

Article

## Charisma and Counterculture: Allen Ginsberg as a Prophet for a New Generation

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**Abstract:** The cultural role of Allen Ginsberg does not fit a typical Weberian model of charisma. The avant-garde poet was an outstanding personality and possessed an unusual ability to affect people. He played a vital role in expanding the boundaries of personal freedom in America of the 1950s–1990s, blazing new paths for spiritual, communal and artistic expression. Serving as a father figure for the counterculture—a symbol of an alternative set of cultural norms, lifestyles and literary forms—Ginsberg was a charismatic counter-leader, with no clearly defined followers or movement. As a leader in a more liberated era, he offered energy, ideas, inspiration, and color, but no structure or authority. Instead he was a prophet of freedom, calling on people to express themselves openly, to expand and experiment. This role demanded charisma but of a different kind—one that was more spiritual and less organizational or hierarchical. This article follows Gary Dickson’s essay “Charisma, Medieval and Modern,” in offering a suggestive analysis of and supplement to Weber’s understanding of charisma. The article grapples with the concept of charisma in relation to a generation that resented rigid structures and authorities.

**Keywords:** Allen Ginsberg; Naomi Ginsberg; Jack Kerouac; Peter Orlovsky; Beat Generation; counterculture; Jewish; Howl; Kaddish; Buddhism

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### 1. Introduction

For many Americans, the police brutality at the 1968 National Democratic Convention in Chicago overshadows all other recollections of the event. However, in the midst of the confrontations and chaos, an inspiring picture comes to mind: an American guru with long hair, surrounded by young fans

and followers, singing mantras and advocating non-violence [1,2]. By the 1968 convention, Allen Ginsberg's image as a prophet for a new generation, and as a representative of an alternative set of cultural norms and spiritual practices, was well established.

Ginsberg became a symbol and a spokesperson, first for the Beat Generation, whose fame and legend he helped create, and later for the counterculture at large. As leader of the Beat literary and artistic circle, the avant-garde poet served as a central spoke that linked unorthodox writers, painters, and musicians both to each other and to larger audiences, including publishers and academic institutions. He founded and raised money for organizations and campaigns that protected the rights of writers, and he came to symbolize the struggle for free literary expression, both on account of a dramatic and groundbreaking trial and because of his constant militancy against restrictions on free speech.<sup>1</sup> Ginsberg also came to represent a new wave of interest among middle-class Americans, and Westerners in general, in new forms of spirituality, helping to bring Hindu and Buddhist practices into the American mainstream. Growing up in a secular Jewish family but venturing out and expanding beyond his parents' orbit, he also stood for a new kind of Jew: one who built his or her life in a diverse and inclusive environment, chose his or her cultural interests and spiritual pursuits at will, and actively created a more complex identity than modern society had previously allowed. In all this, Ginsberg distinguished himself as a charismatic figure, inspiring new styles and drawing new and wider borders of artistic expression, all the while exploring lifestyles and spiritual sites that defied the conventional norms of mid 20th century America but became increasingly acceptable towards the turn of the 21st century.

This essay explores the charismatic nature of Ginsberg's personality and career, as exemplified by his blazing new paths and offering new choices to individuals in late 20th century America. The article will follow Gary Dickson's essay "Charisma, Medieval and Modern," which appears in this journal, in offering an example of analyzing charismatic figures in relation to Weber's thesis, without slavishly adhering to Weber's ideas [4]. Among other things, the article grapples with the concept of charisma in relation to the Beat Generation and the counterculture, while exploring Ginsberg's central standing within his literary, artistic, and spiritual circles, as well as his influential cultural role and outstanding persona. The article will point to the elusive and problematic nature of charisma in a broad cultural movement that had neither official credos nor organizational structures or hierarchies. This study examines a charismatic cultural leader who influenced values, standards, and styles in a number of realms but did not exercise any official authority over his fans, colleagues and admirers. Likewise, he did not recruit followers into a well-defined or cohesive movement. This analysis can add an important new layer to our understanding of charisma and charismatic authority.

## 2. The Growth of a Charismatic Personality

Neither Ginsberg's personality and life choices, nor his intellectual, political, literary, and spiritual pursuits, were typical for his era and background. Trying to understand him as a product of a certain time and place will yield only partial results. Most men of his background and generation developed very differently than him. However, many elements of the poet's actions and style had their roots in a

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<sup>1</sup> The trial became something of a legend [3].

particular home, environment, and upbringing. Allen brought this background with him to the social milieu into which he ventured and on which he left his mark. Ginsberg's political stances and his advocacy of avant-garde, in-your-face, revelatory, often dissenting, poetry could be traced to the atmosphere and personalities he had encountered around him growing up.

