

Introduction

Dislocations and Relocations of Issei Buddhists in the Americas

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[Nishi] Hongwanji was the first Japanese [Buddhist denomination] to start an American mission, which in itself exemplifies the history of an eastward transmission of the Buddhist teachings (*Bukkyō tōzen*). This means that American Buddhists have considerable responsibility as pioneers for spreading the teachings around the world.¹

—Kōyū Uchida, Bishop of the Buddhist Mission of North America
(1905–1923)

Bukkyō tōzen: The Eastward Transmission of Buddhism

Buddhists in Japan had long employed the idea of “*Bukkyō tōzen*,” literally “the eastward transmission of Buddhism,” to describe the geographic advance of their religion from its roots in India, across the Asian continent, and finally to Japan. In this formulation, Japan was conceived of as the last stage in the progression of Buddhism. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, however, Buddhist “missionaries” such as Bishop Uchida advocated a new eastward movement of Buddhism: this time, from Japan across the Pacific Ocean to the Americas. These pioneering Issei (or “first-generation”) priests and the devout Japanese Buddhist laypeople they served established a Buddhist presence in lands further east by constructing temples, transmitting Buddhist teachings and practices, and to a lesser extent, through converting non-Buddhists in the Americas. This volume explores these pioneering efforts in the contexts of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century Japanese diasporic communities and immigration history on the one hand and the early history of Buddhism in the Americas on the other.

The eastward reorientation across the Pacific to the Americas allows us to question certain disciplinary boundaries and categories that have traditionally located Buddhism solely in Asia or defined "America" in Anglo-Christian terms. By examining the "eastward transmission of Buddhism" in conjunction with the lives of the Issei in the Americas, we will explore how Buddhism negotiated local, translocal, and transnational boundaries as well as how a multiethnic, multilingual, and multireligious vision of America emerged from the realities of transplanted Asian religious practices in Hawaii, South America, and the West Coast of the United States and Canada. In this way, we hope to build on the emerging scholarship of historians such as Thomas Tweed who have begun to "retell" America's religious history with sustained attention to Asian religions in America.²

The rhetoric of the American West and its "opening" by "pioneers" suggest that America faces only Europe and is centered in a New England Anglo-Protestantism every other immigrant group and religious tradition ought to "assimilate" into. Instead of the "American West," especially for the first Japanese sojourners and settlers, the Americas should be viewed as the "Pacific East." This is a perspective that is in part inspired by an emergent scholarship on American religious history at its "frontiers" such as that of Laurie Maffly-Kipp who focuses on the American West as part of the Pacific Rim or America's "Pacific borderlands."³

Further, given Japan's own colonial and imperialist ambitions, Japanese Americans could be located, in the words of Eiichiro Azuma, as "between two empires": Japan and America.⁴ Yet, neither the simplistic frameworks of a Japan-centered diaspora ignoring local conditions and community formations nor an America-centered assimilationist model that reduces religious change to "Americanization" are adequate for understanding the place of religion in the lives of Buddhists in the Americas. The study of Issei Buddhism, thus, opens up the possibility for retelling American religious history from the perspective of those for whom Asia, rather than Europe, constituted the homeland.

Dislocations: Religion and the Sense of "Home"

After a period of over two hundred years in which Japan had discouraged international exchange, Japan's emergence into modernity in the late-nineteenth century coincides with its government establishing diplomatic relations with the West and the subsequent approval of the emigration of its subjects. The new Meiji-period (1868–1912) government also established a system of state-sponsored Shintō, withdrew support from the Buddhist tradition, and allowed Western Christian missionaries into Japan for the first time

in centuries. This was the context in which, starting with the so-called *gannen mono* (people of the first year [of Meiji]), Japanese students, businessmen, and laborers began emigrating to the Americas. Even though its treaty with the United States assured Christian missionaries the freedom to proselytize, the Japanese were so wary of Western religious and imperialist ambitions in Asia that the *gannen mono* were issued passports that explicitly prohibited them from converting to Christianity during their journeys abroad.⁵

This policy eased over time, and by the late-nineteenth century some Japanese Christian converts made their way to the Americas for further study and economic opportunities. Still, the overwhelming majority of Japanese immigrants were Buddhist, hailing primarily from certain regions of Japan such as Hiroshima, Yamaguchi, and Fukuoka prefectures. They initially went as laborers to the sugar plantations in the Kingdom (and later Territory) of Hawaii, followed by journeys further east to the North or South American mainland to work on farms, railroads, canneries, fisheries, and logging operations.

