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Religious Aspects in *The Catcher in the Rye*

America in the 1950s was a time of prosperity and happiness. World War II was over, many people had sound financial standings, and the burgeoning suburbs were home to stereotypically white, middle class, Christian families. Everything was perfect—or so people convinced themselves. However, like any place in any time, there still existed the ugly underside of America, the side that people wanted to keep swept under the rug. Some literary greats began to question the “perfection” of suburbia and tried to expose this darker aspect of American society.¹ The public backlash was enormous, as critics scrambled to dismiss any piece of literature that even insinuated that American life was not as bright and happy as its carefree facade suggested.

*The Catcher in the Rye,*² J. D. Salinger’s novel published in 1951, is one of these literary works that challenged the perfectionist norms of 1950s society, and is a proud member of the Boston Public Library’s list of 100 Most Influential Books of the Century.³ However, it has also frequently appeared on lists of banned books across the nation. The novel was scorned for “corruption, moral decay, the erosion of the classic values of Western Civilization, et cetera, ad infinitum.”⁴ One specific argument in favor of the banning of *Catcher* is its treatment of religion. Dissenters claim that the book “encourages a lessening of spiritual values”⁵ and should therefore be sequestered away from the eyes of the public, especially the more easily manipulated youths. Their argument is understandable, for Salinger does provide commentary on various taboo subjects of the time period, such as sex, alcohol, mental instability, and truancy. He also creates a main character, Holden Caulfield, who is an admitted atheist, which contradicts the mainstream values of 1950s America. With so much subject matter contrary to the conventionally accepted
ideals of America, it is not surprising that so many people fought to have *Catcher* banned. However, the novel does not, upon deeper investigation, promote such delinquent behavior among its readers. In fact, it dissuades readers from behaving in such ways and and encourages their antithesis: morally sound behavior based on common religious laws. Through Salinger’s outright treatment of religion and various errant actions, he subtly encourages readers to follow some type of religious system. Any argument that *The Catcher in the Rye* should be banned due to “blasphemy or what people feel is irreligious” is invalid because it promotes adherence to religious systems.

Salinger on Religious Values

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield is often portrayed taking part in various acts of questionable ethics. He begins the novel by leaving school, and his nearly incessant lies are interspersed with frequent drinking binges and feeble attempts at promiscuity. These are all behaviors that are socially unacceptable for a person of Holden’s age and social situation. Not only that, but they are also impermissible in most world religions, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Because of Holden’s recurring execution of such sinful behaviors, it is understandable why certain groups, especially religious groups, would push for the banning of *Catcher*. They want to shelter the youth from exposure to Holden’s unscrupulous practices throughout the novel. However, although Holden is depicted committing these moral transgressions, Salinger is not using these depictions to condone this manner of behavior among his youthful and easily manipulated audience. In fact, the opposite is true. While Holden does, admittedly, take part in various actions of questionable moral values, Salinger uses the portrayal of these actions in his novel to promote the ideals and teachings common to various religious systems.
Among many world religions, a practice unanimously praised is the pursuit of knowledge; Holden Caulfield embodies the exact opposite of this ideal. At the outset of the events in *Catcher*, Holden is expelled from Pencey Prep School due to his extreme academic shortcomings: he is failing all but one of his classes and never applies himself to his schooling whatsoever. This is clearly not ideal among most religious systems; they would rather have him succeed in school to satisfy a hunger for knowledge. Holden does not have this hunger for knowledge, and instead spends his days loafing around without giving any effort to his schooling. Salinger depicts Holden doing this to illustrate the negative consequences of neglecting his education. Because he has been expelled from school, Holden has free time to wander the streets of New York and engage in various forms of delinquency. During this time, he feels much anxiety as he awaits the inevitable confrontation with his parents to explain to them why he has been “kicked . . . out”\(^\text{12}\) of Pencey Prep. His anxiety, coupled with the misconduct in which he engages as he runs amuck in New York City, leads to a nervous breakdown that ultimately sends him to therapy sessions in California. Salinger uses this chain of events to encourage the common religious value of the pursuit of education. He is trying to dissuade readers from abandoning their education by portraying in such a negative light the consequences of abandoning one’s quest for knowledge. In his illumination of the harmful repercussions Holden faces by ceasing his pursuit of education, Salinger tries to convince his readers not to abandon their own education. Persistence in education, which Salinger promotes, correlates to the teachings of many world religions; they advocate the lifelong pursuit of wisdom among their disciples. For example, “The Qur’an has repeatedly laid stress on the importance of knowledge,”\(^\text{13}\) and the book of Proverbs, which is treated as inspirational text in both Judaism and Christianity, states that “Happy the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains
understanding!” Salinger promotes the same quest for knowledge among his readers, and so the ideals of his novel parallel those of various religious systems.