Ginsburg's parents, Naomi and Louis, were not typical middle-class Americans of the 1920s–1940s. Both children of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, they advanced through the public school system, acquiring skills and higher education, and moved away from the Yiddish-speaking, working-class world in which they grew up, into a more educated lower middle-class environment.<sup>2</sup> Louis was a teacher and a poet who published his poetry at his own expense, obtaining some amount of recognition and self-esteem. Yet, while the Ginsbergs were first and foremost Americans, and while both Louis' ambitions as a poet and Naomi's political activities were far from tribal, the ethnic divides of their generation imposed limitations on their mobility, and their social milieu was therefore composed mostly of secular Jews like themselves. The Ginsbergs' political views and affiliations were more radical, however, than those of most Jews (and non-Jews) at the time. Although seeing America as potentially a land of promise, they considered their country to be in dire need of social reform. Louis defined himself as a socialist, but his views were moderate compared to his wife's. 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 eccentric by the standards of the time.<sup>3</sup>

Although he did not adhere closely to his parents' political outlooks, Allen was certainly influenced by them. "America I used to be a communist when I was a kid / I'm not sorry," he wrote many years later in "America," a poem in which he aired his complaints and feelings about his country ([5], p. 40). While Ginsberg ventured far beyond his parents' geographical and cultural orbits, many of his attitudes and choices were inspired by his parents' values and dreams and even followed them in essence, though not in form. Ginsberg pursued what many of his contemporaries considered a radical, culturally and socially progressive worldview, and he often regarded American society and government as betraying the nation's true values and goals.

Just as important, the charismatic poet was strongly influenced by his parents' manners and attitudes. Ginsberg's mother was not afraid of adopting radical political stands and unconventional affiliations, as well as an eccentric appearance. She expressed her non-conformist opinions in an open, unabashed manner. Throughout his life, Allen would likewise demonstrate considerable defiance of social norms and disregard for rules that did not represent his values. So too as a poet and cultural leader, he spoke his mind and expressed his emotions in a direct, undiluted way (albeit, as a rule, a kind one), even if he flouted social conventions. Moreover, his constant advocacy of an open, tolerant, and inclusive society—one that would transcend tribal and parochial boundaries, allowing individuals to experience, experiment with, and create their own ways of living—also had its roots in his early life. As far removed from his parochial background as Ginsberg would become, he ultimately remained the child and grandchild of assimilationist Eastern European immigrant Jews, eager to transcend his culture of origin, and the faithful son of the radical, unconventional, and often tormented Naomi Ginsberg. Perhaps the genius of his charisma was his ability to be himself unabashedly, a bohemian,

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<sup>2</sup> Naomi Ginsberg was born in White Russia but grew up in America.

<sup>3</sup> For an exploration of Allen Ginsberg's family and childhood, see [6], pp. 4–32.

neurotic, non-conformist, East Coast Jewish intellectual, and yet become a hero and a prophet for people who came from very different backgrounds but appreciated his messages, even if they did not adopt every idea he advocated.

Circumstances became difficult for Allen and his family when his mother's mental health deteriorated. However, the pain Ginsberg carried throughout his life of having grown up with a highly unconventional, at times even psychotic, mother, ultimately allowed him to view others' eccentricities, erratic behavior, and 'craziness' as acceptable human traits ([6], p. 13). The environment in which he grew up would prepare him for his role as a leader of counter-cultural groups and individuals. While emotionally damaging, his childhood experiences allowed him to feel comfortable with people with all sorts of psychological characteristics and issues. Beginning during his undergraduate years at Columbia, Ginsberg's social circle was often composed of persons 'on the edge,' and Ginsberg would share his time and space with people whom many others would have avoided on account of their marginal personalities and unpredictable behavior. *Howl*, one of his most powerful works, refers to friends and acquaintances who had demonstrated erratic behavior on account of mental suffering, in a way that normalizes and legitimizes their desperate actions and at the same time arouses sympathy and compassion. Dedicated to a fellow patient at a psychiatric ward in which the poet was hospitalized in 1949–1950, the poem was widely read and has touched many readers. "You have to be inspired to write like that... the right courage, and the right prophecy," Michael Schumacher wrote admiringly in 1992 ([7], p. 207). Since Ginsberg's death, a number of artists have worked on staging and filming the poem [8]. The poem is truly striking, conveying in words and rhythm both the harshness of the world and the vulnerability of humanity.

Ginsberg would soon become the leading figure of a growing circle of creative yet unconventional and, at times, self-destructive artists and writers. He possessed social energy, with both the ambition and the ability to build friendships, even with complicated personalities and literary elites who normally held themselves aloof. He acquired patrons and friends who helped him publish his, or his friends', works or aided in putting on exhibitions or concerts. Already in his college years, Allen was befriending writers and editors, gaining support and encouragement for his literary and editorial gifts. He gained the trust and appreciation of, among others, poet and literary critic William Carlos Williams, who introduced Ginsberg to fellow writers; about a decade after they became acquainted, Williams wrote a laudatory and compassionate introduction to *Howl*. Reading some of Ginsberg's early correspondence, one is struck by the ease with which the aspiring, but unknown, young poet approached prestigious figures in the arts and letters, making their acquaintance, offering poems or essays for publication, or inviting himself to their homes [6].