Although many were sojourners and returned to Japan at the end of their labor contracts, thousands remained in the Americas, where they formed various kinds of community organizations, families, and even Japantowns. It was amid this “dislocation” that the necessity of religion, particularly Buddhism, became clear. The hardships of labor, the lack of proper Buddhist funerals for those who had perished in the “foreign land,” and the need for spiritual, moral, and social centers all propelled those in diaspora, especially those from the fervently Pure Land Buddhist regions of Hiroshima and Yamaguchi, to call for the establishment of Buddhist missions in the Americas.

Buddhist organizations in Japan had already begun to respond to similar requests from Japanese who had emigrated to other parts of Asia, reflecting both Japan’s colonial ambitions and the promotion of Japanese forms of Buddhism to other Asians. For example, the Higashi Honganji (one of the large Pure Land Buddhist organizations) had been the first to send a missionary priest to China, as early as 1873.⁶ By 1889, however, the voices of those in Hawaii had been answered with small-scale nonofficial propagation by Buddhist priests such as Reverend Sōryū Kagahi of the Nishi Hongwanji. The headquarter organizations in Japan shifted some personnel to look “east” across the Pacific; Kagahi’s Nishi Hongwanji, for instance, formally opened its Hawaii mission in 1898. The pattern of sending missionaries to East Asia first, and then to Hawaii, was followed by other mainline Buddhist sects of the Pure Land tradition and the Nichiren, Zen, and Shingon schools: the Jōdoshū established its Hawaii mission in 1894,⁷ the Nichirenshū in 1899,⁸ the Sōtōshū in 1903,⁹ and the Shingonshū in 1914.¹⁰

These denominations eventually opened temples on the North American continent, but largely due to different policies in Japan, some established their respective North American headquarters later and on a smaller scale than others. For example, Cristina Rocha's chapter describes how the Brazilian government, with its deference to the country's strong Catholic tradition, restricted official propagation by Buddhist missions to the Japanese immigrant community until the 1950s.¹¹ The early years of Buddhism in the Americas had thus both translocal and highly localized elements. On the one hand, the simple fact of "dislocation" meant that Japanese Buddhists, whether in Manchuria, the Philippines, or the United States, shared common concerns, and Buddhist institutions served as their spiritual link to Japan and family through funerary and memorial services. On the other hand, as a number of chapters of this volume suggest, each locality—Canada (Masako Iino), Hawaii (Keiko Wells), and Brazil (Cristina Rocha)—brought on a different set of conditions to which Buddhism had to adapt.

The challenges faced by these pioneer Buddhists came from the fact that they were located "in-between" localities, nations, and empires. On the one hand, those who left Japan would in many respects never be completely accepted as "Japanese" in Japan; and on the other hand, racially discriminatory laws in the Americas—such as naturalization laws, voting rights, and alien land laws—meant that it was nearly impossible to be considered fully "American." Here, the role of religion in national identity was evident on both sides of the Pacific. Even though both nations constitutionally protected the freedom of religion, those who had converted to Christianity in Japan and those who refused to convert to Christianity in the Americas faced serious questions about their national identities. Buddhists in America faced serious obstacles to really feeling at "home" in a nation that seemed to assert the normalcy and superiority of one particular race (Anglo white) and one particular religion (Christianity, especially Protestantism—or in the case of Brazil, Catholicism).