Not only does Salinger depict the consequences of dropping out of school, there is also a frequent portrayal of unmarried sex with negative connotations, both through Holden’s own actions and his observation of others. Holden tries to create a facade of the stereotypical teenage boy, one who is sexually active and mature. However, internally, Holden admits multiple times that “Sex is something I just don’t understand.” Such an admittance illuminates Holden’s inner purity because he does not understand the finer nuances of sexuality. All of the acts of sex that Holden has encountered are through his friends at school, especially his roommate Stradlater, a boorish young man who seems to be interested in only the physical aspect of any kind of relationship with a girl. According to virtually every major world religion, this manner of sexual relations is unacceptable, as it only satisfies the lustful desires of the flesh rather than reinforcing a bond of love between two people. All of the sexual acts with which Holden has had contact are unnatural and not on par with the true purpose of sex. Because they do not conform to Holden’s morally pure and religiously idealistic views of sex, it is no surprise that Holden does not understand sex. Salinger is promoting abstinence in relationships without real love by emphasizing the abnormal nature of sex without love. Holden discusses how “most of the time when you're coming pretty close to doing it with a girl . . . she keeps telling you to stop. The trouble with me is, I stop. Most guys don’t,” which shows why most of the sex Holden is exposed to is abnormal and impure. If one of the members of the relationship asks to stop, but the other member ignores this request, that relation lacks love and respect between partners. Whenever characters engage in sexual activities without love in the novel, there are never any positive consequences. Such a depiction of sex encourages readers to adhere to the common
doctrine of many religions: that sex is sacred, and not to be engaged in lightly. These religious teachings value sexual relations as “within the larger context of holiness,” and Salinger’s portrayal of it mirrors this ideal. In this way, Salinger promotes the values surrounding sex shared by many religious systems. Holden’s ideals regarding sex are taught in most major religions; therefore, Salinger is encouraging readers to adhere to the teachings shared by many religious systems.

Holden admits that he does not understand sex, and through his commentary he insinuates that he does not approve of sex without love or respect. When he witnesses some “perverts” in a hotel across the street spitting water into each other’s faces, he remarks that “if you don’t really like a girl, you shouldn’t horse around with her at all, and if you do like her, then you’re supposed to like her face, and if you like her face, you ought to be careful about doing crumby stuff to it, like squirting water all over it.” Through this observation, Holden insinuates that he does not subscribe to lustful acts of sexual promiscuity without some basis of love. He, rather, only approves of sexual relations between two people who care deeply for each other, rather than just “hors[ing] around.” This parallels the ideals of religious systems, which teach that sex should be between two people to strengthen their bond of love. Holden further demonstrates this value when Sunny, a prostitute, is sent to his room. She unceremoniously removes her clothing, and “Holden feels nothing but despair at the sight of Sunny’s pulling off her dress.” Even though the opportunity is presented to Holden, he does not take advantage of it. This illustrates the “importance of love and respect” Holden places on sex. He does not want to fool around with a prostitute because he knows that neither of them loves each other, and their relations would just be the “crumby stuff” of which he so strongly disapproves. On another occasion, Holden thinks about Stradlater going out with Holden’s good friend Jane Gallagher.
Holden is distressed about Jane’s purity, thinking about how likely it is that Stradlater will “Give her the time in Ed Banky’s goddam car.” Holden’s concern for her shows that he values the respect necessitated for sex and objects to sex without love. This disapproval of lustful acts of sex that he demonstrates here is how Salinger promotes adherence to religious values: many major world religions teach parallel doctrines on the subject of sex. All of these religions teach that sexual promiscuity is sinful, and that sex is acceptable only if it is pure and loving, usually under wedlock. For example, the Hindu ideal of Brahmacharya, which is to “Observe celibacy when single, and faithfulness in marriage,” coincides with the Buddhist precept of “abstain[ing] from sexual misconduct and sensual overindulgence.” Because Holden views these lustful trysts in such a negative light, it discourages their execution among readers. By discouraging sexual licentiousness among his readers, the ideals Salinger advocates in Catcher mirror those of many religious systems. Because Salinger discourages sexual promiscuity among his readers, Catcher mirrors the values surrounding sex of various world religions.