Ginsberg's ability to charm and befriend people he wished to get close to became evident when he relocated himself, geographically as well as socially, to Columbia University and the Upper West Side of New York. The young poet was eager to get acquainted with fellow students or other young people with literary and artistic inclinations, preferably from social circles and cultural backgrounds very different than his own. Within months, if not weeks, he ventured successfully beyond the ethnic and cultural confines in which he grew up in Paterson, New Jersey. Most of his new friends were non-Jews, as a rule from well-to-do middle-class white Protestant backgrounds. Many possessed physical, athletic, and social gifts, which provided them a greater sense of ease than Ginsberg in America's urban and sophisticated environment ([9], p. 21). This circle of friends was unusual for Jewish students

of the 1940s, who tended to make friends with other Jews; for many of his new acquaintances, Ginsberg was the first Jew with whom they became close. This is all the more remarkable when one considers that Ginsberg was not trying to ‘pass’ by adopting mannerisms that were not his own or fabricating a false background. Such occurrences were not unknown among Jews of his generation.<sup>4</sup> While he was uncomfortable with some aspects of his being, such as his homosexual desires, the aspiring poet did not pretend to be someone he was not, and his openness about himself was, at times, striking.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, as he ventured beyond parochial constraints to obtain wider recognition, he did not befriend contacts for their money or political power, but rather for their creative and outstanding personalities or their positions in the world of arts and letters, as well as their sexual appeal and good looks. In effect, Ginsberg 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], p. 195).

Ginsberg, the student, quickly gained the trust and appreciation of a number of Columbia’s most outstanding men of letters, including the influential literary critic Lionel Trilling, who encouraged Allen, introduced him to editors and publishers, helped him obtain fellowships and assistantships, and wrote letters of recommendation on his behalf. Trilling and others stood at his side when he ran into trouble with the law. Few undergraduate students stirred such devotion, or received so much encouragement, from their professors.

Ginsberg was building an impressive network of connections and supporters, and he befriended a number of creative and unique personalities, including friends who would later form the core of the Beat writers and artists. However, Ginsberg could not be considered, at this early stage, a leader or a cultural hero. At this time in his life, he had other things on his mind besides promoting his and his friends’ writings or promoting progressive cultural agendas—although, to be sure, those goals were already in his sights. But as a young man, Ginsberg was preoccupied with completing his studies, making ends meet, serving his time in the military, and fighting a series of emotional demons. He struggled against, then gradually came to terms with, his homoerotic feelings; also, a deep sense of guilt over his mother’s loneliness and pain. His leadership position within a group that would attract national, as well as international, attention would become more evident in the 1950s and reach its full bloom in the 1960s, with Ginsberg laboring actively to create the movement’s aura.

### 3. Leader of the Beat Circle

Leadership positions, even unofficial and amorphous ones, demand great effort, and Ginsberg, perhaps somewhat unwittingly, worked hard to earn his role. To begin with, he was the one person on friendly terms with everybody else in his circle of unorthodox avant-garde writers, artists, and musicians, serving as a connecting link, and at times as a peacemaker, between feuding friends. Ironically, his tolerance of his friends’ weaknesses and his willingness to put up with others’ difficult personalities and psychological conditions would prove to be an asset, placing him in a central position within the group of Beat writers and artists. As a rule, Ginsberg avoided petty skirmishes with fellow writers and did not break relationships. He was in the habit of making new friends, while careful not to

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<sup>4</sup> Tobias Wolff’s father was one of many such Jews who “crossed” at that time [10].

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Ginsberg’s letter to Wilhelm Reich, March 11, 1947 ([11], pp. 16–17).

lose any of the older ones. Allen made a point of keeping in touch with his literary and artistic acquaintances, seeking them out, writing letters or making telephone calls to inquire about their well-being. He often made tours, or stopped by along the way, to revive or keep old friendships going. Also, he kept his home open to friends with artistic inclinations, whether for them to stop by or to reside for short or long periods of time. He extended this hospitality to friends or colleagues whom other acquaintances, such as Bill Morgan, considered obnoxious ([6], pp. 533–36). Among these was Jack Kerouac, who at times turned so hostile and abusive that keeping in touch with him demanded great forbearance. Ginsberg thus developed and maintained friendships with a constantly growing number of colleagues in the arts and letters, establishing an expanding circle of creative, if not always easy-going, personalities.

The constant outpouring of energy and patronage towards the careers and lives of others helped turn him into a leader able to bring together individuals who otherwise may not have cooperated with each other. He organized or recruited fellow writers and artists to appear at different events, including poetry readings; concerts; sessions of summer school at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, which he helped establish; or lectures series at Brooklyn College, where he began teaching in the late 1970s. Much of Ginsberg's charisma in literary circles flowed from his role as a mediator, promoter, and initiator of such projects, as well as a willing agent and impresario for many of his acquaintances. He spent much time and energy using his connections to help others in his circle publish, perform, or exhibit, and he helped a number of writers and painters launch careers and receive recognition. At times he offered financial support to needy friends and colleagues.