Hybrid forms of American Buddhist formation or "creolization," as Cristina Rocha's chapter on Brazil explores, continued in the new lands with the dynamic interaction between Buddhism and certain aspects of Christian and other religious traditions popular in the Americas. This ongoing process of identity construction through the interface of religious and cultural differences is also highlighted in Keiko Wells' analysis of Buddhist musical traditions among wartime Buddhists in Kona, Hawaii. Both Rocha's examination of life-cycle rituals and Wells's study of music emphasizes the extent to which the Buddhist religion served simultaneously as a repository of Japanese spiritual and cultural patterns and practices and served as a vehicle to enter

and mold a new religious landscape emerging in Hawaii, the U.S. mainland, Canada, and Brazil.

This volume's strength lies in both its contributors' extensive use of Japanese-language sources and their commitment to explore these encounters—or more precisely, an increasingly complex network of transnational exchanges from both sides of the Pacific. For example, to counter the Japanese state's orientation toward a new form of national identification centered on the emperor, some Buddhists sought to “modernize” the tradition by employing Western scholarship for the study of Buddhism as a pan-Asian tradition.¹² The influence of these Buddhist reform movements is the subject of Lori Pierce's chapter, which explores “Buddhist modernism” and the relationships between Asian Buddhists and European and American sympathizers. She uncovers “a neglected and more complex reality” by analyzing publications such as the *Light of Dharma*, an English-language Buddhist journal published between 1901 and 1907 by the Nishi Hongwanji mission, as well as a host of other English-language Buddhist periodicals. This “universal” Buddhism—one that emphasized its trans-sectarian and multiethnic aspects—locates its “peculiar hybrid faith” in a process of transnational encounters hitherto not seen.

Meanwhile, this new international arena offered an opportunity for the Japanese Mahayana Buddhists to propagate their teachings. Tomoe Moriya's chapter on publication ventures presents the new discourses of Japanese Buddhists, including those of the young D. T. Suzuki and a number of Nishi Hongwanji ministers. In the words of Bishop Uchida, the ideal of *Bukkyō tōzen* was the driving force behind many Japanese priests' desire to spread the Mahayana teachings among Euro-American converts/sympathizers (*kaikyō*, or the opening of the dharma), even though their actual target audience seems to have been the Japanese immigrants and their children (*tsuikyō*, or the teachings following [immigrants]). These Issei Mahayana Buddhist intellectuals were responding in their own way both to Westerners' penchant for Theravada Buddhism and to the xenophobic criticisms from American society by using journals and other publications, which had been the preferred method of spreading Christianity in Asia.

Ethno-Religious Formations and Civic Space

Although many sojourners and immigrants thought of themselves first and foremost in terms of their local identities (particularly their regional or prefectural identities), their “dislocation” outside of Japan led them increasingly to identify as Japanese nationals. Although national identity formation did not completely overshadow previous local identities—as evidenced by a num-

ber of the chapters highlighting the significance of prefectural organizations (*kenjinkai*) in helping new arrivals settle, find connections, and build Buddhist temples, especially after the military success in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5—feelings of national pride were celebrated in Japan as well as in the diaspora. Japanese pride in national origins was clearly linked in many respects to their religious beliefs. When white officials in Hawaii refused to recognize marriages conducted and authorized in Japan (in the so-called picture bride marriage) and forced mass Christian marriage ceremonies on the piers of Honolulu Harbor, the Japanese community organized protests against what they felt was an affront to their religion's and their nation's dignity. Eventually, the Hawaiian Territorial government provided certifications allowing Japanese Buddhist and Shinto priests to conduct marriages, an implicit admission that freedom of religion meant that coming to America did not necessitate accepting Christian standards.

By this period, many Japanese in the Americas had begun to form families (the addition of women, including picture brides, meant the birth of a new second generation or Nisei) and communities (forming majority populations on some parts of the Hawaiian Islands and concentrating in ethnic enclaves such as Japantowns on the mainland). The earlier Buddhist missions, which were often all-male youth groups, increasingly developed into full-fledged temples complete with women's organizations and religious and language instruction for the Nisei youths. Masako Iino's chapter focuses on the formation of this type of ethnic-religious enclave in the Canadian Issei community and its struggles in the face of calls for "a white man's province" by politicians in British Columbia. Although some Issei were initially indifferent to religion, the more they encountered a demeaning external identification of themselves as "Orientals" and "Japanese," the more incentive many felt to educate their Nisei children with "not just religious doctrines, but manners and moral education," including loyalty to their parents, the elderly, and the emperor. Iino looks in particular to the Japanese oratorical contests of the 1930s to demonstrate just how much the "*yamato damashii*" (Japanese spirit) was emphasized even among the second generation who simultaneously understood themselves as Canadian citizens.

