this gallery of accomplished poets to Naropa every summer. No less important was the aura Ginsberg offered the larger Buddhist-American movement, associating it with the counterculture and with the growing emphasis on individuality and self-fulfillment.

Ginsberg amalgamated his Buddhist practices with the movement of return to nature and the building of agricultural communes.³⁶ In this, relatively short lived, experiment, Ginsberg was the initiator, fundraiser (mostly his own income) and community leader. Gordon Ball tells the saga of East Hill Farm, in upstate New York, as a story of both triumph and failure.³⁷ Ginsberg wished to create a Buddhist spiritual retreat, among other aims as means of rehabilitation for friends, among them his partner Peter Orlovsky, who were struggling with drugs and other addictions. There were other resourceful personalities involved, but the commune was dependent on Allen's leadership and finances for survival, and he was the one capable of navigating between the different characters, offering a sense of unity and purpose. Ginsberg was, however, a very busy poet, performer, lecturer, crusader for free speech, and

³⁴ On Asian New Religious Movements and sexuality, see James Lewis and Henrik Bogdan: *Sexuality and New Religious Movements*, Palgrave-Macmillan 2014.

³⁵ On Ginsberg as a leader in Naropa, see San Kashner: *When I was Cool: My Life at the Jack Kerouac School*, New York: Harper Collins 2004.

³⁶ On the movement see Timothy Miller: *The 60s Religious Communes: Hippies and Beyond*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press 1999.

³⁷ Gordon Ball: *East Hill Farm: Seasons with Allen Ginsberg*, Berkeley: Counterpoint 2011.

impresario, as well as an anti-war activist and founder of a center at Naropa, to name only some of his central activities. The East Hill Farm commune was Ginsberg's creation and it died when it became evident that he did not have the time and resources to continue leading the place.³⁸

6. Conclusion

Ginsberg was a forerunner and set an example for a new era in both Jewish, and non-Jewish, American culture and religion. Although he did not create a new group, or turned himself into a guru, his spiritual pilgrimages served as a model and an inspiration. A number of his friends, including Richard Alpert, aka Ram Das, or Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the founder of Jewish Renewal, led specific groups. However, with all their influence they have not epitomized the era in the manner Ginsberg did. It was not merely his prominent involvement with so many aspects of the counterculture, from the political to the literary, that made his religious choices more important. Ginsberg's spiritual path was not tied to one idea or system and was rather eclectic and multi-faceted. And his more symbolic than actual leadership style meshed well with the countercultural norms and suited the spirit of the generation for which Ginsberg served as an icon and a spokesperson.

Serving as a symbol for Western Americans, who joined, in the 1960s–1970s, Western forms of Asian religions, Ginsberg was a forerunner of a growing movement. Buddhist groups in America attracted at that time many members of the educated middle classes who aspired to move beyond their older territories. These included Jews in disproportionate numbers, which was no coincidence. While in East, or South-East, Asia, Buddhist groups were often associated with specific ethnic, linguistic, and cultural traditions, its Western proponents, perhaps especially Jews, have viewed their newly acquired faith as universal and as transferring parochial divides. They have often interpreted that faith in almost abstract, non-theistic, terms, relating to it as a philosophical and meditative system. Most Jewish practitioners have viewed Buddhism as a tradition that did not negate their origins and heritage. Jews who joined Buddhist groups were not *meshumeds*, apostates who have turned their backs on their ancestral tradition, and defected to Christianity, just as for Catholics

³⁸ See also Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself*, pp. 432–504.

joining Buddhism were a far cry from Catholic turning to Protestantism. In fact, Ginsberg, and others, did not have to think long and hard about the relationship between their Jewish identity and their Buddhist practices. As far as they have been concerned there was little difficulty involved. The Beat poet certainly viewed the practice of Buddhism as meshing well with his universal values, and his inclusive social and cultural aspirations. He saw it as bringing into completion a long and variegated quilt.