Among the beneficiaries of Ginsberg's at times seemingly unilateral good will was Jack Kerouac, who was to become the most popular novelist of the Beat generation. Written in an associative open-ended prose, his best-selling novel *On the Road* was to achieve a mythical aura. But for long years, Ginsberg tirelessly advocated the publication of the book, struggling to find it a publisher, and telling editors, critics, and journalists that Kerouac's was one of the world's greatest novels.<sup>6</sup> Ginsberg also helped William Burroughs and Neal Cassady, other central figures in the group, to publish their books. In Burroughs's case, Ginsberg also worked to turn Burroughs's book, *Naked Lunch*, into a publishable manuscript. Granted, Ginsberg was devoted to his friends, at times in love with them, and he considered Kerouac and Cassady especially attractive and charismatic personalities ([9], p. 21; [13], p. 68). However, his promotion of his friends' literary products went beyond personal attachment. By assisting individual colleagues, Ginsberg was promoting his literary circle at large and its standing within the larger culture. His own aura grew as he boosted the creativity, reputation, and careers of friends and acquaintances. Helping build Kerouac's or Cassady's careers reflected on him and his own project. Associated, at first, with City Lights Books in San Francisco's North Shore, which also published Ginsberg's early books, the Beat group, now often dubbed Beatniks, stirred growing interest and recognition. Ginsberg, perhaps more than any other member of the group, also helped create its mystique [14]. The reputation of the group, never organized or united, grew considerably. A long series of 'I-knew-those-guys' or 'I-was-part-of-the-group' autobiographies and

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<sup>6</sup> The index in Morgan's biography of Ginsberg [6] includes a special entry "Ginsberg's promotion of" [Kerouac's writings], referencing 20 different pages in the biography. Kerouac's biographer, Tom Clark, plays down Ginsberg's contributions [13].

recollections began to appear as early as the 1960s, often written by persons playing secondary roles within Beat circles, attesting to how early the Beat aura and mystique developed [15–22]. On his own, without the growing interest in the Beat movement, Ginsberg would probably have received less attention and recognition than he did as the representative of a legendary group that within a few years came to serve as the flagship of a larger countercultural movement in America and beyond.

Max Weber acknowledged that charisma, in spite of its ur-etymological definition, was not a gift of the gods but a social construction, often working from the bottom up ([23], pp. 56–77). Gary Dickson brings up to date the meaning of charisma, pointing out that since the 1960s the word has been applied not only to political or religious leaders, but also to cultural icons ([4], pp. 3–4).<sup>7</sup> While Ginsberg possessed character traits that turned him into a central figure and leader of a loosely organized literary and artistic group, his career illustrates that charisma can derive, at times, from the aura a movement reflects onto its leaders and noted personalities. Ginsberg's charisma and leadership role would reach broader venues and new heights when he came to represent a larger cultural movement and, for some, an entire era and generation that pursued new or alternative spiritual and value systems.

#### 4. A Literary and Cultural Icon

Following the publications of *Howl* (1956) [24], and *Kaddish* (1961) [25], Ginsberg became an established, increasingly recognized poet. The growing public interest in the Beat group and its writings promoted Ginsberg's reputation beyond appreciation for his poetry. By the early 1960s, interest in the literary styles of the Beat circle grew considerably, and its writings were soon to become associated with the generation at large. The Beat writers were making their way into mainstream bookstores, as well as into literary magazines, university syllabi, and research papers and theses. Literary circles and the academy increasingly recognized the Beat generation as an important group of writers and artists, a development that affected Ginsberg's growing fame and prestige, leading to public readings, lectures, essays in newspapers and literary journals, museum exhibitions, plays, and movies.

Acquiring and utilizing charisma requires, as Ginsberg's schedule suggests, dedicating substantial time and energy to multiple public projects and satisfying popular requests and inquiries; the charismatic poet was more than ready to make the effort. Allen enjoyed giving interviews, talks, and seminars, making himself constantly available for reading events, symposia, lectures, interviews, and correspondence. The poet used the ever-growing number of such forums to present his poetry, as well as his literary, spiritual, and political outlooks.

Among other agendas, Ginsberg wished to promote his style of poetry, which he considered appropriate for his times and values. Influenced in part by William Blake, Walt Whitman, and William Carlos Williams, he stepped beyond early influences to create and promote his own voice. Ginsberg advocated a direct style of poetry, fully in tune with poets' feelings and observations, regardless of social norms and poetic traditions. Ginsberg's instructions to poets can be found in "Written in My Dream," a poem he wrote on the topic.

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<sup>7</sup> Please note also Dickson's critique of Weber's understanding of charisma.

As is / you are bearing / a common / truth / commonly known / as desire / No need / to dress / it up / as beauty / no need / to distort / what's not / standard / to be / understandable / pick your / nose / eyes ears / tongue / sex and / brain / to show / the populace / Take your / chances / on / your accuracy / Listen to / yourself / talk to / yourself / and others / will also / gladly / relieved / of the burden— / their own / thought / and grief. / What began / as desire / will / end / wiser. ([26], pp. 357–58)

Not all poets dedicate poems to instructing readers in a new school of poetry. However, many of Ginsberg's poems, including the better-known ones, were instructive in nature, promoting awareness of aspects of life, feelings, and creativity that Ginsberg considered ignored or misunderstood. "Written in My Dream," composed relatively late in Ginsberg's career, became a central piece in his reading tours; it was recorded and even sung.<sup>8</sup>

Following his trip to India in 1962, Ginsberg made a habit of starting his literary performances and public talks with the chanting of mantras, at times resorting to such singing when literary or political events went sour and disagreements or disturbances erupted. This was the case in August 1968, when the Beat poet, by that time a convinced pacifist, tried to calm the heated spirits in Grant Park, Chicago, by his reciting of such hymns. Allen also adopted the habit of introducing younger or lesser-known poets by inviting them to read alongside him, even when they were not scheduled to speak and the organizers had no prior knowledge of these additions to the program. In this way, he used his reputation to help aspiring new poets launch or enhance their careers. Such a posture helped strengthen his role as a central brotherly and fatherly figure of his group, further building his charismatic aura.