The nexus of ethno-religious formations came to a head most dramatically in the Japanese language school controversies in Hawai'i. Noriko Asato's exhaustive study of this controversy during the 1920s sheds new light on the "religious rivalry" between Buddhists and Christians, discussing various pieces of legislation that targeted the Japanese language schools run by Buddhists. Very much a feature of debate in civic space (both in terms of press coverage in Hawaii as well as legal consequences when the U.S. Supreme

Court ruled in favor of the language schools), at stake in this struggle were larger questions about whether Anglo-Christianity or a multicultural and religiously pluralistic society (including Japanese-speaking Buddhists) would define “America.”

Buddhism in the civic sphere is also discussed by Michihiro Ama in his chapter on the establishment of Higashi Honganji Pure Land sect in North America, by Reverend Junjō Izumida. Ama analyzes several court cases from the 1920s (using both legal documents filed in Los Angeles and press reports from the period) that pertained to Izumida and the legal “ownership” of the temple that would eventually become the Higashi Honganji headquarters in North America. Groundbreaking as one of the first studies of Buddhism and American law, Ama explains that the differences between American “democratic” board governance (as accepted by the court) as opposed to Japanese “customary” practices of temple management was a key feature of this hotly disputed legal case.

As Buddhism became an increasingly visible part of the religious landscape in the Americas, it faced resistance from those who thought it undermined the notion of a Christian, English-speaking, and whites-as-racially-superior America. Between the Japanese victory against a “white” imperial power in the Russo-Japanese War and their confidence as a economic and military power in its colonialist projects in Asia, the growing number of Japanese in the Americas caused increasing concern among those who viewed this group as simultaneously too inferior to be assimilated and too powerful to treat equally. Whether it was Buddhist language schools in Hawaii challenging anti-Japanese legislation or Buddhist temples leading the charge for higher wages in the sugar plantation strikes whereas Japanese Christians supported the plantation owners, Buddhists were beginning to be viewed in the mainstream public opinion as troublemakers and “un-American.”

Relocations: Wartime Loyalty and Japanese American Religions

By the mid-1930s, when the Japanese military seized political leadership in Japan and began their imperialist incursions in the name of creating “co-prosperity” in Asia, a strong anti-Japanese sentiment was growing not only among white Americans, but Filipinos, Chinese, and Koreans in America as well. As it became increasingly obvious that a clash of two empires (American and Japanese) was inevitable, U.S. and Canadian intelligence agencies began collecting information and compiling lists of persons of Japanese ancestry to arrest in case of war. Akihiro Yamakura’s chapter expands this volume’s

focus on Buddhism to trace the process of targeting Shintō (Tenrikyo) priests alongside others considered national security threats, describing how these religious leaders were arrested almost immediately after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Race eventually trumped religion as nearly 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry—whether Buddhist, Shintō, or Christian, whether Japanese or American citizens, including babies who could hardly be considered a national security threat—were incarcerated in internment camps run by the Department of Justice or the U.S. Army: the so-called “ghost towns” in the Canadian interior, or “relocation centers” run by the War Relocation Authority in the months that followed Pearl Harbor. Yamakura documents Shintō religious life during this “relocation” as involving both racial prejudice continued along with religious discrimination (Shintō was banned altogether and Buddhism was discouraged by American and Canadian authorities).