Throughout Catcher, Holden frequents various bars, gorging himself on alcoholic beverages into a drunken stupor. At times he even admits that his intent is to become completely intoxicated, stating that he “[feels] like getting stinking drunk.” Such a habit is unwholesome for anyone, especially not a youth whose physical development is incomplete. Most of the major world religions teach that intoxication or impairment of one’s cognition is to be avoided: Buddhism teaches that one must “avoid intoxication,” Islam instructs that “the drinking of wine . . . is described as ‘an abomination of Satan’s work,’” and Judaism and Christianity both look to Proverbs to find that “Wine is arrogant, strong drink is riotous.” This is a concept which Holden clearly does not accept, as seen in his frequent drinking binges. However, while Salinger does portray Holden drinking quite frequently, he is not utilizing this portrayal to promote
alcoholism; rather, he depicts Holden in such a way in order to discourage intoxication among his audience. Whenever Holden drinks, it is most often because he feels alone. Sometimes he drinks by himself to disguise his loneliness, such as when he goes to Ernie’s club. At other times he drinks with others in an attempt to make other people more willing to spend time with him, as seen when he meets Carl Luce for drinks. Holden’s drinking is unsuccessful in its aims, however, as he usually ends up leaving the bars alone, feeling worse and more isolated than he did before he began drinking. Although Holden wishes to use alcohol as an escape route, it is clear that “Holden’s drinking does not achieve this end: it does not make him glamorous or mature or worthy of respect—hence, he gains no friends from it. Nor does getting drunk help him forget about his problems.” In fact, it is during a drunken stupor that Holden wanders through New York in the cold, convinced—and probably rightly so—that he is near death. With these events, Salinger creates a portrayal of alcohol that is very negative, illuminating the harmful effects of intoxication on a person’s life. Viewing such injurious consequences of Holden’s drinking sprees dissuades readers from engaging in similar alcoholic binges themselves, which parallels the teachings of most religions. Salinger wants readers to perceive how Holden’s mental and emotional state of being is made worse by the alcohol, and apply the knowledge gained by Holden’s mistakes into their own lives. His purpose of portraying alcohol in such a negative light is to discourage its abuse among his readers, which mirrors the doctrines of various religions. Holden is Salinger’s vehicle for the dissuasion of readers from following in his alcohol-filled footsteps; in this way, Salinger advocates the following of one common teaching among many religions.

Through Salinger’s portrayal of behaviors that are contrary to the doctrines of many religions, he is actually advocating behavior that adheres to these same doctrines. By describing
the effects of Holden’s expulsion from school, Salinger encourages the pursuit of knowledge, a common teaching among many religions. With his portrayal of sex without love, Salinger discourages it among his readers due to its impurity and lack of love and respect. Many religions have parallel teachings that necessitate at the very least real love, but more commonly marriage, to exist between two people before their relationship becomes sexual. Thus, Salinger is promoting adherence to religious teachings on the basis of their teachings about sex. When Salinger shows Holden drinking, the effects of his alcoholic binges are so detrimental to his health and sanity that they persuade readers to abstain from excessive alcohol, which coincides with the ideals of several world religions. By portraying actions contrary to religious teachings in such an unflattering manner, Salinger is actually promoting the same religious teachings, and, ergo, the religions themselves. Those who want to ban the novel based on “a lessening of spiritual values” are erroneous in their views because Catcher does not discourage the practice of these values; to the contrary, it advocates them. Because it encourages readers to behave according to the standards prescribed by various systems of religious beliefs, Catcher should not be banned based on its treatment of religion.