Early on in his career as a poet and public speaker, Allen decided to dedicate the income he received from lectures and reading tours to his various public causes. Ginsberg was in his element on the stage, inspiring his audience. Reading poetry is an art, which Ginsberg mastered to perfection, creating an atmosphere that matched his personality and poetry.<sup>9</sup> From the late 1950s until his death, he gave hundreds of poetry readings, some of which yielded handsome incomes. One of the major beneficiaries from the income from Ginsberg's poetry readings was the Committee on Poetry, a nonprofit organization Ginsberg founded in 1966, which offered material and legal support to fellow poets and colleagues, as well as cultural rebels such as Timothy Leary, who became entangled in legal battles. This commitment provided Ginsberg with an additional leadership edge. In the case of Leary, he was now associated, in people's minds, with the call to experiment with drugs.

In the late 1960s, Ginsberg assumed a more influential cultural and political role, becoming a father figure for the much larger countercultural audiences that during that time adopted many of the Beat generation's values and styles, from more daring expressions in literature to explorations of new spiritual paths. In this capacity, too, Ginsberg often acted as a mediator and peace maker. In recordings of countercultural discussions and symposia, one can hear Ginsberg express more moderate views and

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<sup>8</sup> One of Ginsberg's last powerful poems, *Written in a Dream*, appeared in a technological age and can be found online set to music or special graphical designs. See a snippet of Ginsberg's own reading of the poem on September 16, 1993, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kt3pj8JFCII](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kt3pj8JFCII).

<sup>9</sup> I owe thanks to a number of colleagues and friends for sharing their impressions of Ginsberg with me. Nora Rubel attended his last performance at Carnegie Hall, which took place a short time before he died, and was amazed by Ginsberg's vitality and charisma. She realized how weak he had been only when she met with him after the concert [27].



optimistic assessments than other speakers, often trying to soften other's heated exclamations.<sup>10</sup> He made an impact on countercultural positions and habits with his more peaceful opinions and less flamboyant language.

## 5. Countercultural Charisma and Sex

Ginsberg's charismatic gifts and his ability to bring people into his orbit manifested themselves strikingly in the sexual realm. Ginsberg's sexual explorations were tied together with his talent to influence people's lives and further interwoven with his literary and spiritual messages. In all of these realms, he called for openness of heart and mind, generosity of spirit and flesh, and a revealing and liberating self-expression. He voiced his sexual mores in his poetry and in his readings and encouraged colleagues to be open in their poetry, including their public readings. In judging the poetic quality of fellow writers, artistic expressions of intimate matters became a litmus test for him. When Denise Levertov's poetry became more daring and revealing, he felt that he could find a common language with her and could relate to her more appreciatively as a friend and a poet ([6], p. 377).

Carnal attachments were important to Allen, providing more than an outlet for his libido. With his growing acceptance of his homoerotic tendencies, his attitudes towards physical explorations became more proactive than before. He saw unity of flesh as a means of bonding; through intimate acts, he sought others' approval and affirmation. Sexual encounters offered redemption and self-validation no less than spiritual exercises or pilgrimage to holy sites. In this realm, as well, Ginsberg served as a prophet for a new age, in which the right to individual fulfillment was more important than adherence to traditional norms. Ginsberg was not shy about conveying this idea to friends (mostly men) with whom he fell in love, arguing for amorous intimacies as a means of signifying and solidifying emotional attachments ([6], p. 189).

Ginsberg's encounters with both sexes showed him to possess an almost magical touch that enabled him to charm both men and women to the point of drawing them to either seek or accept his sexual company. As a rule, the women in his life sought his intimacy more than he pursued theirs, at times hoping to establish a long-term relationship and perhaps build a family together. This interest on the part of Ginsberg's female friends persisted even when it became evident that he was not interested in sharing his life with women. In spite of Ginsberg's gay tendencies, relationships with women, as well as men, were often kindled quickly. At times, a chance encounter at a party, or a reading event, or a literature class, could ignite attractions and romances.

Bill Morgan points out that Ginsberg was not attracted to gay men and that when confronted with gay pursuers he would rebuff them ([6], pp. 120, 189, 391, 538, 569). Perhaps because he had a hard time accepting his homosexuality and for a time made deliberate efforts at establishing 'straight' relationships, Ginsberg found straight 'manly' men more desirable.<sup>11</sup> Amazingly, he managed to have numerous intimate encounters with men who did not identify as gay, did not lead gay lives, and were, for the most part, involved with women throughout their lives. This included even his lifelong friend Peter Orlovsky. Ginsberg's male lovers often had other intimate attachments already, even marriages.