Although “dislocated” once again, newly discovered letters, diaries, and sermons of Issei Buddhist and Shintō priests reveal how they provided not only a spiritual refuge for internees during these hard years, but also served the social function of maintaining family and communal cohesion through ancestral, life-cycle, and traditional Japanese rituals. Although the Japanese in Hawaii were not caught up in the mass incarceration (individual Shintō and Buddhist priests were arrested), under martial law and with the absence of priests most temples and shrines on the island had to close for the duration of the war. However, from both within the “relocation centers” and the islands of Hawaii, thousands of Nisei (the vast majority of them Buddhists) volunteered for military service either in the legendary 100th Infantry Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team in the European front, or as linguists for the MIS (Military Intelligence Service) in the Pacific, many of them having studied the Japanese language at one of the Buddhist-run schools. Many of these young men sacrificed their lives, serving in the most highly decorated unit in U.S. Army history (the 100th/442nd) or a unit that shortened the Pacific War by at least two years according to General MacArthur’s intelligence chief (the MIS) and were clearly loyal Americans. The majority of them were also Buddhists. Keiko Wells’s chapter offers an insightful analysis of the Buddhist folk songs written by the parents of these soldiers on the Hawaiian islands as news of their sons’ deaths became nearly a daily occurrence. Although the notion of an “American Buddhist” might have seemed inconceivable just decades earlier, no one—including the army, which after the war officially added the option of a “B for Buddhism” designation for a soldier’s dog tag—could deny that this seemingly anomalous combination was a part of the American religious landscape.

Inevitably, the trauma of war and “relocation” shaped Japanese American Buddhism as it reemerged in the postwar period. *Bukkyō tōzen* continued on during the “resettlement” of many Japanese in cities such as Chicago, New York, and Toronto as thousands of Buddhists sought new lives away from a hostile Pacific coast. Further research on this and subsequent periods will be crucial to re-visioning Buddhist and American religious history faithful to these experiences.

Each section of this volume begins with a brief essay by the editors to provide some contexts for the chapters. We hope with this volume to not only stimulate further research on these topics, but to reorient Buddhist studies toward the emergence of the religion in areas beyond Asia, to recall Asian American studies to the significance of religion in ethnic communities, and within American religious history to keep studying Asian immigrant religion.

Notes

1. Kōyū Uchida, “Hokubei kaikyō sanjūnen no kaiko to shōrai no tenbō,” In *Sōkō bukkyōkai kaikyō sanjūnen kinenshi*, Sōkō Bukkyōkai Bunshobu, ed. (San Francisco: Kageyama Tetsujirō, 1930), p. 20.

2. See *Retelling American Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) edited by Thomas Tweed and *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) edited by Thomas Tweed and Stephen Prothero.

3. See Laurie Maffly-Kipp, *Religion and Society in Frontier California* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994) and “‘Eastward Ho!’ American Religious History from the Perspective of the Pacific Rim,” in *Retelling American Religious History*, Thomas Tweed, ed. (University of California Press, 1996), pp. 128–47.

4. Eiichiro Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

5. Hawaii Nihonjin Iminshi Rengō Kyōkai, ed. *Hawaii Nihonjin iminshi* (Honolulu: Hawaii Nihonjin rengō kyōkai, 1964), p. 226.

6. Yūsen Kashiwahara, ed., *Shinshū shiryō shūsei* (Kyoto: Dōbōsha, 1975); Jidong Chen, “Kindai ni okeru Nicchū bukkyō no saisekkin: Ogurusu Kōchō no Beijing nikki o chūshin to shite,” *Kindai Bukkyō* 9 (2002): 52–71.

7. Sadanobu Washimi, “The Issei and the Jōdo Denomination in Hawaii during the 1920s: Research from the ‘Propagation Records,’” paper presented at the Issei Buddhism Conference, University of California, Irvine, September 3–5, 2004; “Jōdoshū kaigai kaikyō no ayumi” Henshū linkai, ed., *Jōdoshū kaigai kaikyō no ayumi* (Tokyo: Jōdoshū henshūshitsu, 1980), p. 188.

8. Naofumi Annaka, “Nichiren-shū Mission in Early 20th Century Hawaii: Findings from Its Early Documents in the 1910s,” paper presented at the Issei Buddhism Conference, University of California, Irvine, September 3–5, 2004; Naofumi Annaka, “Hawaii ni okeru Nichirenshū no kaikyō katsudō ni tsuite,” *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku Kenkyū* 52/2 (2004): 572–77.