Holden on Religion

J. D. Salinger refers to religion on various occasions in his novel The Catcher in the Rye. On primary examination, these references appear to oppose religion, as Holden professes his atheism during the novel. For this reason, it is not surprising that many of the faithful desired the condemnation and banning of the novel. Such blatant disregard for what was socially “correct” in Salinger’s zeitgeist—suburban families with 2.5 perfect children, a working husband, a good housewife, and all practicing Christians—could not be illuminated before the eyes of American children. However, upon further analysis, it becomes clear that Salinger’s conspicuous
discussions of religion are actually in support of religious adherence. Although Holden declares himself an atheist, Salinger uses this and other illustrations of religion to encourage his readers to follow a religious system. Through his overt discussions of religion in *Catcher*, Salinger encourages his readers to follow some form of religion.

Although Holden says that he dislikes religion, his aversion is actually generated by religious organizational structures, not by religion itself. In the novel, Holden admits that he is “sort of an atheist,” which would lead the uninitiated reader to arrive at the conclusion that Salinger is discouraging religion as an entire concept. However, upon further reading on a deeper level, it is clear that Salinger is using Holden’s take on religion to actually support its practice. Even though Holden tries to convince the reader of his atheism, the manner in which he says it with “The use of the words *sort of* clearly indicates the uncertainty of this conviction.” At one point in the novel he even acknowledges, though somewhat hesitantly, a belief that “I know it’s only [Allie’s] body and all that’s in the cemetery, and his soul’s in Heaven.” This uncertainty makes Holden more of an upcoming convert rather than a confident atheist; it appears that all he needs is some kind of event to trigger a religious conversion for him to become a strong believer. Such a comment suggests that Holden does still believe in God, which allows for the possibility that it is only the manifestation of religion in its organizational structures, not religion itself, that he dislikes. This hypothesis is further supported by Holden’s opinion that “I like Jesus and all, but I don’t care too much for most of the other stuff in the Bible.” Although Holden maintains views against the human aspects of religion, such as church hierarchies and the misbehavior of church leaders, he appears to persist in his belief in the existence of a higher power. Thus, Salinger has not penned a character that unashamedly rejects religion; on the contrary, his character is a model for faith because of his own belief in the divine. If Holden is taken as a role
model for *Catcher*’s audience, as Salinger desires, they are likely to maintain their own religious beliefs because of Holden’s beliefs, even if his are somewhat shrouded by his confusion and apprehension concerning church physical structures, than they are to shirk their religious beliefs in an attempt to emulate the “sort of an atheist”\(^{35}\) aspect of Holden. Holden’s influence on readers, will not encourage them to abandon religious beliefs because of how, whether he knows it or not, he believes in God.

Holden does not appreciate the human and procedural aspects of religion, nor the behaviors of those who practice religion hypocritically. It is very common to see people who attend church services on their holy days, but maltreat those around them at most other times. Holden does not approve of this; he instead focuses on the ideal form of religion that is filled with love for others. He even says:

> I asked old Childs if he thought Judas, the one that betrayed Jesus and all, went to Hell after he committed suicide. Childs said certainly. That’s exactly where I disagreed with him. I said I’d bet a thousand bucks that Jesus never sent old Judas to Hell . . . I think any one of the Disciples would’ve sent him to hell and all—and fast too—but I’ll bet anything Jesus didn’t do it.\(^{36}\)