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<sup>10</sup> See the transcript of "The Houseboat Summit," February 1967, reprinted in [28], pp. 271–301.

<sup>11</sup> Steven Taylor suggests that Ginsberg's attraction to handsome, manly, athletic, and popular men was due to such men being very different from himself ([9], p. 21).

That he managed to persuade such acquaintances to overcome their (often life-long) disinterest in or even aversion to same-sex encounters should be attributed to outstanding energies of persuasion and an ability to affect other people's choices, especially in one-on-one encounters. As time went by and Ginsberg's reputation grew, men much younger than he (and occasionally women) entered his romantic life. While Allen's ability to successfully pursue his objects of desire became evident early on, in this case 'charisma' proved its presence in his multiple encounters with individuals he met.

## 6. A Prophet of New Identities and Spiritualities

One of the major components of Ginsberg's charismatic position in countercultural circles was his role as a pioneer in the new spiritualities that Americans have adopted and adapted since the 1960s in much larger numbers than before. Ginsberg signified a new era of spirituality centered around the choices, journeys, and needs of individuals. His experience of mystical moments, related to different cultural and religious settings, defied the common wisdom of scholars of mysticism who worked in the early decades of the 20th century, among them Gershom Scholem ([29], esp. first lecture). Scholem, a thoroughly modernist thinker who promoted Jewish particularity, asserted that mystical experiences occur only within the cultural-religious framework in which the individual mystic grows up and lives his or her life. According to that paradigm, Allen should have encountered Elijah, an acceptable revelation, according to Scholem, for persons growing in a Jewish environment. The charismatic poet, however, encountered William Blake in a moment of revelation—without ever having converted to Christianity. Ginsberg's experience with Blake represented not a change of loyalties and communal affiliation but rather the incorporation of elements of Christian spiritualities, in this case English Protestant apocalyptic imagery, into the growing amalgam of a constantly enriched inner life. In this regard, Ginsberg was a forerunner and prophet for a postmodern era, in which individuals select and combine their spiritual interests. Ginsberg ventured throughout his life to broaden his spiritual horizons in addition to his emotional, intellectual, aesthetic and literary experiences. He was a perpetual pilgrim, thus providing a role model for the many individuals who in the decades since have come to pick and choose their spiritual paths and religious networks, shifting and re-arranging them along the way, or amalgamating different traditions, practices, and identities to suit their emotional and communal needs. Ginsberg's spiritual odyssey is worth exploring, given that it served an entire generation as a model for the relationship among individuals, communities, and religious traditions, old and newly adopted.

Ginsberg grew up in a secular Jewish home, not committed to observance of the commandments or the studying of Jewish texts. But even this seeming spiritual void left a deep mark on Allen. The family did celebrate Passover seders, often with relatives. Some of the language and rhythm of epic passages of the Passover Hagaddah are echoed in *Howl*, except that the "He" of whom Ginsberg speaks in *Howl* refers to vulnerable humans instead of to God. The family also followed some Jewish rites of passage, notably Jewish funerals and the reciting of *kaddish*, the traditional Jewish mourner's prayer. Allen was absent when his mother, Naomi, died and did not attend her funeral. The few mourners who did participate refrained from reciting the *kaddish*. Years later, a pained Allen wrote his second major poem, *Kaddish*, as a substitute for the *kaddish* not recited for his mother. The poem follows *Howl* in its themes and atmosphere, as befits a memorial poem to the emotionally tormented Naomi Ginsberg, whose misery and loneliness, especially after she left the family home, burdened her

son's conscience. When writing *Kaddish* in 1960, Allen was far from leading a Jewish life. He had no affiliation with Jewish congregations or groups, although he took some interest in Jewish spirituality and related strongly at times to Jewish history and symbols.<sup>12</sup> It was important for him to commemorate his mother by reciting belatedly, and in a literary form, an individualized version of the Jewish prayers traditionally recited for one's beloved dead. Ginsberg's *Kaddish* follows the powerful rhythm, though not the words, of the traditional prayer. The mostly Aramaic prayer affirms the majesty of God in the face of loss and grief, without reference to the deceased, the specifics of his or her life, or to the bereaved family. Ginsberg postmodernized the ancient prayer, personalizing it and tailoring its content to his mother's life experiences, while maintaining its powerful effect and its connection to realities beyond the life of the deceased. As an individualization of the ancient prayer, *Kaddish* simultaneously maintains a universal message. The poem appealed to many Jews of Ginsberg's generation, who appreciated, in addition to the powerful poetic elements, its value as a model of personalized commemoration. 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.

Few view Allen Ginsberg as a Jewish leader. He himself would probably have disliked that characterization. However, while he did not act directly on behalf of Jewish communities, and while Jews of his time failed to recognize him as an avant-garde explorer of new Jewish practices and identities, Ginsberg served as a forerunner of a new type of Jew in the postmodern world. *Kaddish* was a hit among educated Jews and could be found, during the 1960s–1980s, on the bookshelf of almost every Jew who read poetry. Nathan Zach, one of Israel's recognized poets and himself an icon of a new individuality in Israel, translated Ginsberg's poetry into Hebrew, helping acquaint Israeli audiences with the American poet. Perhaps without realizing it, Ginsberg opened the way for a number of Jewish writers to invest the *kaddish* with new spiritual meanings [30,31].<sup>13</sup>

His relationship with his Jewish family also pointed the way to new interactions in many Jewish (and non-Jewish) families. Ginsberg maintained a warm relationship with his Jewish relatives throughout his life.<sup>14</sup> He also took keen interest in Jewish history and mysticism, identified with Jewish suffering, and visited the new Jewish state.<sup>15</sup> He refused, however, to limit himself to Jewish cultural, communal, or religious venues. Instead, he stitched them into an ever-growing quilt of cultural, religious, and aesthetic influences that Ginsberg took from and contributed to an increasingly pluralistic social milieu. Ginsberg thus foreshadowed a new kind of Jew of the late 20th century: one who explores new spiritual homes or amalgamates different experiences and cultures. Among his contributions, Ginsberg served as a catalyst and symbol for the relatively large number of Jews who have become practitioners of Asian or other faiths while maintaining their Jewish identity. Jewish

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<sup>12</sup> 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, August 20, 1965 ([11], p. 303).

<sup>13</sup> Wieseltier's *Kaddish* [30] explores the history and meaning of the ancient prayer, intermingled with the author's experiences during his year of mourning his father.

<sup>14</sup> See the photograph "Allen Ginsberg family," a reunion on 31 May 1970, taken by Richard Avedon, [32].

<sup>15</sup> For example, Allen Ginsberg to Eugene Brooks, November 25, 1961 ([11], pp. 252–54).

practitioners of Buddhism increased considerably during the 1970s–2000s, with thousands of Jews joining Buddhist groups, including in Israel [33].

Ginsberg's social circle was one of the first of its kind to open up to Jews as colleagues, friends, and lovers, with little or no stigma attached. This innovation was insightfully identified by Jack Kerouac, who strongly related to Ginsberg's Jewishness both negatively and appreciatively. Kerouac saw his friend's ability to become an influential figure within a larger cultural movement as pointing to a new phase in the position of Jews within American society, and he lamented the Jewish community's lack of recognition for Ginsberg's role.<sup>16</sup> "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..." ([34], p. 288).

Until his travels with Peter Orlovsky to India in 1962, Ginsberg's spiritual interests moved in the Jewish-Christian path, with the poet showing more interest in Christian mysticism, perhaps, than in Jewish. He was attracted, for example, to the mysticism of St. Francis of Assisi. Ginsberg's poetry invokes the Jewish-Christian God time and again, albeit revolutionizing the meaning of righteousness and holiness. "Holy Holy Holy," which accompanies *Howl*, is a good illustration of Ginsberg's deeply religious poetry, a poetry which is at the same time defiant and striking, even shocking, by the standards of the day, calling for a new understanding of humans, their emotional needs, and their personal rights.

Deborah Baker points to Ginsberg's visit to India in 1961–1962 as a transformative period in his life [35].<sup>17</sup> While Ginsberg and Orlovsky joined poet Gary Snyder and wife Joanne in exploring India and its spiritual venues, it was Ginsberg who would come to symbolize Americans' new enchantment with Asian religions. Writers who discuss the growing interest in Asian religions among educated middle-class Americans bring up Ginsberg as one of the early examples and an outstanding figure who led the way for others ([37], pp. 235–41). This is especially true for Ginsberg as a forerunner of Jewish interest in Buddhism. Here again, Ginsberg was not a conventional charismatic figure. His spiritual pilgrimage, alongside those of other icons of the counterculture, served as a model and an inspiration, but the poet himself did not create a new group or even call upon Americans to join a particular movement, not did he turn himself into a guru as did some other members of his generation. Moreover, his spiritual path was not tied to one idea or group and was eclectic and multi-faceted.

At the height of the psychedelic years, after his return from India, Ginsberg became a symbol of the use of drugs as a means for spiritual growth and inner peace. Ginsberg used recreational drugs before the 1960s, like many of his friends and acquaintances, although he made certain not to become addicted and, as a rule, refrained from long-term usage of hard drugs. However, in the 1960s he became associated with LDS ideologue Timothy Leary, a role in which he influenced many spiritual seekers in the 1960s and 1970s [28]. In this he was not alone. A series of countercultural religious leaders from Ram Das to Zalman Schachter-Shalomi experimented with drugs as a means of expanding their minds and spirits and gaining new perspectives on themselves and the world in its multiple dimensions. Ginsberg's role as a leading symbol of that movement contributed to his aura as a prophet of spiritual experimentation and personal liberation.

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<sup>16</sup> Jack Kerouac to Allen Ginsberg, May 11, 1955 ([34], pp. 287–89).

<sup>17</sup> See also Ginsberg's poetry and letters of the period ([36], pp. 290–322; [11], pp. 256–87). The references to Ginsberg's writings include poems and letters from Japan, which was also an important station along the way.