This shows that he does not approve of how religious adherents treat others poorly, yet still claim to be religious, even though most religions call for the kind treatment of others. Holden does, however, appreciate the loving and forgiving nature of religion that Jesus shows through his forgiveness of Judas. This love and forgiveness forms religion in its purest sense, and “[p]urity is Holden’s ideal, and the lack of it is what most saddens him.”\(^{37}\) He appreciates the purity he sees in Jesus’ forgiveness of Judas, but is upset by the tainted form of religion that many people follow: one of loud preachings and condemnation. Ergo, though Holden disapproves of the corrupted religion that many adhere to, he does appreciate the ideological core of religious belief. Salinger created Holden with these values and opinions to further his argument in the
encouragement of religion. If readers identify with Holden, they will begin to desire to mirror his attitudes towards religious practices. They will begin to treat faith as a way to deal with grief, as Holden does with his brother Allie, and consider religious figures admirable role models for themselves. Because Holden approves of the ideological core of religion, Salinger promotes religion to his readers.

Salinger also promotes religion by portraying changes in Holden’s character when placed in locations physically near to religion. At one point in *Catcher*, Holden encounters two nuns in a diner. Holden makes friendly conversation with these two sisters, and even gives them money to help the poor. This is perhaps the scene in which Holden demonstrates his most redeeming qualities: he is respectful, friendly, and generous around the nuns, while he does not always show such admirable character traits at other times in the novel. These nuns represent religion as an establishment. If the presence of the nuns brings out the finest aspects of Holden’s character, then this encounter demonstrates that religion draws forth the most redeeming qualities in its followers. Salinger allows the encounter with the nuns to encourage adherence to some religious system by illustrating how a religious encounter in an oftentimes annoying and sometimes unethical teenagers’s life transfigures him into a young man full of laudable character traits. By including this scene in the novel, Salinger encourages religious practice among his readers so that their finer qualities can also be drawn forth. His unobscured portrayal of the finer qualities produced in Holden as a direct result of contact with religion reveals the positive impacts religion can have on readers’ lives by drawing forth their own more commendable characteristics. Salinger conspicuously champions religious adherence among his readers through his portrayal of the changes that overcome Holden when confronted with religion.
Readers may detect another tint of religious themes throughout *Catcher* because Holden is a character whose life roughly parallels that of the Buddha. The Buddha was born a wealthy prince who was sheltered from the world by his father. When he encountered an old and dying man, he became disillusioned about his life of affluence and began a pursuit of enlightenment, culminating in the founding of Buddhism.\(^{38}\) Holden’s life contains events that are similar to these. Holden’s father is a corporate lawyer, and so he, like the Buddha, was born into wealth. Up until the events of the novel, Holden spends his life moving between boarding schools. Because he spends so much time living on a campus, he is in many ways sheltered from the world outside his boarding schools, much like the Buddha. Holden, following the Buddha, is dissatisfied with his life at Pencey Prep and goes on a three-day adventure through New York, at the end of which he receives “enlightenment” in the scene at the carousel with his sister: he realizes how much he wants to protect children, and makes the decision that this is what he should do with his life.\(^{39}\) Salinger uses the close parallel between Holden’s life and that of the founder of Buddhism to encourage readers to go on their own spiritual journey and receive their own enlightenment. If readers look up to Holden, they will want to follow the ideals set down in the philosophy created by the inspiration for Holden: the Buddha. By creating a character that so closely connects to a major world religion,\(^{40}\) Salinger encourages discipleship to Buddhism among his readers. Holden seems happiest after he has experienced his enlightenment; this promotes the seeking of one’s own enlightenment, which is the central ideal of Buddhism.\(^{41}\) Thus, through the series of events in *Catcher* that mirror the life of the Buddha, Salinger is promoting adherence to religion, in this case more specifically Buddhism.