Ginsberg advocated some Hindu practices, as he understood them, including pacifism, a teaching central to his aura as a prophet for the Vietnam Era generation. It was in the mid-1960s that Ginsberg discovered Buddhism. He did not undergo a conversion experience, did not follow any orthodoxy, and did not tie himself to one school or interpretation. His was a tailor-it-to-your-needs Buddhism, in which he alternated among teachers and systems that suited him best. His Buddhist practices and affiliations notwithstanding, Ginsberg maintained Hindu practices, as well as related to Jewish history and symbols such as the wailing wall in Jerusalem, and his poetry continued to reflect a strong Jewish-Christian cultural awareness.<sup>18</sup> While on some levels his Buddhist path was private and self-customized, Ginsberg became nonetheless an icon of the new wave of interest among educated middle-class Americans in Asian religious teachings. For Jews he was the BuJew *par excellence*. Ginsberg participated actively, and assumed leadership roles, in a number of Buddhist groups and projects. Utilizing his position in his circle of American writers, Ginsberg also established the Kerouac's Center for Literature at Naropa University in 1974.<sup>19</sup> He recruited a long series of fellow writers to teach in the program and raised funds. It is noteworthy that instructors, among whom were leading men of letters, were not paid but merely provided with dormitory space. These individuals were not necessarily philanthropists, and many of them could have used an honorarium. It took Ginsberg's strong relationships and gifts of persuasion to bring this gallery of accomplished writers to Naropa every summer. Directing the program also allowed Ginsberg to exercise his charms on a younger generation of students and writers, establishing both literary and intimate contacts. No less important than offering leadership, fundraising, and helping establish centers and projects was the prominent public image Ginsberg provided to the larger Buddhist-American movement, associating it with the counterculture and with an emphasis on individuality and self-fulfillment.

Ginsberg's interest in Buddhism often mixed with other projects and pursuits. Besides creating in Naropa a center for writing and a venue for literary creativity and exchange, the poet took part in the "return to nature" movement of the '60s and '70s and the building of agricultural communes.<sup>20</sup> In this experiment, Ginsberg was the initiator, funder (from his own income, primarily), and community leader. Gordon Ball tells the history of East Hill Farm in upstate New York as a story of both triumph and failure. Ginsberg was interested in creating a spiritual retreat for himself and his friends, as well as offering a site for rehabilitation to acquaintances, including Peter Orlovsky, who were struggling with drugs and other addictions. Reading Ball's memoir, one is struck by Ginsberg's central role in creating a small community of farmers and spiritual seekers. There were other intelligent, resourceful, and impressive personalities involved, including Ball himself [41]. But the commune was dependent on Allen's leadership (and finances) for survival. He was the only one capable of navigating among the different characters, making peace, and cultivating a sense of unity and purpose. Ginsberg was, however, a very busy poet, performer, mystic, free-speech crusader, impresario, anti-war activist, and founder of Buddhist centers and projects, to name merely his central activities. The East Hill Farm

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<sup>18</sup> Surprisingly, the multi-faith influences on Ginsberg and his own multi-faith practices came up in the Chicago Seven Trial (December 11–12, 1969), where he was a witness for the defense. Note his answers about his faith practices ([38], pp. 201–04).

<sup>19</sup> On Ginsberg as a leader in Naropa, see [39].

<sup>20</sup> On the movement, see [40].

commune was Ginsberg's child, and it died when it became evident that he did not have the time and resources to continue leading the experiment (see also [6], pp. 432–504).

## 7. Conclusions

Allen Ginsberg's career is not a typically Weberian study in charisma. As with so many other components of his personality, activity, and creativity, Ginsberg possessed his own kind of charisma. The avant-garde poet was undoubtedly an outstanding personality with an unusual ability to influence people. Dynamic, creative, original, daring, and brilliant, he became a central figure in almost every group he joined or established. His merits, however, would not have risen to the status of "charisma" were it not that the social, cultural, literary, and intellectual environments were ready for his voice and ideas. At other times and places, Ginsberg's personality would not have sufficed to make him a cultural icon. He might have ended on the gallows, in a gulag, or in a mental asylum. Merely a few years earlier, Ginsberg's life would have taken a very different turn, and he would probably not have been able to pursue the cultural role he fulfilled between the 1950s and the 1990s. The age was barely ripe to, first, tolerate and then accept Ginsberg, allowing him to become a literary, cultural, and spiritual icon. He himself played a vital role in expanding the boundaries of personal freedom and self-expression and promoted his own aura and career in resourceful ways. But his successes tell us about the times even more than about this cultural leader. Eager to influence the culture and values of his era, Ginsberg was fully aware of developments around him. He realized that the generation of the 1960s–1970s had no interest in the kind of leaders and movements that appealed to his parents' generation, and he spoke about the "genius of non-leadership" ([38], p. 276). By this he did not mean an absence of charismatic figures to lead the way, but an avoidance of the authoritative and intellectually and spiritually repressive leaders of political, ideological, and religious movements of the previous generation. He himself served as a charismatic counter-leader: with no clearly defined followers, he offered energy, ideas, inspiration, color, and a symbol for a more liberated and diverse era. He was a prophet of the freedom to be truthful to oneself, to explore, expand, and experiment. This demanded charisma, but of a different kind—more spiritual and less organizational or hierarchical. His charisma matched the countercultural movement perfectly.

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