Through his unconcealed discussions of religion in *The Cather in the Rye*, Salinger advocates for discipleship among his readers. Holden, in his commentary on religious practices,
exhibits his deprecation of the logistical structures of religion but less obvious appreciation for the values taught by religious systems. Holden’s approval of religion in this manner encourages it among readers. When Salinger portrays Holden’s more admirable qualities being drawn out by the presence of religion, in the form of the nuns, he condones religion among his readers by showing the positive effects it has on a person’s character. By paralleling Holden’s story to that of the Buddha, Salinger creates an enlightened yet relatable influence for readers to emulate. Salinger promotes religion with his various illustrations of it throughout the novel. Those who have “complaints [that] have to do with blasphemy or what people feel is irreligious” are not privy to this aspect of Salinger’s piece. They want to ban the book based on its “moral turpitude” when clearly it promotes the religious values on which they place so much significance. Catcher should not be banned based on its treatment of religion because it does not promote atheism nor any connotations of moral wickedness that may accompany it. Thus, Catcher’s treatment of religion is not a sufficient reason for it to be banned.

J. D. Salinger’s novel The Catcher in the Rye has often been banned due to its “moral turpitude” and “lessening of spiritual values,” which is understandable. Upon first examination, Catcher does appear to be more raunchy in its treatment of such taboo subjects as religion, sex, and alcohol, than other literature of its time period. However, this is not a sufficient argument to ban the novel, for the novel does not promote misbehavior among readers, but rather encourages discipleship to some form of religious system and adherence to many of the common doctrines established by these religions. Through Salinger’s portrayal of alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, lying, and dropping out of school, he discourages these types of delinquent misconducts among his readers. In this way, Salinger promotes the ideals laid down by parallel teachings of various religious systems. In Holden’s various encounters with religion or
representatives of religion, Salinger makes clear that although Holden disapproves of some of the minor facets of religion, he maintains his appreciation for religion as a whole. By creating a chain of events that parallel the life of the Buddha, Salinger also encourages readers to seek their own enlightenment as they follow the path of a religious system. Thus, any argument for the banning of *Catcher* based on its treatment of religion and religious ideals is nullified: the novel promotes those religious values cherished by “those of us who are Christian and who love life,” those encouraged to “lay this book aside as the weapon of an enemy.”

Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* should therefore not be banned on the basis of religion.

The research of this topic revealed several other similar topics that, for brevity’s sake, could not be addressed here. One such topic is Holden subtly comparing himself to Jesus, and talking about him as if they are close friends. He often refers to him as “old Jesus” and predicts his behaviors as if he knows him on a close personal level. Further research and analysis into Holden’s relationship with Jesus, and possible parallels between the two, would most likely unearth some intriguing information. A comparison between the relationship between Holden and Jesus and that between Holden and the Buddha would also be highly thought-provoking and would provide exceptional insight into Holden’s characterization. It would also be interesting to further research other reasons why the novel was banned, and discover whether the preceding arguments have countered all of the reasons for which the novel has been banned. This is unlikely, and so an investigation would be called for to determine what more Salinger’s critics could want before they consider the book acceptable. Over the years, *The Catcher in the Rye* has been both praised and criticized for its contributions to the literary sphere. Although a consensus will likely never be reached as to whether the novel should be “[laid] . . . aside as the weapon of
an enemy\textsuperscript{48} or studied for its literary merit, *Catcher* will forever remain one of the more influential novels of the twentieth century.
Notes


5Whitfield, 577

6Whitfield, 581


12Salinger, 3.

13Inayatullah.


15Salinger, 63.

16Salinger, 92.


18Salinger, 61.
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19 Salinger, 62.


21 Frangedis.

22 Salinger, 43.

23 Pandit.

24 White.

25 Salinger, 145.

26 White.

27 Inayatullah.

28 Proverbs 20.1.

29 Frangedis.

30 Whitfield, 577.

31 Salinger, 99.

32 Frangedis.

33 Salinger, 156.

34 Salinger, 99.

35 Salinger, 99.

36 Salinger, 100.


40 “Religion” is used loosely; Buddhism is technically a philosophy more than a religion. See White.

41 White.
42 Whitfield, 584.
43 Whitfield, 579.
44 Whitfield, 579.
45 Whitfield, 577.
46 Whitfield, 580.
47 Salinger, 137.
48 Whitfield, 580.
Works Cited


